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For Philippe Jaccottet, who passed away during the final revisions
and for Michael

He wormed about a bit on his stomach to get quite comfortable and looked intently into the eye of a buttercup.

- David Jones, *In Parenthesis*

The wary, sharp sighted crane, circumspectly observed our progress.

- William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida*

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Introduction

“Lack of observation seems to me one of the cardinal sins, responsible for so much cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners—and general unhappiness, too.”¹

It was in a letter to her friend Anne Stevenson that Elizabeth Bishop made the above complaint, the same long letter in which she admired Charles Darwin for his “endless heroic *observations*.” It is a letter that Bishop scholars refer to as “the Darwin letter,” and within its considerable length it contains a sort of anti-manifesto connecting an aesthetic sensibility with an ethical intuition. It isn’t just lack of observation in general Bishop laments, but especially lack of observation among fellow writers.² She particularly disliked styles of “self-absorption” and “heaviness,” unabashedly preferring “fun” and “cheerful,” but with an edge.

Throughout the Darwin letter Bishop oscillates nimbly between dark and bright, an oscillation “observation” renders endurable. Her embrace of opposite feelings—or rather her suspension of feelings that seem to follow automatically from a given outlook—drives the movement of the following sentences: “My outlook is pessimistic. I think we are still barbarians, barbarians who commit a hundred indecencies and cruelties every day of our lives, as just possibly future ages may be able to see. But I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy,—to make life endurable and to keep ourselves ‘new, tender, quick.’”³ The form of the letter allows her to make summary judgments and hyperbolic claims, to range, to be chatty, abrupt and irreverent.⁴ The word “gay” would by this point have had both its main connotations (of mirthful, merry; and of

¹ Bishop, Letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (Hereafter referred to in footnotes as *PPL*), 860.

² “I’m often thunderstruck by the helplessness, ignorance, ghastly taste, lack of worldly knowledge, and lack of observation of writers who are much more talented than I am . . .” (Bishop, Letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, *PPL*, 860)

³ Bishop, Letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, *PPL*, 864. The quote is the last three words of George Herbert’s “Love Unknown.”

⁴ “I have a vague theory that one learns most—I have learned most—from having someone suddenly make fun of something one has taken seriously up until then.” (Bishop, Letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, *PPL*, 858)

homosexual) for Bishop, and she seems to amuse herself with the ambiguity.⁵ Vitality despite wretchedness, as an ethical stance —“we *should* be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy”—is a stay against “self-absorption” and “heaviness.” I take her point as not merely, if at all, about display, but about disposition—the observer’s disposition suspends the tendency to absorb everything into the self, to make it about the self. Indirectly, this is a response to the “cruelties and indecencies” we humans apparently commit without end, by being what we are. The disposition of observation does not manage, or solve, or correct, which are actions of will; but allows, and heeds, and yields, actions of attention. Gaiety and giddiness then become possible where they might previously have been censored as inappropriate, unseemly. The gaiety Bishop advocates is not blithe callousness, but a refusal to brood, a kind of happiness that is not wholly self-determined. Likewise, the “endlessness” with which Bishop qualifies Darwin’s “heroic observations” is a refusal to determine the end of observation in advance, and a refusal to look away, to cease observing after discoveries have been made.

Putting Bishop’s call for gaiety in the face of human “barbarity” together with her unofficial observer’s manifesto, I want to set the tone for this dissertation. Now, at a time when the evidence and consequences of human “indecencies and cruelties” are only mounting, I offer the readings in the following chapters as case studies for the writing and reading of attention to the natural world. The observers considered are as follows: English poet John Clare (1793-1864), American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), French poet Francis Ponge (1899-1988), Franco-Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet (1925-2021), Victorian naturalists Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), the English “parson naturalist” Gilbert White (1720-1793), and lyrical naturalist J.A. Baker (1926-1987). I hope to make the case that these observers’ accounts also offer ways of

