

**BECOMING (IN)HUMAN.
THE SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE PRESENT IN HELEN
MACDONALD'S *H IS FOR HAWK***

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Abstract

The paper presents a reading of Helen Macdonald's non-fiction book *H Is for Hawk*, that focuses on the adoption of the temporal perspective of a predator (the instantaneousness of the attack and capture of the prey) instead of the typically human way of addressing the temporality spreading over a past, a present, and a future (memory, mourning, anxiety). Rethinking the inherited cultural practice of keeping and taming goshawks, the British writer narrates the process of mental merging with the female goshawk she trains. Through her engagement as an austringer (keeper of hawks), she also questions such categories as gender, class, and nationality. In parallel to her own experience, she reads the personal story of yet another transgressive austringer, the homosexual author T. H. White. This double line of vital/textual experience deconstructs the dominant cultural stance of heterosexual masculinity and sketches a peculiar queertopia.

Keywords: British non-fiction; interspecies studies; ecofeminism; queer; falconry

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In her non-fiction book *H Is for Hawk* (2014), Helen Macdonald offers an account of the year following the death of her father. Progressively, she withdraws from the society, spending the major part of her mourning time in the company of a young she-goshawk, Mabel. The temporal dimension, precisely, will be put into the limelight in this paper, as the bereaved woman builds up an alternative dimension of (in)human temporality, trying to adopt, to some degree, the way time is experienced by a predatory bird, in the instantaneousness of attack and capture rather than the duration of human recollection, grief, and the anxiety of what tomorrow might bring.

The interspecies encounter of a woman and a bird, as well as culturally charged tradition of falconry, provide an occasion for critical rethinking of basic notions such as the dualism of nature and culture, and the categories of gender and class, identity and belonging. The character of the issues addressed seems to locate *H Is for Hawk* in the field of ecofeminist criticism. In fact, before we pass to the main argumentation concerning (in)human temporality, it provides a good starting point for the presentation of criss-crossing inspirations, references, and cultural legacies that resonate in Macdonald's text.

The foundations of ecofeminism have been laid by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), where she connected gender inequality and environmental issues, arguing that patriarchal structures and the domination of women by men are deeply intertwined with the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. D'Eaubonne advocated for a radical feminism that would go beyond mere gender equality to embrace a broader vision of social and environmental justice. Forty years after that original formulation leading to the birth of a prolific school of literature and criticism, Helen Macdonald preferred to fill the key concepts of the movement with troublesome and transgressive content rather than to provide yet another exemplification of its main ideas. Apparently, in *H Is for Hawk*, all the ecofeminist ingredients are present: the connection between woman and nature, the questioning of the male-centred rituals and narrations, the contestation of the imposed notions of gender, class and ethnicity defined in association with environmental conditions (as far as homeland landscapes may be treated as a trigger of patriotic feelings). Nonetheless, Macdonald's narration makes a persistent impression of "ecofeministically incorrect", as she decides to explore the dark side of her womanhood in the company of a she-goshawk that facilitates her initiation into the cruellest and bloodiest secrets of life. The protagonist becomes an austringer (the term referring to the keeper and trainer of hawks as distinct from the specialised falconer) and departs for a solitary hunt in the British countryside, re-enacting and subverting an anachronistic practice of class and gender (a sport associated with male scions of aristocracy and gentry).

Certainly, the austringer's adventure, although engaging to the highest degree the environmental context, differs from the climate of ecofeminist conferences and workshops held in the United States in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Macdonald does not depart from the notion that women and nature are jointly oppressed; rather the contrary, she seems to seek her own way of empowerment.

In the company of her hawk, she assumes the dominant position in nature, searching to occupy an elevated rank in the natural hierarchy of predators and prey. She re-enacts an archaic practice in which she occupies the traditional place of a male hunter. On the other hand, her relationship with the bird acquires, at a given stage, a maternal inflection that has hardly any equivalent in the traditional art of manning birds of prey.

Falconry, in the broader sense of taming various predatory species of birds (falcons, hawks, eagles, owls, etc.), has been recognised by UNESCO as a part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is testified in diverse traditional cultures over a great expanse of the Old World, including the steppes of Central Asia, Korea and Japan, Indian subcontinent, Middle East, North Africa, and Europe (cf. *Falconry, a living human heritage*, 2021). Nonetheless, as a specific form of interspecies relationship, falconry has been almost entirely absent from the landscape of the present-day multispecies (human/animal) studies, which is a significant gap in the state-of-the-art. On the other hand, the omission is understandable, because the discussion of all types of partnership between human and non-human hunters has often been treated as politically incorrect and thus marginalised. Obviously, both from the ethical and ecological point of view, hunting is a highly objectionable practice, especially if it should be inscribed in depleted and impoverished natural environments of industrialised countries such as Great Britain.

