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Introduction

Marie-Luise Egbert

The Fascination of Birds

In scientific classification, a bird is a "warm-blooded vertebrate of the class *Aves*, unique in having feathers and forelimbs modified into wings" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, *s.v.* "bird"). From an anthropocentric point of view, it is precisely this *differentia specifica* of birds from other vertebrates that constitutes their unique attraction. Being able to fly, birds can do what remains an unfulfilled dream for human beings. Their flight capacity has made bird anatomy an object of study for natural scientists and early inventors, who modelled their flying contraptions on the bodies of birds.[1] But the fascination of birds also derives from the sheer diversity of avian species around the globe. Apart from opening up a vast field for taxonomic and behavioural studies, the variety of bird life has also attracted many lay people who devote much of their spare time to observing and studying birds. Observing them is indeed easier than observing other classes of animals because of their sheer apparentness: there is hardly a place in the world where there are no birds to be seen, and this goes some way towards explaining why the feathered tribe have occurred so prominently in poetry from its beginnings (Armitage 285).

More so than their mere presence, however, it is the similarity perceived between songbirds and poets that gives this class of animals an important place in literary history.[2] The lyric power of birds has made poets look to them for inspiration. This conventionally assumed connection was of central importance to the Romantics, who gave pride of place to birds both in their poetry[3] and poetics.

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1 Leonardo da Vinci's own late-fifteenth-century studies of the wings of birds and bats, whose anatomy he drew in detail, served him as the basis for his outline of a gliding machine (original drawings contained in the Codex Atlanticus, Biblioteca Ambrosiana Milan).

2 Notwithstanding the special place of birds in poetry, one of the best known works of classical literature in which they figure extensively is a play, namely Aristophanes' *The Birds* (414 B.C.). This depicts a utopian state free from the strictures of civic life in Athens to be established in the airy realm that is the birds'.

3 Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Skylark" (1820) and John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) are certainly among the best known bird poems of Romanticism, but the list can easily be prolonged to include, for instance, Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" (1807) and

The comparison between poet and bird does not rest at the common power of those songsters, though. In his "To a Skylark" (1820), Shelley essentially makes the lark a figure for his own art, associating both its song and its flight with the soaring of the poet's imagination (Doggett 552). Indeed, since the classical age, as creatures of the air, birds have been thought to be closer to the deities than humans are, and their flight has been read as augury foretelling the fate of humans. In this regard also, birds resemble poets. The latter, too, have been understood as prophets. As Shelley put it in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), their poetry "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (Shelley 844) – to show us life, that is, other than we tend to see it and to open up perspectives beyond the confines of the ordinary.

Forms and Functions of Birds in Literature

Looked at from the point of view of literary criticism, birds are one among many kinds of animals figuring in literature. Like horses or lions, they constitute a literary motif to the extent that they recur either within the same text or across texts in literary history and in this way contribute to creating meaning.[4] This still leaves open the question of the particular guises under which birds figure in individual texts and of the functions that birds perform. They can be present as objects of the phenomenal world, forming part of the setting of a narrative, for instance. Birds can also be given the role of characters, as when birds occur as anthropomorphized beings in fables, or even that of narrators, as in Robert Olen Butler's short story "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot" (1995). Where they are not themselves agents, they can constitute a topic of discourse as when the speaker of a poem evokes a bird, or in conversations between fictional characters: the protagonists of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) engage in talk about the Cerulean Mountain Warbler as the object of conservation work. Another important mode of occurrence is in rhetorical tropes – birds can be evoked as symbols or metaphors. These different guises of appearance and functions are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Thus, a bird in fable is both a character and serves an allegorical function.

Mentioning these textual levels of manifestation and some of their rhetorical functions can only give an abstract idea of the diverse ways in which birds

John Clare's "The Nightingale's Nest" (1835). For a survey of singing birds in Romantic poetry, see Doggett.

4 For general definitions, see Cuddon (s.v. "motif") and the entry on "motif, in literature" in the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*; for the bird motif in particular, Beyer, Daemmrich and Daemmrich (xx).

contribute to creating meaning in literary text. The essays assembled in this book may serve to reveal just how varied the life of birds in literature is.