⁵ This ambiguity recurs as the last word (with an exclamation point!) in her last published poem (1979), “Sonnet,” where it modifies “the rainbow-bird/ from the narrow bevel/ of the empty mirror.” (Bishop, “Sonnet,” *PPL*, 180)

learning some “manners” in the most profound sense, some “gentleness” in the strongest sense. To realize that other beings can teach us some manners suggests an alternative to utilitarian ways of looking at the environment—not only because it is ‘bad manners’ to reduce another being to its use-value, but also because the observer develops a keen disposition towards other beings, one that is interested in learning from them, rather than developing designs upon them. It isn’t so much that the observer would imitate these other ways of being to enhance her own, as that she learns from them strategies of coexistence she could not have dreamt up on her own, because she had not taken the other ways of existing into account. As I will elaborate further in the section on “curiosity,” these observers, guided by passionate interest towards the objects of their attention, also discover the existence of these objects and beings in excess and regardless of that interest. The realization that this independence, this excess is “not an evil” is bound up with the uncommon happiness of observers.⁶

Affinities of Natural History and Lyric Poetry; a Cast of Characters

I have collected here a disparate group of eight observers, organized into four chapters, each of which places two observers with some affinity in counterpoint. They range in era from the 18th through 21st centuries, write in English and French, and hail from North America, England, France and Switzerland. I also bring together the apparently unconnected disciplines of natural history and lyric poetry to suggest an underestimated affinity, based on an aim of fidelity to the natural world in literary forms.

⁶ The phrasing comes from Ponge: “Tout le secret du bonheur du contemplateur est dans son refus de considérer *comme un mal* l’envahissement de sa personnalité par les choses.” (“Introduction au galet,” *Proèmes*, 175.) [The entire secret of happiness for the one who contemplates is in his refusal to consider *as an evil* the invasion of his personality by things.] Italics in the original. This passage discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

First, there are more literal connections to be made between the two disciplines in the work of these observers. One of the poets, John Clare, many of whose poems are in themselves works of natural history in verse, also applied himself to prose natural history, and worked on (though never finished) a regional natural history in the vein of *The Natural History of Selborne* by one of the naturalists, Gilbert White. Another poet, Elizabeth Bishop, was not a naturalist herself but obviously admired and drew upon natural history. J.A. Baker started out with grand plans to become a poet, and his lasting works are hybrids of lyricism and natural history.⁷

Less explicitly, Francis Ponge and Philippe Jaccottet each keep the title of poet at a distance, in their suspicion of language's betrayal of the world, and without becoming scientists, they prioritize a fidelity to the natural world that resembles the naturalist's. They are careful to preserve the unknown as unknown. Ponge's methods appear at times borrowed from the natural sciences, while Jaccottet attempts to reconcile himself to what little the methods of the poet can allow him to say about the world with any certainty.

Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace are at first glance the most straightforwardly aligned with their discipline of all the observers in the dissertation. Look up naturalist in the dictionary, and there they are. Yet the tradition in the life sciences that continues to draw upon them draws not only on their methods of inquiry and the lasting impact of their empirical and theoretical discoveries in evolution and biogeography, but also on their commitment to the *art* of writing, without which they would consider their work incomplete, impoverished. "Naturalists" of recent years, from E.O. Wilson to Bernd Heinrich to George Schaller, have sustained this tradition of

⁷ John Clare's aborted regional natural history was to focus on his native Helpston. Baker's poems, accessible in his archives, and printed for the first time as an appendix to Hetty Saunders's biography, are mostly inert. His lyrical excesses seem to have needed constraint, not from verse forms, but rather from the form of a naturalist's journal—with which he admits taking only the editorial liberty of compression (condensing ten winters into one, for instance) and the license of metaphors, over which he labored as much as any poet. Beyond that, any lack of fidelity between what Baker saw and what he recorded must be called a mistake, on his own terms. For a study of Baker's influence on contemporary nature writing, see David Farrier, "J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* and its Readers."

scientific rigor fused with literary art. What I focus on in the work of Darwin and Wallace is more specific and elusive than just its literary dimension; it is a thread of recognition in their writing of an excess in the living world that was not exhausted by scientific explanation. Furthermore, it is this thread of recognition, in the work of naturalists, that draws the attention of such poets as Bishop and Clare.

Hopeless Attention, Observing the “Bond of the Furthest Apart”

I call these writers “observers” as a way of signaling a kind of work that they all perform, which bridges the divide between the two disciplines of their writing. I suppose I could have called them “attenders,” but that is a much less fluent word, and I wish to stress the commonness of this form of work rather than render it strange or difficult to recognize.