Also the ecofeminist movement did not assume as its first priority to explore consistently the condition of woman as a huntress or her solidarity with predatory species. Initially, the aims of ecofeminism were to identify and sever the connections between women and nature, rather than to deepen and develop them. The early figures associated with ecofeminism, such as the theologian Rosemary Ruether, strived to reinterpret the biblical sources legitimizing the dominance of nature and to disconnect women from the natural world that, according to the leading exhortation of the monotheistic religions, should be subjected to patriarchal dominion, guidance, and control. Contrastingly, the traditional techniques of taming the birds of prey as a form of culture are almost the paradigmatic example of the scheme of patriarchal dominion. As they were historically cultivated both in Europe and in the Middle East, they derived from the monotheistic (either Christian or Islamic) injunction to extend the rational control of man upon the irrational, unpredictable, “chaotic” factor represented by the bird of prey. The primacy of reason and man’s rational control in interspecies relations is the general message transferred by *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* (1943), a 13th-century *summa* of Western and Eastern falconry lore elaborated under the auspices of Frederic II.

What is more, in the mediaeval and early-modern European societies, the control of a bird of prey served as a symbol of political and socio-economic supremacy. Culturally established and codified hierarchies of ornithological species reflected the social hierarchy, reserving eagles for emperors or kings, and distributing other, “lesser” species among different categories of nobility.

Aristocratic women, low in the hierarchy, received the right of keeping and training only smaller birds of prey, such as merlins. Curiously, they seem to have been interested in doing so already in the medieval and early-modern period, and the authorship of the *Book of Saint Albans* (*Boke of Seynt Albans*) (1881) that codifies such a “socio-ornithological” hierarchy, first printed in 1486, is often attributed to Dame Juliana Berners, a prioress in Hertfordshire (born ca. 1388). Yet on the other hand, the cultural tradition preserves and exploits the identification between the bird of prey that should be manned and the woman who should be trained to abdicate from her all-too-independent mind. It is not by chance that William Shakespeare, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, written between 1590 and 1592, gives a proof of a considerable expertise in falconry, while Petruchio explains how his young wife Katherina should be treated:

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,
And till she stoop, she must not be full-gorged,
For then she never looks upon her lure.
Another way I have to man my haggard,
To make her come and know her keeper's call:
That is to watch her, as we watch these kites
That bate and beat, and will not be obedient
(Act 4, scene 1, lines 169-177).

The Shakespearean fragment refers to the technique of maintaining the bird's readiness for hunt through refusing to nourish him. The hungry bird is disposed to accept the training in which the falconer or austringer uses the lure, i.e. a model of a live bird such as pigeon, that he attaches to the end of a string or a rope he whirles in the air. The headstrong, obdurate woman is compared to a haggard, i.e., a bird of prey in its adult plumage. Such birds are harder to train than the specimens caught in the wild at a younger age or those elevated in captivity.

The feminist theology of Rosemary Ruether departed from the notion of full humanity of women and stressed that anything that lessens their humanity must be contrary to God's will. Accentuation and valorisation of the female experience, no longer treated as secondary to the male one, should thus be a step toward the eradication of the discriminatory system. In Helen Macdonald's book, the austringer's exploration, nonetheless, goes in quite the opposite direction. Penetrating to the core of patriarchal traditions and practices, exemplified by falconry and the art of pre-modern austringers, Macdonald explores precisely the brink of the human condition, the liminar zone where the woman used to be located in the male-centred world-view. At the same time, she explores the darkness of the traditionally male activity such as hunting, and thus the inhumanity of man as a killer. Significantly, her adoption and cultivation of male cultural patrimony, with all its ambivalence, takes place after the death of her father and goes on parallel with the process of mourning.

The fact that *H Is for Hawk* is presented as non-fiction rather than fictionalised autobiographical writing, in which the connection between the text

and the author's life is loosened, may be interpreted in the light of the writer's hypothetical connection with, or critical answer to, the ecofeminist movement. In the famous article "What is ecofeminism?" published by *The Nation*, Ynestra King accentuated precisely the "connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice" (King 1987, 702). The movement has thus created an intellectual climate privileging the treatment of text as non-fictional and transformative in relation to reality rather than a construct alienated from real life or parallel in relation to it. As we will see, Helen Macdonald gives voice to a claim of an alternative present, situated not in an illusory or escapist textual domain, but in the realm of direct, vital experience. This alternative, yet palpable present, described as a real-life experience is achieved through the relationship between a woman and a she-goshawk, while the *pacte de lecture* implied in the non-fictional text presupposes merely an attempt at communicating this experience. The parallel experience of reading (in this instance, the engaged, deeply affective reading of diverse personal and published writings of T. H. White) is presented by the author as a constitutive part of a contrapuntal composition that interweaves the narration of outdoor and bookish activities.