Much critical work has been generated that can serve as the basis for subsequent scholarly efforts in this area, most of it concerned with the work of single authors. Given the close association between birds and poets, it is not surprising that the genre of poetry should feature prominently here, with essays examining figurations of birds in the work of Chaucer (Rowland), Wyatt (Morris) and Shakespeare (Harrison, Stockelberg), Shelley (Jeffrey), Keats (Lacey), Robert Browning (Harrison), Larkin (Craik), and Hughes (Schlesinger), to mention but a few of the canonical poets covered.

In the area of fiction, one finds, for instance, work dealing with Jane's bird drawings in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Kelly, Taylor), with birds in Virginia Woolf's short stories and novels (Leslie, Gillespie), the bird motif in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (Bates, Thornton), and in the novels of D.H. Lawrence (Widmer).[5]

A comprehensive study that covers all genres and takes a historical perspective on the presence of birds in Anglophone literature and beyond is Leonard Lutwack's *Birds in Literature* (1994). Lutwack's monograph is structured thematically, beginning with the nexus between poet and bird and the connection of birds with the supernatural, then broaching "Birds Caged, Hunted and Killed" and "Birds and the Erotic". Its last part looks at "Literature and the Future of Birds".

Literature and the Environment: Ecocriticism

The future of bird life outside literature is an issue that has been causing concern among ornithologists as well as the public at large for several decades. Sensitivity to the need to protect birds in the interest of biodiversity was certainly fostered by a number of documentary series dealing with birds around the world, notably so in *Last Chance to See* (BBC 2, 2009-2010, directed by Tim Green and others), presented by Mark Carwardine and Stephen Fry. This documented a trip around the world in search of endangered animals, among them several bird species.[6] Even more influential may have been Sir David Attenborough's earlier series *The Life of Birds* (BBC, 1998), which had established a new standard for such documentaries. These series probably had their share in drawing still more

5 The references given for this and the preceding paragraph represent a sample only, they do not adequately represent the wealth of material that exists for these and many other poets and writers.

6 This was a retracing of the trip around the world in search of endangered animals made by Mark Carwardine and Douglas Adams twenty years earlier.

people towards the already popular pastime of bird watching in recent years. Now a leisure activity with a whole industry of periodicals, birding equipment and festivals behind it, bird watching in Britain is an early case of the popularization of specialist knowledge about the natural world known today as citizen science. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, it received a special impetus from evolutionary theory in the nineteenth century. While a growing interest in avian life seems a good thing in itself, an enthusiasm for spotting birds in the wild today is not always in line with the aims of conservation (as when self-proclaimed bird spotters roam the world in order to spot a rare species in its formerly inaccessible habitat).

Notwithstanding an increased awareness of the need to protect birds, many conservation efforts have so far fallen far short of their aims. In 2015, we have even more reason to be concerned about the future of birds than twenty years ago, when Lutwack was looking at it. Almost all the political efforts to reduce pollution and to protect natural habitats have either been virtually ineffective or remained far behind their self-proclaimed aims. The European Bird Directive ("Directive"), first passed by the member states as early as 1979, is a case in point: its objectives in the area of protection, notably its fight against the catching of birds as rare food,[7] have had little success so far.

Given the long-standing ties with birds, it seems appropriate to ask what literature and literary criticism may have to contribute to their survival. Without assigning it the role of a mere instrument in the fight for protection and conservation, one may claim that literature seems especially called for to help create awareness and sensitivity. Lutwack's hope, expressed in 1994, has lost none of its relevance in this respect: "Creative writers drawing on a rich store of literary antecedents, as well as adding new insights to meet present needs, may help to keep alive the sensitivity that is absolutely essential in the conservation of wildlife and natural beauty" (Lutwack 254). As for literary criticism, the 1990s saw the institutionalisation of ecocriticism, an approach used in the study of literary and other texts that takes a revisionist look at the relationship between human beings and the natural environment.[8] In a basic definition, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix). It undermines conventional constructions of nature as an object of human exploitation and reification, acknowledging the non-human world as an autonomous Other worthy in and of itself, irrespective of its 'relevance' or 'use-

7 For an essayistic treatment of that topic, see Franzen, "The Ugly Mediterranean".

8 See the seminal collection edited by Glotfelty and Fromm. On the moral and political side to ecocriticism, see Garrard (3-4); for ecocriticism and postcolonial writing, see Huggan and Tiffin.