To observe in these contexts is to watch attentively, to notice. There is sometimes the scientific inflection of observing without intervening, in the desire to get to know another kind of being on its own terms, or on the terms it negotiates with its environment, without setting parameters or trying to control its movements (as by experimental method or simply stopping its movement by killing it, for purposes of dissection).⁸ Thus for instance Gilbert White is distinguished from many of his contemporaries by his interest in *field observation*, in the “life and conversation of animals,” as opposed to the kind of controlled observation that could be carried out with dead specimens indoors. John Clare, too, expressed that his interest in natural history stopped in the field, that he had no taste for collection and dissection, “no desire further to dry the plant or torture the

⁸ See OED definitions of observe (8a) and observation (7a), as distinguished from the intervention of experiment. See also Lorraine Daston’s account of “the period from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century,” in which “the relationship between observation and experiment shifted not once, but several times: from rough synonyms [...] to complementary and interlocking parts of a single method of inquiry [...] to distinct procedures opposed as ‘passive observation’ and ‘active experiment’” (Daston, “Empire of Observation,” 82) It was in the late seventeenth century that “the widely diffused, all-purpose word ‘experiment’ [...] narrowed its scope to denote a carefully designed human intervention into the ordinary course of nature.” (83)

Butterflye by sticking it on a cork board with a pin.”⁹ Yet if there is a resistance to intervention, there is also a robust sense of implication or involvement—if the observers are not, in the moments I’ve collected, manipulating or controlling the objects of their attention, they are still aware of their own presence in the moments of attention. The responsiveness or indifference of the living object of attention is part of the narrative they must write, and in turn they register the consequences for themselves of being exposed, ontologically vulnerable to, another form of being. “Ontologically vulnerable,” in the sense that the character and scope of their own being is subject to transformation as they register it in relation to other forms of being.

The dissertation implies a tentative ethics, despite the heterogeneity (and heterodoxy) of its individual observers and writers. As implied in Bishop’s statement about observation, it is an ethics of outward orientation, an openness that yet resists assimilation and consumption, and resists absorbing the world into the self (which is a mistake, a moral error), rather than attending to it as independent. I agree with Lucy Alford that “attention” (in her case, poetic attention; in mine, written accounts of attention, though not always in poetic form) is far too various and refracted to have a single, coherent moral effect in the world. Poetic attention, she writes, “can cultivate the *necessary but insufficient grounds for ethical response.*”¹⁰ She also writes of poems that they

produce not one single form of pure and reverent attention but *many*, many of which are decidedly *irreverent*, *impure*, and *amoral*. And this amorality of poetry (its capacity to be many things and therefore to be, in many senses, *alive*) is not something to be simply accepted, but rather celebrated, as ecocritics hope that one might celebrate the complexity of a living thing, a working ecosystem. The amorality of poetic attention is crucial to its livingness.¹¹

⁹ Clare, Letter to Messrs Taylor and Hessey II, *Major Works*, 458. Here and in all subsequent quotations from Clare, I have reproduced the text as its editors Robinson and Powell have, respecting idiosyncrasies of spelling, grammar and typography.

¹⁰ Alford, *Poetics of Attention*, 277. Italics in the original.

¹¹ Alford, *Poetics of Attention*, 277.

Described in such a way, this valuation of complexity and “livingness” is in itself an ethic. Sharon Cameron uses the French filmmaker Robert Bresson’s formulation of a “bond of the furthest apart” for the title of a comparative study placing Bresson’s films alongside texts by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Kafka. These figures and texts, she writes, are “kindred in their resistance to all forms of abstraction that prevent us from seeing the welter of things that cluster around us that are not referenced to our distinctions, that, to adopt Kafka’s words, are ‘not for us.’”¹²

It is specifically to Kafka’s famous response to the question of whether there was “hope for the universe” that Cameron refers: “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us.”¹³ If we don’t quite know how to take this response, how to interpret it, there is still a way of feeling its charge as a radical alternative to our assumption that in order to matter, in order to *be* hope at all, it would have to be “for us.” If not for us, we might wish to ask, then for whom, or for what? But there is no way of isolating or controlling the beneficiary of such hope, and I take that to be part of Kafka’s (and Cameron’s) point.