Helen Macdonald was born in 1970 and grew up in Camberley, Surrey, a town situated barely 50 km from London and connected to British military life (which is a circumstance exploited in her book as she thematizes a specific vision of Britishness, identity, patriotism, and historical memory). *H Is for Hawk*, distinguished with 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction and Costa Book Award, is her most recognizable publication, translated into several languages. Nonetheless, she has also authored other texts on falconry and its symbolism, namely *Falcon* (2005), as well as the collection of essays *Vesper Flights* (2020), where she returns to the topic of loss and mourning connected to the man-made destruction of the natural world ("the sixth extinction"). Having studied English at Cambridge University, she has made a career as a historian of science and a naturalist active in the world of the media, namely writing and narrating several radio programmes. In 2010, she appeared in the BBC television series *Birds Britannia*. In 2017, as a part of the BBC *Natural World* series, she created *H Is for Hawk: A New Chapter*, where she trained a new chick (the northern goshawk Mabel portrayed in the book is known to have died in 2014).

Hypothetically, the experience as a naturalist popularizer might have contributed to soften the tone of Macdonald's writing. In the eyes of a distracted reader, *H Is for Hawk* may appear as quite an unpretentious, even a conservative book, centred on the celebration of British landscape, cultural identity, and sporting heritage, a fact that partially explains its status as an international bestseller. As Vicky Constantine Croke picturesquely put it in her book review for *The New York Times*, the narration seems done with "words that mimic feathers, so impossibly pretty we don't notice their astonishing engineering" (Croke 2015). Be that as it may, what appears to the eye of a critical interpreter is quite a subversive significance of this text. It is precisely the transgressive quality, rather than the sheer beauty of her prose, that makes Macdonald's book stand

apart from the genre of falconer's autobiography that is still quite productive today both in Europe and the United States (for instance, cf. Bodio 2015, Cowan 2016, Gallagher 2008, Montgomery 2022, Stotts 2022). A critical reading reveals extremely daring, transgressive layers of meaning, as the text explores patriarchal legacies and, on the other hand, develops contesting strategies that may appear as unorthodox in relation to the classical formulations of ecofeminism. Apparently narrating an activity that should be treated just as an eccentric hobby, i.e. her experience of manning a young goshawk, Macdonald offers an account of a multiple transgression of basic, deeply rooted cultural norms, including those related to bereavement and mourning. Obviously, the confrontation with traumatic affects related to death appears as unavoidable at a given stage of her individual biography, namely at the moment of the disappearance of her father. Nonetheless, she chooses to exploit and develop this confrontation with death, paradoxically delving, instead of avoiding it, in the natural spectacle of killing and dying, i.e. accompanying the goshawk attacking and devouring her prey.

The relation with the bird aims at the creation of an alternative present: not just a reality in which the deceased parent might be still alive. The affective reality the austringer tries to create for herself is alternative in relation to a wider landscape of lack and loss, including such factors as lack of emotional support, frustrated maternity, the perception of socio-economic fragility, and relative homelessness –or, as the author puts it concisely: “*No father, no partner, no child, no job, no home*” (Macdonald 207; italics in the text). The woman's relation with the bird creates a sphere in the margin of humanity where her solitude and socio-economic deprivation may acquire an absolute intensity and therefore lose all meaning. The alternative present should be understood quite literally as a peculiar temporality differing in an essential way from the time perspective of an average human. The predator lives faster, focused on the tiny fraction of the temporary flow, oblivious of the past, anticipating nothing but the imminent seizure of her prey. Hunting implies a suspension of time, a complete erasure of past and future, their reduction to the narrowest perspective that is defined as the closest thirty seconds. It also implies an extreme acuteness of sensual perception, a focus on the tiniest details of the flow of sensations compensated by almost total exclusion of memory. Such a present of plenitude and intensity, filled exclusively with primary affects related to power and possession, is the exact opposite of the time and its affective content as experienced by the bereaved woman who feels that everything (human relations, a job, a house to live in) slips out of her grip. The bird of prey epitomizes the lacking temporal and affective quality resumed in just one verb: “Seize” (18). It also incarnates an ideal of insensibility that seems extremely desirable for the suffering woman: “The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life” (85).

