

Conference of the Birds

Less than an hour's drive north of Baghdad, near the Tigris River at Camp Anaconda: whiskered terns, white-cheeked bulbuls, white-breasted kingfishers, a squacco heron, purple swamp hen, spectacular hoopoe. The American soldier Jonathan Trouern-Trend, who counted them, says, in his book *Birding Babylon: A Soldier's Journal from Iraq*, "something as universally familiar as the migration of birds, or watching ducks in a pond, fulfilled a need to know that something worthwhile or even magical was happening, even in the midst of suicide bombings and rocket attacks."ⁱ

What kind of people "bird" or are "birders"? For those who love birds, each sighting, each recognition, is like a still life moving. Each bird is a stained glass window in a cathedral of place, telling the story not of a god slain but of song, costume, and the open road. I sometimes think of these sightings as reliquaries or a *retablo*, an overhanging altar for lights and ornaments, something filled with emblematic moments, as Joseph Cornell filled his boxes with coins, shells, and feathers—and Cornell made many boxes with birds or bird themes. In an interview with John Seabrook, Trouern-Trend asserts that, to be civilized, one should recognize the song and the sight of birds where one lives, much as one learns the area's history, its famous names and houses and events.ⁱⁱ To know marks one's spot on the map, pins one's attention to the plants and animals within the varying circumference of what we call place and time. For birds, who migrate, who often breed and feed in quite different lands, place is, rather, the memory of a trajectory.

Why birds travel thousands of miles twice a year, traversing the earth in a star-navigated, blood-roused, or genetically programmed pilgrimage is one of our largest mysteries, and, of course, prime for allegory. The Latin word for birds, *aves*, originally meant

both bird and spirit. It also meant “Hail,” as well as “Farewell.” Allegories of the spirit ascending—as eagle for shamans, as hawk for the Egyptians—or descending—as dove or angels with their two, three, and four wings—are familiar to us. Daedalus invented wings so he and his son Icarus could escape the Labyrinth. Those who fly the highest are usually accorded the status of those closest to god. The ability to turn into a bird was common to all forms of shamanism. Flight, thus, is an image of freedom for those of us who are earth-bound and longing for transcendence or transformation beyond the bounds of the self.

*Salutation, O Pigeon. Intone your notes so that I may scatter round you seven plates of pearls. Since the collar of faith encircles your neck it would not become you to be unfaithful.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Persian epic poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, written by Farid ud-din Attar in the twelfth century in northern Iran, twenty-two species of birds assemble and enact, in their migration, the allegory of a spiritual quest. The poem begins with an evocation by the poet, who greets the birds individually and reminds them that their mission is to seek god, who takes the form, in this text, of a king named Simorgh. It is a difficult enterprise; the group must traverse seven valleys: the Valley of the Quest, of Love, of Insight into Mystery, of Detachment, of Unity, of Bewilderment, and lastly, the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness.^{iv} That there will be trials at each stage of the journey is something we expect from this kind of quest, that there will be successes and failures. There is no guarantee that any of them will make it, and most of them won't. Indeed, at the end, only thirty do.

Salutations, O gently moaning Turtle Dove! You went out contented and returned with a sad heart to a prison as narrow as Jonah's. O you who wander here and there like a fish, can you languish in ill-will? Cut off the head of this fish so that you may preen yourself on the summit of the moon.^v

In *The Conference*, each bird comes to the quest with different attributes, different strengths and limitations. The poet welcomes, among others, the finch, parrot, partridge, falcon, magpie, heron,

duck, goose, raven, hoopoe, dove, hawk and peacock. The birds are soon aware that they are likely doomed—somewhat like characters in a novel by Beckett—and one by one they try to beg off, giving excuses for not participating. Their excuses are recognizable as *human* failings: the Sparrow is too feeble and tender; the Peacock is vain and feels he is needed here; the Nightingale is too in love with the rose to leave. “O my friends,” says the Partridge, “see how I live! Is it possible to awaken one who sleeps on stones and swallows gravel?”^{vi} The Owl says, “I have chosen for my dwelling a ruined and tumbledown house” and pleads, “I was born among the ruins and there I take my delight.”^{vii} The Heron says, “I am so inoffensive that no one complains of me.”^{viii}

Anthropomorphism, as a literary devise, can be defined as the attributing of human characteristics to something not human. As a way of thought, it is impossible for us to avoid, given that being human is all we know. Personification, on the other hand, though it has come to mean the same thing, was originally, according to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “the staging of personalities whose masks reveal” ideas or qualities.^{ix} For instance, Envy would take the stage, as would Avarice. A personification, thus, was a mask, a metaphor, a literal *figure of speech*. Personification, metaphor, and allegory have in common that they depend on an “undersense,” and thus, consequently, an “oversense,” the division of reality into both a concrete, sensory form and its underlying spiritual or ideational counterpart. Allegory correlates “different figures of a narrative with different levels of an orderly universe.”^x To work, of course, this kind of figure of speech depends on our belief that there *is* an underlying order.