At present, there seems to be very little hope for many forms of life (many argue even for and because of “us”—but the laying of blame has as many vicissitudes as the attempt to identify for whom Kafka’s hope exists). If we were really to consider the world as not “referenced to our distinctions,” which requires a radical adjustment, a suspension of our own interests, then we would be forced to consider a kind of relinquishment, which does not perhaps feel like “hope.”¹⁴ For

¹² Cameron, *Bond of the Furthest Apart*, 11.

¹³ Cameron, *Bond of the Furthest Apart*, 7. The Kafka quotation comes from Walter Benjamin’s essay, “Franz Kafka: on the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” which in turn quotes a conversation reported by Max Brod, between himself and Kafka. The quote and its context can be found in *Illuminations*, 116.

¹⁴ A genre has emerged in recent years, in response to the explosion of constructive environmentalist literature. This new genre calls for a kind of giving-up on human survival. There may be a contradiction at its heart, which is that it notices how humans have failed to make a meaningful global, collective response to the knowledge of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction, and yet proposes instead an even less likely global, collective act of human retirement, “learning to die” as a species for the sake of the rest of the earth. Yet at its best, this genre can describe, on the scale of the individual, an alternative human response to anthropogenic environmental crisis, which is to allow oneself to be decentered, to imagine a hope, like Kafka’s, that is “not for us.” A few examples of provocative, personal books in this vein: *The Selfish Ape* (2019) by microbiologist and mycologist Nicholas P. Money, *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of*

Walter Benjamin, “This statement really contains Kafka’s hope; it is the source of his radiant serenity.”¹⁵

Like Cameron’s book, my dissertation notices numerous “[bonds] of the furthest apart,” bonds and distances which proliferate when I reflect upon them: between each pair of observing writers in each chapter; among all of the writers across the chapters; between the observers and the objects of their attention in the natural world, both in the physical moment of attention and in the moment of writing. The distance and the bond are equally apparent.

Similarly, the recognition that the being of other forms is not “referenced to our distinctions” implies a relinquishment of moral authority in the observing subject, which is in itself an ethic—an ethic without a predetermined outcome, but which clears way for a possibility (Alford’s “necessary but insufficient grounds”) of being in another form of relation with other forms of being. As a response to environmental crisis, to the dying of living things all around us, this collection of observers, sensibilities, writings and readings, makes a modest claim: that however we find ourselves estranged, the work of bringing into language our attentive encounters with other beings can help us to recognize a bond, in at least two interrelated senses: that of connection, and that of responsibility. E.O. Wilson has asked, “What is it exactly that binds us so closely to living things?”¹⁶ His slim collection of essays, *Biophilia* (1984), in which he argues the basis for that question, has a subtitle: “The human bond with other species.” As Wilson makes clear (for instance in his essay on “the serpent”), biophilia as a bond is not limited to living things towards which we have warm feelings. To extend biophilia in an ethical sense, it is a recognition that we are ‘bound up’ with other living

Climate Crisis (2018) by Robert Bringham and Jan Zwicky, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* by Roy Scranton. Eileen Crist offers a more measured, ambitious and fully-worked-out ecological vision of “scaling down and pulling back” in *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* (2019). In a different direction, an older book, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Microbial Evolution* (1986) by Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, continues to engage the environmental imagination that would resist anthropocentrism by vividly recounting and anticipating a history and future of life in which the human species is but an interesting blip.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “Some Reflections on Kafka,” 144.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Biophilia*, 84/

things, regardless of how we feel about them. One thing attention and its intelligence make possible is a recognition of this bond beyond an abstract statement of it. If we are really to extend such a recognition to other forms of life, other kinds of being, we must accept that we do not already know what kind of tug there might be from the other side of the bond.