In this way, she achieves a stage in which she participates in the primordial time of the bird. In this time lived on the brink of humanity, the present is no longer suspended between the past and the future. The austringer is thus set

free from the temporal burden stretching between the awareness of loss, the mourning, and the anxiety of what tomorrow might bring:

Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human. Then it took me past that place to somewhere I wasn't human at all. (...) The world gathered about me. It made absolute sense. But the only things I knew were hawkish things, and the lines that drew me across the landscape were the lines that drew the hawk: hunger, desire, fascination, the need to find and fly and kill (195).

The position “on the very edge of being a human” is obviously an untenable one. In the final sections of the book, the collapse into the human condition as the outcome of such a radical experiment couldn't be avoided. This is why the narration ends up with the banality of a Christmas celebration that marks the recovery of the typically human time, as well as the return to the social and affective status of an ordinary woman. Separated from her bird at the time of its moulting, she is reintegrated in the usual contexts of sociability and family life. The whole narration is built around the double move of estrangement from all things human and the subsequent recovery of human condition, enriched with the opportunity of inner development and soul healing. Finally, the separation is consumed when the bird lives its own untranslatable bodily experience of loss and regeneration through moulting, i.e., growing new feathers.

The “ecofeministically incorrect” endeavour of Helen Macdonald consists in finding a way out of the emotional fragility associated with the womanhood, her marginalised position in the society, as well as her perceived inability to cope with life as an independent subject (without a parent, a partner, or even a child). This aim is achieved through the progressive fusion with the bird and its way of experiencing the world in the process of manning, or rather, of “birding” the austringer. In the world of birds of prey, female is the stronger sex; in the traditional falconry lore it is her who is treated as the “whole” bird, while the male is called *tiercel*, because most specimens are approximately one third smaller and lighter than the females of the same species. Yet the woman's affective adventure is not based simply on acquiring a dominant, aggressive or ferocious pose. It is not, or not exclusively, the process of binding the wild nature of the hawk into accepting the human presence, but rather the opposite, the process of draining and exhausting the humanness of the austringer. Her paradoxical empowerment is not derived from the sense of dominion and control over the bird and its predatory impulses, but from the confrontation with fear experienced by and through the bird. This fear is shared and lived together with the hawk as if drop by drop, in the narrow perspective of those thirty seconds that define its peculiar posture in relation to the world. The instantaneous, impetuous reactions of the predator are as if suspended, the time slows down:

The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the

gloom. Her beak is open. She breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burned stone. Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready to flight. I don't look at her. I mustn't. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there* (66-67).

The traditional technique improperly called “watching” (as we have seen this term used in the Shakespearean quotation) consists in the progressive soothing and overcoming the fear through a patient co-presence of man and bird. Rather than dominance or participation in the predatory instincts, it implies an almost complete erasure and depletion of the human ego. This is how the existential anxiety of the austringer progressively melts together with the fear of the wild animal.

Overall, the process of taming the goshawk, one of the most difficult bird species used in falconry, is for the bereaved woman a daring move right into the heart of darkness. Among all the species of birds used in falconry, such as gyrfalcons, peregrines, kites, merlins and kestrels that might assume some kind of solar symbolism, the very choice of the goshawk reflects the desire of penetrating the affects that the classical Jungian psychology defined as those of the Shadow. The bloodthirsty bird, extremely hard to tame, epitomizes the darkness, but its source is located deep in the human soul, in what the austringer lucidly recognises as her own madness:

I'd seen people in the grip of psychosis before, and that was madness as obvious as the taste of blood in the mouth. The kind of madness I had was different. It was quiet, and very, very dangerous. It was a madness designed to keep me sane. My mind struggled to build across the gap, make a new and inhabitable world (16).

At the same time, this metaphorical bridge opens an access to the primordial time and its elemental energies. The protagonist sees the goshawk as a living dinosaur: “There was a distinct, prehistoric scent to her feathers; it caught in my nose, peppery, rusty as storm-rain” (19). At the same time, this delving in the pre-human times of distant beginnings of life on earth helps to overcome gender and social conundrum that structures the human life. In the context of the traditional falconry lore, the goshawks have a bad reputation, and the protagonist finds in that prejudice the reflection of the opinions concerning women, and thus the social prejudice against herself: “Like women, goshawks were inexplicable. Sulky. Flighty and hysterical. Their moods were pathological. They were beyond all reason” (112). Yet the taming of the goshawk leads to quite a different outcome than Shakespearean taming of the shrew, transforming the foundations of the “domestication” of the woman that will utterly take place as the austringer comes back home for Christmas.

