THE TORCH IN MY EAR (A PRIMARY INDEX)

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Do not revile even in your thoughts, or curse in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and on the wing may report what you say.

Ecclesiastes 10:20

An opening refrain bordering to the well-known idiomatic phrase ‘a little bird told me’ supports information that is either filtered or gathered from a source not to be overtly exposed. With this in mind how might a painting, an epic story or a song under close observation transpose or amalgamate itself into a condensed but equally expandable version? Said otherwise, what is former, or latter, and in which order is often difficult to believe in, or in essence rudimentary enough to believe in, as a sequence of defined histories are often made to be sacred, but are likewise mysterious. Such tangents, when taken apart, sum towards a textual display of would be verses and choruses, characterised not unusually by a song.

In the Flemish painter Frans Snyders’ 1630-1650 depiction *The Concert of Birds*, an owl is portrayed as the conductor to an orchestra of talking and singing birds. Oddly though, in the picture, it appears that the owl sings simultaneously from a score whilst the surrounding avian cacophony is perched upon and around the branches of a mistletoe. The various participants of this concert include: a parrot (the idle gossiper), a macaw (protagonist of telepathic communication), a heron (with an ability to exist in-between worlds), a swan (the breath of spirit), a starling (the ascetic), a nightingale (bounding between melancholy and cheer), a toucan (the face to face communicator), an eagle (with a demeanour of rationality), white cockatoos (illuminated in the air), a hoopoe (the truthful messenger), various song birds, and a pair of peacocks (seeking immortality) amongst others – with a bat in flight (discerning a hidden message) pervading the entire scene. But these given representations, like all, are dependent on one’s background and system of belief.

Snyders’ painting, whose theme and title originates from an Aesop fable, tells the succinct story of an owl who understood more than it was given credit for. Its saintly expression in the painting is polarised against the irritated poses of the surrounding birds, which might suggest her to be mad.

Principally the fable specifies the owl to be warning of ‘acorns producing mistletoe, from which an irremediable poison, the bird-lime, would be extracted and by which they would be captured.’ Bird-lime, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is ‘a sticky substance smeared on to twigs to capture small birds’. Pliny the Elder tells us that ‘bird-lime’ is made from the berries of a mistletoe, but are taken whilst in a ‘unripe state’, put in water, which ‘aids the decaying process’ after which they are ‘left to rot’ and are then ‘beaten with a mallet’. This process concludes with drying and thinning (again aided by running water), with the berries ‘outer coat’ eventually removed leaving only a ‘inner pulp’ to remain. Thereafter birds only have to touch it with their wings in order to be caught.

The ‘bird-lime’ conception then, of which the owl is warning of with her beautiful though mysterious call, might inadvertently appear to appropriate the notion of being weary to the human ability to manipulate nature with aesthetically disguised processes and charms.

Later, ‘bird-lime’ appears in an altered version in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*. Set in two acts the play has a form classified as a ‘Singspiel’, which literally translates as ‘sing-play’. The phenomenon is brought to attention in the play when Papageno (who is played in the original performance by Emanuel Schikaneder, the libretto’s author) enters the first scene ‘A rough, rocky landscape’ carrying a birdcage on his back and begins to sing in his baritone voice the song *I am Happy Bird Catcher*; ‘I know how to set traps, and make myself understood on my pipes.’

Even if operatic, Papageno comes across as a Mannerist and perhaps he is also not too distantly associated from the Greek mythological sirens who were known to be devious and dangerous creatures, represented as birds with feathered wings, large female heads and scaly feet. It is their enchanting music and voices that attracts sailors towards rocky coastlines.

The question is: is the owl, in retrospect, actually warning the other birds? Or is it she who is Papageno, acting as a dissident gadfly? Correspondingly, Frans Snyders’ *Concert of Birds* is a Baroque period painting – an artistic style in favour for an exaggeration of movement, with details that are easy enough to interpret. Nevertheless, all periods of time, however technically assertive are abstract in maligned ways. And as far as time goes, it seems never enough is to hand, and as a result aren’t all things produced overtly concerned with an artificially hidden, but still visible language or landscape?

Whether it is coincidental, or not, as the *The Magic Flute* develops Papageno is found to be guilty of hoodwink and his mouth is locked shut with a padlock until later evidence is received of his incessant ability to sonically charm with a repertoire of bells. Polemically still, in a letter to his wife Constanze, Mozart obtusely reveals a disdain to the sound of applause: ‘what always gives me the most pleasure’ he said, ‘is silent approval.’