In *The Conference of the Birds*, the birds don masks that can be attributed to various aspects of human personality. At the same time, it is also true that many of their qualities are ones we have perceived by living among them. It is not just ourselves but the sparrowness of the sparrow we recognize *in ourselves*, who builds homes and rarely strays from them, is industrious and devoted to its tribe; it is the resourcefulness, courage, and humor of the raven in the face of death, the patience of the pine siskin who waits all year for the pine seeds it is named for,

the speed of hummingbirds who grab what they can when it's ripe. Could it be, not that the birds stand for our qualities, but rather that we, after observing them for generations, have learned how to be human *from* them?

Bruno Snell, in his book *The Discovery of Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, elucidates this inverted, or rather, inflected way of looking at allegory. I quote at length: "If the rock contributes to the understanding of a human attitude, i.e. if a dead object elucidates animate behavior, the reason is that the inanimate object is itself viewed anthropomorphically; the immobility of the boulder in the surf is interpreted as endurance, as a human being endures in the midst of a threatening situation. It appears, therefore, that one object is capable of casting fresh light upon another in the form of a simile, only because we read into the object the very qualities which it in turn illustrates. . . . Thus it is not quite correct to say that the rock is viewed anthropomorphically, unless we add that our understanding of the rock is anthropomorphic for the same reason that we are able to look at ourselves petromorphically, and that the act of regarding the rock in human terms furnishes us with a means of apprehending and defining our own behavior. In other words, and this is all-important in any explanation of the simile, man must listen to an echo of himself before he may hear or know himself."^{xi}

Allegory is defined as a "term that denotes two complementary procedures: a way of composing literature and a way of interpreting it."^{xii} To compose allegorically is to construct a work so that its apparent sense refers to an "other" sense [i.e. each bird stands for a different kind of human attribute]. To interpret allegorically is to explain a work—or a world—as if there were an "other" sense to which it corresponds. The lives of birds are both compositional and interpretive. Each species of bird is tied genetically as well as through experience to changes in wind, light, and temperature. In turn, one could say that the literal and figurative nature of migration is the same. Migration is designed to ensure the survival not just of one bird, one self, but the whole of one's species, perhaps even the survival of all species. And, in fact, the thirty birds in *The Conference*

who survive to make it to King Simorgh's residence find that what they have been searching for is this wholeness. According to the introduction in the Penguin translation of the epic, "The moment depends on a pun—only thirty (si) birds (morph) are left at the end of the Way, and the si morph meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest."^{xiii}

Welcome, O Hoopoe! You who were a guide to King Solomon and the true messenger of the valley, who had the good fortune to go to the borders of the Kingdom of Sheba.^{xiv}

In the initial assembling of the birds in the Attar text, it is the hoopoe that is greeted first and who, subsequently, is voted in as the leader of the pilgrimage. I have never seen a hoopoe, yet most readers of Western literature have heard of it. In the famous story of Philomela, told in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, it is the bird the rapist Tereus turns into after learning that his victim and her sister have fed him his son in revenge. They have transformed into a nightingale and a swallow in order to flee him:

One flew to the woods, the other to the roof-top,
And even so the red marks of the murder
Stayed on their breasts, the feathers were blood-colored.
Tereus, swift in grief and lust for vengeance,
Himself becomes a bird: a stiff crest rises
Upon the head, and a huge beak juts forward,
Not too unlike a sword. He is the hoopoe,
The bird who looks like war.^{xv}

The hoopoe often appears in Trauern-Trend's observations of Iraqi bird-life. Camp Anaconda is midpoint on the migration route for "species that breed in Europe and western Russia, and winter in Africa or the Middle East,"^{xvi} and the hoopoe is just one of them. The birds, which frequent the dump and where the water drains from the laundry facility, seem un-phased by the war or destruction of land around them. For Trauern-Trend and many of his fellow soldiers, that fact was a solace, as birds have been, perhaps in any war. Philip Gosse, a medical officer in World War I, says, in Kenneth Helphand's

book *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*, that without the birds that shared the trenches he didn't think they could have gotten through at all. At a time when the no man's zone had become a virtual wasteland of stricken forests and scorched earth, that there were still birds helped to "stave off the men's despair at the horrors of the war."^{xvii}