Thus I appreciate the prudence, even the “necessity,” as Wilson puts it, of his call for “a robust and richly textured anthropocentric ethic apart from the issue of rights—one based on the hereditary needs of our own species.”¹⁷ And yet it may be possible—the writings of these observers attest that it has been possible—if not immediately on a widespread or political scale then on an individual one, to experience ourselves as *not* at the center of the world when we are in the presence of other forms of life.¹⁸ There is of course a sense in which each form of life is at the center of its world, in which sense it cannot be a mistake to be “anthropocentric.” But there is another sense, related to our own excess on the earth, in which anthropocentrism is not like other ‘centrisms’—which does not constitute a claim for human exceptionalism, but just the opposite. In 1934, the Estonian-born biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll judged the physiologist deficient insofar as for him, “every living thing is an object that is located in his human world,” whereas the biologist, ideally, “takes into account that each and every living thing is a subject that lives in its own world, of which it is the center.”¹⁹ Perhaps the sheer scale of anthropocentrism, corresponding to the sheer scale of human presence on the earth, paradoxically makes it possible for us to imagine ourselves, and wish for ourselves to be, decentered. On the scale of human presence on the earth, given the anthropogenic nature of the current crises of climate change and mass extinction, humans *en masse* have a consequence that no individual human can decide to opt out of (which does not mean that all humans bear equal responsibility for these crises)—whether or not we accept the designation of

¹⁷ Wilson, “Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic,” *Nature Revealed*, 652.

¹⁸ I am against coining terms willy nilly, but—perhaps we could imagine being anthropeccentric?

¹⁹ von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 45.

anthropocene. We do not know all the ways that the nature of the future will force us to decenter ourselves as a species. But on a scale of individuals, it is already and has long been possible for a human being to be cognizant of a “bond with other living things,” a bond that exerts a decentering force on her own being.

Elaine Scarry’s description of what happens when we are in the presence of something beautiful has a structure similar to the attentive encounter between the observer-writer and the natural world I examine in the chapters that follow: “we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us.”²⁰ The difference is that where Scarry sees beauty as alerting us to “aliveness,” the writers examined here lead me to venture that beauty cannot be necessary to the attentive recognition of other life, or indeed other forms of being. Beauty is one way that the excess in other life can strike us. But there are others less palatable, less lovable, and the decentering process Scarry describes is equally viable as an attentive response to those beings that could not, without distortion or flattery, be called “beautiful.” Thus John Clare writes to his publishers John Taylor and James Hessey,

toads and newts harbour in ruins and under large stones they will live either in the water or out of it—I believe the newt is called the water Lizard by many—and the nimble one on heaths is the land Lizard of a light brown covered with small scales—ugly as these things are they give the poet a delight to mention them²¹

As another case in point, in terms similar to Scarry’s, Adam Phillips characterizes the insight of Darwin’s 1837 paper on earthworms (which rehearsed the ideas he would lay out in his final book in 1881):

²⁰ Scarry, *On Beauty* 111-112.

²¹ Clare, Letter to Messrs Taylor and Hessey IV, *Major Works*, 473-4.

In this paper, [...] Darwin makes explicit comparison between the animals and Man; in this mundane revelation—which has parodic as well as theological implications—Man is a poor imitation of a worm. In his characteristically modest way, Darwin is shuffling the traditional hierarchies; not cutting men down to size, like an arrogant deity, but trying to get them the right size.²²

The twin insights of Scarry and Phillips express the way ecological attention can prompt an adjustment of the human observer to a world that is not as she thought it was, limited by her own way of being. Scarry's figure is one of position, stance; the image I have is of a person stepping aside, making room, or "drawing back," in Simone Weil's terms. Phillips's figure is one of proportion. Both Phillips and Scarry clarify that observation is a matter of being in right relation, which is corrective, reflective of how things already are. It is a work of becoming less deceived—in the first instance, less deceived in one's own person; in the second, less deceived in one's species.

The dissertation will not, therefore, determine a way forward through environmental crisis, but it will present a collection of complex attempts by serious (but not necessarily solemn) individuals to recognize and, in written accounts, work through forms of fidelity to the bond between themselves and other forms of being. In the process, these written accounts will suggest the possibility for humans to apprehend, in the intelligence of their attention to other forms of being, a "robust and richly textured" alternative to anthropocentrism.