Clearly then, people, as well as animals, whether they be real or imagined, all seem to be coursed into finding a way to be received, or heard, either by one, a few or many. After a while, whatever one might say, write or sing falls on deaf ears. I guess it depends on how many birds you can catch or that believe you.

The scrupulous detail and temerity required to paint *The Concert of Birds* is of its epoch, and Snyders painted various versions of the same myth, time and again, as the prolonged dates of its production, ‘1630–1650’ discern.

Given that Aesop’s owl gives heed to the rebuked rejections of those in her vicinity, the birds suddenly begin to venerate to her warnings and as they do so, her energy reverts, becoming dissipated. ‘Hence it is that when she appears they look to her as knowing all things, while she no gives them advice, but in solitude laments their past folly.’

Typical. Recognition is desired and once it arrives, someone or something would prefer not to hear a single word or sound. But who’s not to say a response to a question isn’t just a quick-fire example of terminating or slowly removing a relation? Or that if not in agreement one might quietly make an excuse to leave the crowd in fear of what may lie at the end of the perceived road?

A reversal of the conundrum inflicted in *The Owl and the Birds* applies in Farid Attar’s 12th Century epic Persian poem *The Conference of Birds* as a group of birds, each of whom represent different human faults, follow a Hoopoe, and not an owl, towards a mythical flying figure known as the Simurgh – an imagined but non-existing God, who suggests to ‘Turn your minds to our words, our ethereal words, for the words of the birds last forever.’

Obliquely, in Aristophanes’ 414 BC comedy *The Birds*, various characters (including a priest masked as a bird) are allied by various bird-like messengers, inspectors, informers and oracles serving Pisthetaerus, a wise citizen of Athens who convinces the birds of the earth to form a new city in the sky – a way to combine and to equally reside as authorities. Though Pisthetaerus himself mutates into a Hoopoe and only upon aid from Prometheus is able to replace Zeus. (It is said that Aristophanes took up re-writing various synopsis’ in order to hide himself away from embarrassment.)

Alas, with all these birds in flight, is any formulation of a concrete distillation possible? When one approaches a bird closely they move away and they thus will no doubt remain a mystery. Unlike the attacking and kamikaze deployments adopted by birds in Dapne Du Maurier’s novelette, which is titled *The Birds* and famously re-scored by Alfred Hitchcock. In one scene a flock of fierce songbirds disturbs Melanie and Mitch’s tea by coming into the living room via the chimney at a speed visibly more akin to a plague of locusts. It is this thought, of birds attacking like arrows, that brings about a route back towards Aesop’s *Owl and the Birds* and the line ‘And lastly, seeing an archer approach who contrived darts armed with feathers to fly faster than the wings of the Birds themselves.’

But from where might these darts originate?

Aesop's own identity, like all mythical beings, is widely disputed in all milieus. It is not known whether he existed at all, or if he formulated the fables himself, or that perhaps he just merely compiled them from other sources and experiences? He has likewise been depicted historically with abridged identities and ethnicities. But no matter their provenance, a fable or any textual formula conjures a continuous doubt between belief and non-belief in both the nature and language of its author.

And if setting out a way to codify and mutate a personality is a pre-requisite given to material dispersed or made public, the message always remains removed or is at least partly inconspicuous when sent between a mute object or an animal, and a human being.

How neutral then it might all seem to be, and the neutral, how strange it sounds? A recounting of a painting, including examples of its references stands here merely as an exercise in hermeneutic interpretation. It reminds of being present at a performance by an ornithologist who proceeds to blow around the lip of an empty wine bottle, and releases distinct phase lengths and amplitudes of recurring whistles by various distances of weights of breath. These sounds and actions could not be fully recorded and I am unable to recall the emitted resonances that appeared out of the bottle. (A doubtless reasoning this gatekeeper-like-gesture was adhered to.) Such an anecdote evokes a deftly use of legerdemain, whilst abutting the idea that history itself is, in part, an unreliable medley of both form and medium.

Whether be it 'verbi, voco or visual', language and its facility is unlikely to negate itself as a tangible response or understanding between a mute but espied object, its embellished past or future tenses, and an individual, observer or reader (which is which?). It is therefore plausible that a fine procuring of an exact fidelity takes a very long period of time (maha-manvantara?) as well as a vast orbit of words, especially given all the names, places, artefacts and songs that knead together. But nor is it possible for an individual to know which name, place, artefact or song will come next, or that is about to fall away, turn around or repeat itself. The almost tenebrous yet ubiquitous phrase of Dutch Golden Age poet and jurist Jacob Cats offers itself as a rational pause, 'Every bird can only sing what it is able to hear.'

Sources

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