No one knows what the casualties of war amount to for the birds. Their needs are simple: water, a habitat that supports plant life for food and shelter. Those are also our needs. Consequently, destroying habitat has always been a strategy of war. The Romans used to "salt the fields" around Carthage to impair food production. Jessica Adley and Andrea Grant report that, in South Vietnam, 14% of the forests were destroyed when the United States sprayed Agent Orange. "Few if any, have recovered . . ."^{xviii} There was the burning of 600 oil wells in the first Gulf War, which some environmentalists claim is the worst environmental disaster the world has yet suffered. Burning for nine months, they have changed the land and air irreparably. Then, there is the U.S. use of depleted uranium weapons, made from low-level radioactive waste, which we already know has caused mutations in human embryos along the line of those found in the vicinity of Chernobyl. Iraq's wetlands, like those in any arid place, are delicate. In fact, according to Solana Pyne, the huge "Mesopotamian marshlands" are home to rare wildlife, birds, fish, and the Marsh Arabs, "heirs to the Sumerians and Babylonians."^{xix} Indeed, we have become one of the dangers the birds must navigate on their spiritual quest.

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One of the saddest things I have ever seen is a golden eagle on display in a booth at a powwow outside Lynchburg, Virginia. It had been captured in 1962 in Montana, the sign said, and here it was, forty-five years later, far from the place I had just arrived from—after three plane trips and fifteen hours—the mountains of my home only a dim memory for this bird who perched, huge, dark, hunched, and leaning to the left as if its wing were broken, and perhaps it had been broken. The sky was

hot and white as the one eye the eagle had left, the other plucked out—who knows how. *Please, let this one die soon*, I found myself saying. If that eagle were ever sky spirit, it had plummeted to earth, its ankle chained to a wooden stand, never again to fly, as the poor white man who was his keeper said. If energies are angels there were no angels here, only this robed monk cowering in a postmodern dungeon we have grown to recognize: no windows, no communication with others, no room to turn around. In effect, it was a coffin for the living.

If it is true that we experience ourselves as an echo heard in the rocks, the mountains, the birds, and other human beings, it is also true that we might experience in them our own despair. This keeper of eagles—why did nobody report him? I watched as even children grimaced when they saw the eagle and moved away, on to the dance pavilion where the Native Americans disturbed less, the last of a tribe of fewer than a hundred who gather every year in costumes made of sequins and commercial fur. The allegory grows, complicates. Back in Montana, where this eagle is from, there is a growing anti-Indian movement, fueled by confrontations between the demands of white landowners and tribal sovereignty on the state's seven reservations. As of 1990, only 55% of people who live on our seven Indian reservations were Native American, mostly due to the poverty that caused them to sell their land to whites.^{xx} The original inhabitants of this land are crowded into smaller and smaller allotments. In a basket near the ancient eagle, there were four fluffy new chicks. "Eagles, too?" I wondered.

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In Montana, at the spring equinox, for the past eight or nine years, I have set off on my own pilgrimage, one I wouldn't hesitate to call spiritual but one without trials and only joy. It is a pilgrimage *to* the birds, the snow geese in particular, who each year arrive from their winter feeding grounds in Sacramento to a long string of lakes west of the Rocky Mountain Front, collectively called Freeze Out Lake, where they stop to rest before their last leg to the Canadian tundra. The drive is long, over two and

a half hours, but it is spectacular, past the Front with its peaks blustering with snow even when the rest of the sky is clear. The range is so high and long that it creates its own weather patterns.

This year is the first year there is no snow at Freeze Out Lake on the equinox, evidence, many would say, of global warming. The water is open, a strange blue-green next to the still-bare hills, stubble from the previous year's grazing. Wind off the mountains, though, as usual, is biting cold. The white geese rim the shore like ice would, had it been there, and, until we get close, we aren't sure what we're seeing. Then, the squawking geese protest from a distance. When the thousands of white birds lift off the water where they have been resting, in phalanx after phalanx, one thinks this must be what a miracle looks like.

In November 1995, the snow geese were on their ancient trek to California from the Arctic when they spied the open water of the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana, approximately 165 miles south of Freeze Out Lake. The Pit is what we call the 600-acre lake created by twenty years of open pit copper mining. When the mine closed in 1982, and the pumps that had diverted ground water were shut down, the pit began filling with a substance that, according to author and Butte native, Edwin Dobb, was "acidic enough to liquefy a motorboat's steel propeller."^{xxi} Three hundred and forty two snow geese were found dead and floating in the lake over the next few days.