What "mere" attention is good at, to build upon Lucy Alford's sense of a "*necessary but insufficient grounds for ethical response*," is not altering a course or solving a problem, but in its mereness, suspending the question of how things ought to be, suspending expedient categories that would allow us to start sorting the world immediately upon encounter with it. These suspensions make possible a lucid perception of what, as Alfred Russel Wallace writes of the Bird of Paradise, is "*not made for man*"—which does not mean that we turn away and lose interest, but that, in Robert Bresson's phrase, we recognize a "bond of the furthest apart," a reshuffling that not only dismantles

²² Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, 50.

anthropocentrism, but allows us really to imagine for ourselves a form of being that is away from the center, off-center, eccentric. We might know about the effect human activity and expansion are having on the population of a certain species, for instance, and yet when we encounter an individual or a group belonging to that species, its struggle to exist, its joys and sufferings, its life, are not subsumed under that knowledge, are not “referenced to our distinctions,” in Sharon Cameron’s phrase.

Bill McKibben’s influential formulation of “The End of Nature” in the age of anthropogenic climate change may be technically true on his own terms. But the insight that there is nowhere on earth not touched (insidiously) by human actions or productions does not extend in the other direction—what I mean is that we ought not therefore to assume that other forms of being have unanimously succumbed to a way of being not their own, that they have *de facto* converted to a division of human being (which is a tacit implication in the elegiac tone of *The End of Nature*—that we are already, for all intents and purposes, alone on the earth). We cannot conclude that because their lives have been disrupted by human activity, or the moment their lives come into contact with human interference of one form or another, they are somehow ‘denatured.’ Many species face anthropogenic disruptions and harm, which undeniably force them to adjust or perish, but on terms we cannot assume we know. Alfred Russel Wallace’s insight about the Bird of Paradise also remains true, and applicable to many other forms of life besides:

This consideration must surely tell us that all living things were *not* made for man. Many of them have no relation to him. The cycle of their existence has gone on independently of his, and is disturbed or broken by every advance in man’s intellectual development; and their happiness and enjoyments, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death, would seem to be immediately related to their own well-being and perpetuation alone, limited only by the equal well-being and perpetuation of the numberless organisms with which each is more or less intimately connected.²³

²³ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 339-40. Italics in the original.

Even for species that we all but know to be headed towards extinction, it does not follow that their dwindling numbers have converted their existence into one that is “referenced to our distinctions.” The intelligence of attention can preserve the dignity of beings in their independence, while not denying the interdependency of ecosystems, an interdependency that inevitably leads us to grant some truth to McKibben’s insight. This preservation of dignity prevents an ecosystem from hardening in our thinking our own species, or around any species just because it has power to destroy.

Focusing on individuals and capturing sensibilities is important to my method because I want to show not just when attention is working perfectly, but when the writer is coming to terms with his or her own failures of attention; how they work within their own limitations. Because to some extent we are always working and attending with limitations, whether they are historical (for instance, we might now see failures to value the environment as something that could be destroyed in writers for whom environmental vulnerability would have been practically unthinkable), or personal (Gilbert White’s partiality for some creatures over others; J.A. Baker’s misanthropy; Francis Ponge’s sometimes pedantic rigor; Darwin’s visceral rejection of the Fuegians as “inhabitants of the same world” as himself²⁴). We need these accounts of individuals of, yes, exemplary attentive capacity, coming up against their own limits, because we will almost certainly never be practicing ideal attention under ideal conditions.

These dynamic comparisons are indispensable to my method—if each chapter were about one observer, it might be possible to see them as exemplary observers of certain types of attention, and to circumscribe these types of attention by the practice of exemplary individuals. If on the other hand each chapter focused on more than two observers, it might seem that they were studies of the variations within types of attention, once again leaning towards a taxonomic order that would

²⁴ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 190.

emphasize the type of attention as dominant over and uniting diverse individuals. Pairwise comparisons are practical for imagining a close, intense back-and-forth conversation between the two observers. The technique of describing a tone or mood of attention that emerges in considering two individuals with some affinity, in depth, side by side, allows me to focus on salient tensions between the two, which prevents the chapter's claims from becoming classification. This resistance to classification is important because, with all the variety of situations, objects, and methods across the observers included here, the passages I focus on have to do with the objects of attention asserting themselves, being in *excess* of the observational frame. Each chapter, then, tries to catch a way of opening up to this excess, an orientation towards the natural world that does not fill it in advance.