It is important to understand that a manned falcon or hawk is not domesticated in the same sense as a hound or any other animal that accompanied man

throughout the history. A contemporary American falconer Stephen Bodio tries to make it clear right at the beginning of his book *A Rage for Falcons. An Alliance Between Man and Bird*: “Let me tell you a few things that falconry is not. First, it is not pet-keeping. Most falconers cringe when some well-meaning acquaintance refers to their birds as pets. A falconer’s bird, however tame and affectionate, is as close to a wild animal in condition and habit as an animal that lives with man can be. Above all, it hunts” (Bodio 2015, 4). The relation between the austringer and her bird not only requires closeness and constant attention, making the taming a particularly time-consuming endeavour; it is also much more intimate and, in a way, much more egalitarian than other kinds of interspecies relationships, where domination and submission play the crucial role. As Helen Macdonald explains it, “hawks aren’t social animals like dogs or horses; they understand neither coercion nor punishment. The only way to tame them is through positive reinforcement with gifts of food” (67). The bird soaring into the sky escapes the range of human control; its return to the keeper, answering his or her call, is under all circumstances conditional and uncertain. The bird of prey is never reduced to the role of a living tool used to achieve pragmatic hunting goals. Even bred in captivity, it conserves its full or only slightly impaired aptitude to live in natural state; for all the effects it remains so to speak potentially feral. Retaining its full capacity of survival, it may break its relationship with the human at any moment, taking up an independent existence. The bird released for a hunting session may return or not, is never forced to return – this is perhaps the most thrilling, defining element of this interspecies relationship. The option of independent existence remains constantly present, especially during the breeding season, when the encounter with a potential partner may prove to be more tempting than the lure offered by man. If the return is always uncertain, the decision of releasing the bird is the expression of a subtle and complex mixture of hope, confidence and risk. No wonder that falconry as a source of symbolism became a kind of imaginary model helping to overcome the contradiction between mutually exclusive values. This is why it is associated with the search for spiritual perfection, especially in the eastern Sufi poetry, such as in the well-known mystical poem “The Seed Market” of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, known also in the West:

A perfect falcon, for no reason
has landed on your shoulder
and become yours (Rumi 2004).

This is how, far more important than the proteins it might help to acquire, hunting with the bird of prey incarnates a lofty cultural ideal, harmonising such contradicting values as freedom and fidelity, wilderness and home, abandonment and possession, certainty and risk. The dimension of autonomy, arbitrariness, even the apparent gratuitousness of the return of the bird had been accentuated in the systems of cultural symbols that progressively developed around archaic falconry practised simply as a hunting technique. This is why, in parallel to the

Shakespearean vision of taming the woman, the relation of man and bird could explain the theological concept of free will: God became a falconer and man the bird of prey enjoying the freedom of the sky, the ambivalence of flight, distance, and return, harmonizing human sinful nature with the attachment to God. Such contents could be found in various Baroque poets – Macdonald, nonetheless, chooses to cite a rather unorthodox name, that of the English soldier, politician and adventurer Sir Thomas Sherley (1564 – c. 1630), the author of *A Short Discourse of Hawking to the Field* (cf. contemporary edition: Sherley 2004). Crossing the centuries, the same literary paradigm speaking of harmony and collapse was still present and productive at the beginning of the 20th century, when William Butler Yeats, in “The Second Coming”, a poem written in 1919, conveyed the atmosphere of Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. He expressed the cataclysm through the image of the broken alliance of human and non-human hunter:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer (Yeats 1920).

Helen Macdonald moves thus through a rich cultural field. Certainly, the narration of the year starting with the death of her father may be yet another “widening gyre” in the micro-scale of a private life. The exploration of the community with the bird utterly permits to invert the expanding direction of the interior cataclysm, to restructure the perception of the world, and utterly to regain the psychological sense of control over the reality. The traditional technique of “watching” that, contrary to what the term seems to indicate, includes awareness of the bird’s presence achieved through all the senses but the direct glance (and the menace it represents in the animal kingdom), is transformed into a way of rebuilding mindfulness and a search for an alternative present – the present lived as a temporal dimension of plenitude, rather than a time of despondency, suspended between the painful recollection of the past and the anxious anticipation of the future. At the same time, even if utterly her story is made of words, the austringer manages to escape the phallogocentric sphere of dominance exerted through verbalised orders, as she builds her relation with the hawk on speechlessness and silent co-presence. The “widening gyre” in which the bereaved woman found herself may be seen as the void of human language, caused not only by the utter impossibility of giving full expression to death, but also by the fact that the primary patriarchal relation has been severed. The death of the father brings about a crisis of language. She can no longer speak to her father nor receive his guidance; no one will tell her what to do, neither in the negative nor in the positive sense.