As Dobb makes plain, the snow geese were "instantly canonized as martyrs to copper mining, yet another sacrifice demanded by the gods of extractive industry." Yet, he also points out our own complicity in the matter. In its heyday of over fifty years, the pit yielded a third of the copper used in the United States. "You cannot long survive as an environmentalist in Summit Valley," Dobb writes, "without arriving with or coming to a respect for mining and miners, and not only because you may be ostracized but, more important, because it is so transparently hypocritical not to admit your indebtedness."^{xxii} Today, the pit is shut down, but not because we have quit using copper; we have simply started importing it, letting other countries destroy their ecosystems in the process.

One could, of course, write a more contemporary *Conference of the Birds*, with ever increasing dangers to the birds on their pilgrimage—nuclear war that results in the poisoning of food sources, global warming that results in the melting of the polar ice-caps, overpopulation of humans that results in loss of old growth forests and the destruction of aquifers. In fact, birds are already dying in great numbers. According to Scott Weidensaul, author of *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds*, “Between 1987 and 1996, more than 184,000 birds washed up on the shores of the Salton Sea,” a man-made lake caused by run off—laden with pesticides—from Imperial Valley farming.^{xxiii} In 1996, 15,000-20,000 Swainson’s hawks died on the pampas in Argentina due to pesticide use.^{xxiv} In the United States, we have lost half our wetland habitats and most of our native grasslands. And then there are the steel towers we erect to watch television and use our cell phones. Activists, Weidensaul writes, “guess that 2 million to 4 million birds are killed in the eastern United States alone” by running into towers during migration.^{xxv} Will the allegory we write be one only of diminishing numbers and despair?

I think of the purpose of pilgrimages, how the departure sets something in motion not only for the pilgrim, that it serves, in addition, a larger purpose. By setting off, one perhaps keeps the seasons in motion or the sun—a way of thinking that privileges rectification, not destruction. I try to imagine a people whose rituals would be designed around the planting of trees for bird shelter, the preservation of riparian zones, spring and fall ceremonies to mark the migrations. I imagine them cheering the birds on as they take off for their winter or summer grounds, planting fields of grain to welcome them back. They might even begin an exchange with the people who live at the other end, and perhaps those in between, with whom they would exchange information on the birds’ numbers and their health. In learning this, they might learn, too, of that other people’s numbers and health. The birds might tie them to each other. They might, even flying over Iraq.

Notes

- ⁱ Trouen-Trend, Jonathan. *Birding Babylon: A Soldier's Journal from Iraq*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006, p. 10.
- ⁱⁱ Seabrook, John. "Back from Iraq: Birds of America." Talk of the Town. *New Yorker*. 24 April, 2006, p. 52.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Attar, Farid Ud-Din. *The Conference of the Birds*. Translated by Mantiq Ut-Tair. Berkeley: Shambala, 1971, p. 9.
- ^{iv} Attar, Farid Ud-Din. *The Conference of the Birds*. Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.
- ^v Attar. *The Conference*, Shambhala, p. 9.
- ^{vi} Ibid. p. 20.
- ^{vii} Ibid. p. 27.
- ^{viii} Ibis. p. 25.
- ^{ix} Preminger, Alex and T.V.F. Brogan, editors. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 32.
- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} Snell, Bruno. *The Discovery of Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*. T.G. Rosenmeyer, trans. New York: Dover, 1953, pp. 200-201.
- ^{xii} Preminger, p. 32.
- ^{xiii} Attar. *The Conference*, Penguin, p. 16.
- ^{xiv} Attar. *The Conference*, Shambhala, p. 8.
- ^{xv} Ovid. *The Metamorphosis*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955, p. 151.
- ^{xvi} Seabrook, p. 52.
- ^{xvii} Helphand, Kenneth I. *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006, p. 34.
- ^{xviii} Adley, Jessica and Andrea Grant. "The Environmental Consequences of War." Sierra Club of Canada. Accessed on 17 May, 2006. <www.sierraclub.ca/national/postings/war-and-environment.html>.
- ^{xix} Solana Pyne. "Leaving a Mess in Mesopotamia: Long-term Damage from a Short-term War." 16-22 Apr. 2003. *Village Voice*. 17 May 2006. <www.villagevoice.com/generic/show_print.php?id+43403&pag>.
- ^{xx} Montana Human Rights Network. *Drumming Up Resentment: The Anti-Indian Movement in Montana*. Helena, Montana, 2000.
- ^{xxi} Dobb, Edwin. "Pennies from Hell." *Harper's Magazine* 293:1757, p. 39+. Infotrac. 28 Mar. 2007. <ebscohost.com>.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} Weidensaul, Scott. *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds*. New York: North Point, 1999, p. 243.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid, p. 185.
- ^{xxv} Ibid, p. 339.