The Force of Curiosity

As explored especially in the sections on Gilbert White in the fourth chapter, there is a way that curiosity, proverbially famous for killing its subject (the curious cat), can also kill its object. Until at least the 17th century curiosity was considered far from virtuous, and its moral status in literature has retained ambiguity even with its more positive associations.²⁵ Curiosity can be a vital source of energy for observation, an interest in other life for its very difference from the observer's life (just as one may be curious about another person, or about another's culture or language, in the sense that one is energetically open to their difference). White is concerned with finding the means by which he can pursue his curiosity without "injuring the object of it"—he knows there is a fine line. There is a tension between the acknowledgment that other beings do not exist 'for us,' an awareness that their

²⁵ The earlier suspicions of curiosity had more to do with various forms of forbidden knowledge than with any fear of doing harm to an object of attention. See Carlo Ginzburg's classic essay, "High and Low," for an exposition of the various contexts (political, religious, cosmic) in which curiosity was considered dangerous in the 16th-17th centuries.

existence can never be completely understood by us; and a drive to ‘get to know’ them (in the sense of *connaître* more than *savoir*), a keen interest in how they are, and how they live, in their “life and conversation”—an interest neither good nor bad in itself, but that like Lucy Alford’s understanding of poetic attention, can offer the *grounds* for ethical responsiveness.

Jakob von Uexküll was, like Gilbert White, a “pioneer” in recognizing that other forms of life might have other systems of meaning that do not map onto our own. For von Uexküll mapping is an apt figure, for he believed humans were quite wrong in assuming their orientation in the world to be definitive:

We comfort ourselves all too easily with the illusion that the relations of another kind of subject to the things of its environment play out in the same space and time as the relations that link us to the things of our human environment. This illusion is fed by the belief in the existence of one and only one world, in which all living beings are encased. From this arises the widely held conviction that there must be one and only one space and time for all living beings.²⁶

As opposed to this conviction, in his own evocative figure, “Every subject spins out, like the spider’s threads, its relations to certain qualities of the things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence.”²⁷ As Thom van Dooren asserts more recently, after citing von Uexküll,

The experiential worlds of these animal subjects are invariably difficult, and to some extent impossible, for us to grasp, in part at least because our access must occur through our specifically hominid embodiment. [...] But this lack of access on our part should not stop us from attempting to describe the kinds of worlds that these beings inhabit—however imperfectly—and it certainly should not lead us to deny that they inhabit meaningful worlds at all.²⁸

The point about the moments of attention I have brought together is that they allow the observer to realize the other being’s independence from any theoretical or experimental context, to realize the other being’s resistance to the very *form* in which he poses his questions about it.

²⁶ von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 54.

²⁷ von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 53.

²⁸ van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 68.

Curiosity can also mean an openness to sources of value that do not coincide with what we value in ourselves. Peter Godfrey-Smith, who has written at length on cephalopod consciousness, expresses his circumspection about extending consciousness to plants: “Not because what they do is simple compared to animals, but because they are on a different road.”²⁹ In part, the desire to find consciousness in plants betrays a prejudice: there are those who *want* plants to be conscious, because consciousness is good and worthy of admiration—how can plants be both admirable and unconscious? They must be conscious because they are so beguiling. Consciousness is considered synonymous with complexity, with a ‘high’ form of life, rather than allowing a radically alternative evolutionary path, which brought plants to an entirely different kind of complexity (just as a radically alternative evolutionary path brought cephalopods to an entirely different kind of consciousness). Even the valuation of “complex” over “simple” forms of life betrays a prejudice. As Francis Ponge, for instance, is willing to imagine, it is just the radical difference in their way of being alive—an alternative to consciousness, which is not merely a lack, which perhaps we lack a name for—that we ought to attend to in plants. It isn’t that we should assume plants ought to be treated like animals, or for that matter that all animals ought to be treated alike, but that attention’s intelligence can lay open the field of beings that coexist with us, unsubsumed by the order in which the world makes sense to us. From there, it might be possible to open ourselves to sources of value in other forms of being, sources for which we have no corresponding part in ourselves.