Obviously, the bird of prey is speechless. Yet the aspect that should be stressed here is precisely its non-domesticated condition. As it is a fact of our everyday experience, the owners of domestic animals obstinately talk to them, opposing their pets’ inability of verbal interaction with a staccato of repeated orders and

commands, reinforcing, rather than eradicating, the performative mechanisms of coercion and norm enforcement that entered in crisis after the death of the father. Perhaps some of the conclusions of Judith Butler's groundbreaking work *Bodies That Matter* (1993) may be applied here. The patriarchal order, reflected also in the practice of interaction between man and the domestic animals, is based on the constrained repetition of norms that cannot be understood outside the process of iterability. On the other hand, the iterability shapes the temporal condition of the human subject, constituting a time filled with ritualized reproduction of the command, "a ritual reiterated under and through constraint" (Butler 95). The passivity of the austringer, her acting on the bird through silence, absence of command and constraint, enables her to access the specific temporal condition of her non-human partner, alternative in relation to the usual, unsatisfactory, human way of being in time.

Helen Macdonald "re-stories" an interspecies practice in such a way that it ceases to be instrumentalised as a hunting technique. Her field activities in the company of the bird cannot be dismissed as a futile pleasure of killing or gratuitous destruction. Nonetheless, their sense is even gloomier and more transgressive. She penetrates the mystery of death itself, as well as the shadow zone of bloodthirstiness, that is not alien also to man. No wonder that the history of 20th-century world wars appears constantly in the background of her personal story, as the vicinity of a military base suggests. Certainly, the army is yet another, quite ambivalent dimension of the patriarchal order, with all its charge of subaltern relations, dominance, orders given and received, troubling secrets of blood, aggression, manliness, heroism. In the middle of the "widening gyre" of private bereavement and grief, there is a search for an understanding of Britishness. The understanding of the ethnic identity and national history is also the domain of the father, a legacy shaped and transmitted by him. In the perspective of Macdonald's text, this history is made private not only by the father's passion for observing and cataloguing different types of aircraft landing in the nearby military base, but also by troubling discoveries such as a statuette of an Übermensch with a goshawk on his fist that in 1937 was offered to British falconers by Hermann Göring. This symbolic value of this rather uncomfortable item may be interpreted as a trigger for re-evaluation of the patriarchal legacy received in the family and the protagonist's closest social circles, such as the group of acquaintances related to falconry.

Truly, the memories, certitudes and mindsets that suddenly come to the fore with the death of the father form a cataclysmic gyre triggering the questioning of all the structuring concepts. The exploration of such a cultural legacy such as British and European falconry, a topic of apparently marginal importance, leads to the rethinking of such categories as ethnicity and class. The bird of prey stands for distinction, social privilege, and visions of supremacy, is a female deconstruction of a given landscape of male affects. The female austringer avoids accessing the primordial power inscribed in the symbolic figure of the "noble" bird as a "licence to kill" or an illusory sensation of belonging to the sort of elite that Macdonald,

evoking the cloth functioning as a symbol of class identity, ironically describes as that of men clad in tweed. Hunting legacy inscribes the subject not only in a maze of the wild and the tame, but also that of killing and dying, standing as a metaphor of war, patriotism, and identity that might not always be placed on the right side of history (as the traces of British flirts with the Nazism indicate).

In most cultures, hunting is an eminently social occasion. The impulses of aggression toward a common target, i.e., the animal prey, tend to bind together a community of male hunters assuming such characteristics as cohesion, dominion, and power. Yet this community is not without its own outsiders. The lonely, female austringer questioning her certitudes ends up exploring this dimension of outsidership rather than that of a male community-building value. A peculiar, quite surprising dimension of a falconer queertopia emerges in the background of this multidirectional questioning. The grieving woman follows the steps of yet another austringer in the maze of blood, cruelty and male values, namely the homosexual author Terence Hanbury White (1906-1964). All along her narration of taming her hawk, she reads White's private appointments and books, such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) and *The Goshawk* (1951). In this way, she delves not only in the Arthurian universe created by this forgotten author, but far more importantly, in a life in which violence suffered in childhood left an indelible trace, causing sadistic urges and the will of flying away from men and the so called civilised life. Studying White's writings, Macdonald's austringer discovers the complexity and ambivalence of a fellow tormented soul responding to the same call of the wilderness: "He is a wicked man. A free man. A man who is cast out, the man who fell. *Feral. Ferox. Fairy*" (132).

In the context of the compassionate, affective reading of White performed by his fellow austringer, the medieval story of Merlin who transforms his disciple Wart into various animals, including the bird merlin, is particularly compelling. The crucial element making falconry so attractive for the queer subject is, once again, the ambivalence inscribed in the denial of separation, loss, and return that it epitomises. In the process of manning, the bird is initially released to fly on a special leash (called *creance* in the specialised terminology). Only after being trained to return and to capture the lure presented by the falconer, the bird is released to fly unrestrained. Nonetheless, the risk of losing the precious bird of prey is present at any stage of the hunting practice. Delving in the depth of human affects that are at play, Macdonald evokes the case of a child obsessed with strings, analysed by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. Tying the familiar objects with all sorts of lines, the boy tried to deal with the fear of abandonment by his mother. Also the austringer tries to deal with her bereavement and grief, "to hold on to something that had already flown away" (49). On the other hand, the obsession of tying the loved object with strings brings about immediate associations with specific forms of sexuality and eroticism, yet Macdonald does not develop her narration in this direction. Instead, she speaks of the general sensation of existential intensity. The austringer manages to instate a better, happier reality,

a world of harmony and plenitude in which things are tied safely together and nothing is missing:

The world with the hawk in it was insulated from harm, and in that world I was exactly aware of all the edges of my skin. Every night I slept and dreamed of creances, of lines and knots, of skeins of wool, skeins of geese flying south. And every afternoon I walked out onto the pitch with relief, because when the hawk was on my fist I knew who I was, and I was never angry with her, even if I wanted to sink to my knees and weep every time she tried to fly away (143).

A relation with a bird might be seen as the very limit of all queer attachments. Yet it leads to the utter fulfilment, not only through a quasi-erotic celebration of the return, but also through the complete fusion of the hearts. As the austringer confesses, “there was nothing that was such a salve to my grieving heart as the hawk returning” (135). At the same time, the identification with the bird becomes almost total: “It was hard, now, to distinguish between my heart and the hawk at all. When she sat twenty yards across the pitch part of me sat there too, as if someone had taken my heart and moved it that little distance. [...] I felt incomplete unless the hawk was sitting on my hand: we were parts of each other” (135).

What is striking and surprising in Macdonald’s book is that her retelling of the male practice of falconry bears characteristically female traces. One of such traces is the maternal affect of the austringer at the moment of the first successful kill made by the young hawk. Rather than simply rejoicing that the bird caught a pheasant that could make an excellent meal, the childless woman comes as close to the joy of maternity as she has ever been. She seems to experience the most profound satisfaction for having been a facilitator rather than the beneficiary of the hunt:

The hawk stops being a thing of violent death. She becomes a child. It shakes me to the core. She is a child. A baby hawk that’s just worked out who she is. What she is for. I reach down and start, unconsciously as a mother helping a child with her dinner, plucking the pheasant with the hawk. For the hawk (184).

What is more, she discovers the same experience of mothering in White’s testimony: “Through the hawk, White could become a mother, a ‘man who for two months had made that bird, almost like a mother nourishing her child inside her, for the subconsciousness of the bird and the man became really linked by a mind’s cord’” (114). The relation with the bird of prey opens a way of access not only to a non-human time – that intense thirty-second present of the predator, filled with all the intensity of her acute senses. It also permits to cross the frontier of experience in a body other than one’s own. It permits to cross the biological borders of sexual corporeality, to transgress into another gender and another species.

Macdonald narrates a process of delving in a non-human condition that is in many ways distinct from the “becoming-animal” as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, since the process does not go from the major and the constant (man) to the minor and the variable (animal) (Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 2007). On the contrary, the realm of stability and ontological plenitude is associated with the non-human being that seems to provide a structure to the world that, from a human perspective, appears as the “widening gyre”. On the other hand, the austringer’s experience deploys a range of variants, such as becoming-mute (outside the phallogocentric sphere), becoming-present (outside the human condition suspended between recollection and anxiety), as well as queer experiences of becoming-man / becoming-woman and becoming-mother. The latter, also for the female austringer, is lived not through the straight, heterosexual, socially accepted, bodily motherhood, but rather through the deviation from the traditional standard: a transgressive non-male experience of hunting.

Yet the culminating, breaking point of the transgression is related to the process of becoming-inhuman. The trauma, but also the liberation that makes the austringer fall back into her human condition is the discovery of the terrible secret of the death of the animal caught by the hawk. The bird of prey ignores the difference between life and death; it often starts eating its quarry when it is still alive. Meanwhile, the liminal human affect, as Macdonald understands it, is the impulse of mercy: “I had to do this. If I didn’t kill the rabbit, the hawk would sit on top of it and start eating; and at some point in the eating the rabbit would die. That is how goshawks kill” (196). The absolute frontier permitting no further transgression into inhumanity is the act of eating the prey alive.

In the groundbreaking essay *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben, interpreting a 13th-century miniature from the Hebrew Bible conserved in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, sketched quite a perturbing vision of an interspecies community. It is a community of carnivores devouring meat during an apocalyptic banquet in which the post-historic reminder of humanity feasts together with animals. On the table set, according to the rabbinic tradition, there are various kinds of meat that the righteous now are allowed to eat no matter if the food is kosher or not. The banquet includes the consumption of the monstrous creatures of the beginnings, Behemoth and Leviathan, expressly reserved by God, according to the Revelation of Baruch, for this eschatological feast (cf. Agamben 2003). Yet at all other occasions, the human affect interferes with the complete, primordial commensality of the hunting partners; even if the austringer hunts with the hawk, merges with her or nurtures maternal feelings toward her, she still abhors her act of eating the live, palpitating meat. In traditional cultures, the falconers exchange the meat with the bird, luring it to release the freshly killed prey in order to devour instead a piece of meat that the human hunter brings in his bag, deliberately to perform this peculiar ritual that utterly draws the bird to the human side through the consumption of a quarry that had passed that subtle frontier of death that the bird of prey cannot perceive. Yet still, this act of meat sharing is situated beyond the usual

ritual prescriptions that refer to killing and eating domestic animals, such as the culturally accepted norms of halal or kosher butchery.

Nonetheless, in Macdonald's narration, the liminal point is maintained. Eventually, humans may eat their meat raw, but they do not eat their prey alive, precisely because humans, contrary to hawks, know "how hearts do stop" (196); they cultivate a concept of death that is out of the bird's grasp. This is why the process of becoming-inhuman reaches a breaking point. As Macdonald resumes it, "hunting makes you animal, but the death of an animal makes you human" (196). This hunting experience, far from any hypothesis of killing merely for pleasure, permits to live fully "the sorrow of all deaths" (197). It includes not only the death of the austringer's father, but also her own death. It brings about the full, direct, acute comprehension of her own mortality.

The protagonist of Macdonald's narration was an austringer also before her father's death and before this liminal experience. She recollects her own lack of awareness of the secret of death as she had witnessed the same hunting spectacle as a child. The animals that were killed used to be called *game*, a strange euphemism connotative of the supposed non-seriousness of hunting as a social activity inscribed in the patriarchal order. Quite similar non-seriousness crippled White. As he wrote in his private papers, his father used to force him to stand in front of a toy castle as a victim condemned to die and waiting to be executed. This drill did not teach him braveness in confrontation with death; on the contrary, he was drilled to victimhood, learning how to live with powerlessness. Both austringers tried to get out of their lingering nightmare through the confrontation with the truth, the sheer vitality of the bird. The hawks attracted them as they were powerfully real, not-pretended, wild and fierce, but also secure of their place in the world. This is how the company of birds could help them both to exorcise the spectres of loss.

The intratextual time of Macdonald's narration closes with the full circle of seasons. The austringer finds a point of equilibrium between the wild and the tame. She reclaims her place in human society not in the state of reductive, crippling domestication of the Shakespearean shrew, but rather as someone who acquired a deeper awareness of the meaning and importance of being human. At the closure of the narration, the bird is placed in the foster care of a falconer friend for the period of moult. Also the hawk achieves her maturity: Mabel progressively loses her juvenile plumage and creates her adult feathers. Overall, the adventure leads to the recovery of the missing home. The great return from the wilderness does not obliterate the traces of the feral condition that the woman conserves, almost like an Arthurian fairy, as her appanage in the middle of the social life.

The narration of the hunting woman and her conquest of an alternative temporality opens a new horizon in the domain of interspecies relationships, aiming far beyond the field of ecofeminist criticism. Macdonald sketches a novel, fascinating way of restructuring the limits of the human condition, indicating an original, queer way of being both female and human. Most importantly, in this context, the term *queer* is no longer applicable exclusively to describe the

process of liquefying the rigid, binary sexual identities. As the austringer becomes “birded” by her hawk, it gains a new assertion as a term referring to the unsealing of the species identity.

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