Accounting for attention becomes a tonic for anthropocentrism that does not deny us our distinct form of being, but returns to the manifold other beings their independence of our frame of reference. This intelligence of attention, enlivened by curiosity, can just as well recognize unexpectedly shared or analogous capacities between observer and observed as it can recognize what

²⁹ Godfrey-Smith, *Metazoa*, 226.

is beyond the observer's experience in the observed. Simon Fitzpatrick writes, in a robust argument to 'do away with Morgan's Canon':

In many instances unless one is prepared to speculate far beyond the current data, to seriously entertain hypotheses involving more sophisticated cognitive processes when less sophisticated ones seem sufficient, it is unlikely that one will ever uncover such subtle and surprising capacities as the dance language [of bees]. One will simply not have any idea of what to look for.³⁰

Similarly, the biologist Donald Griffin (most famous for discovering echolocation in bats) suggests that in scientists who adhere to behaviorist dogma, "antipathy to consideration of consciousness threatens to become a sort of self-inflicted paralysis of inquiry."³¹ Elsewhere he dubs this stance a "paralytic perfectionism."³² The language of paralysis, which he applies directly to behaviorist inquiry, could also describe a relation between observer and observed that maintained a rigid distance.

There is a process I narrate repeatedly in the dissertation, in which the observer, who has attended in silence, responds through writing—growing into her intelligence and often realizing her own implication in a relation to the observed. Paralysis would be a good description of what might happen if the observer never tried to account for the element of herself, or the implication for himself in the event of attentive observation. Anesthetized observation shuts off the current of curiosity. Griffin laments that many

[scientists] lose interest in a theory if no one can suggest how to ascertain whether it is correct or not. [...] Some strict behaviorists object to all hypotheses about conscious experiences in animals, or even in people, on the ground that they cannot imagine any procedure by which such hypotheses can be confirmed or falsified. This may tell us something about the limited imaginations of scientists, and outside of narrow scientific

³⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Doing Away with Morgan's Canon," 238. Morgan's Canon dates from the end of the 19th century. It was proposed by Conwy Lloyd Morgan, a British comparative psychologist. In his book *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (1894), he articulates this "basal principle" as follows: "It may be thus stated:—*In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychological faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands lower in the psychological scale.*" (53) As Fitzpatrick explains and laments, this statement "has played a central role in subsequent scientific and philosophical work into the nature of non-human minds." ("Doing Away with Morgan's Canon," 224)

³¹ Griffin, *Animal Minds*, viii.

³² Griffin, *Animal Minds*, 23.

circles this argument is no more convincing than that of the solipsist philosopher who insists that he is the only conscious person in the universe.³³

The ability to sustain attention not only in a state of uncertainty, but in a state of uncertainty about whether or how uncertainty could ever be resolved, is linked to another attentive capacity, one that is broadly ethical: a capacity to sustain attention even after a given uncertainty has been resolved. Even if it is ‘decided’ for instance that a given animal has consciousness according to a given definition, that will not exhaust the extent of its being, nor warrant the assumption that its being is simply a diminished version or lesser degree of human being, considered as the gold standard of consciousness itself.

This capacity is an openness to other lives not being what I think they are. Despite Griffin’s dissenting voice, he still concedes a commitment to parsimony, and like Darwin, an idea of other intelligences being lesser or simpler in degree, though not different in kind, from human intelligence.³⁴ The human reference point can be blinding.³⁵ The ‘degree-rather-than-kind’ position is certainly more open than the absolute denial of consciousness in anything other than humans, but it still leaves a question—must we remain always most interested in and impressed by what most closely resembles humans? Can we really say that this is an ethical criterion? The radicalism of Francis Ponge, for instance, is to focus on objects with absolutely different kinds of being, so distant as to be different in kind and not only degree. This is a capacity to maintain an ethical interest in that which shares a world with me even if its way of being foils comparison with my own at every

³³ Griffin, *Animal Minds*, 23.

³⁴ Simon Fitzpatrick also exposes the limits of “parsimony” as a basis for sticking to Morgan’s canon. Even if it *were* more parsimonious to explain a behavior as instinct rather than intelligence (which often underestimates the extravagant possibilities of instinct), he suggests, there is no reason to prefer a parsimonious explanation just for its own sake. Then, I would add, it becomes perhaps not just a parsimonious principle but a miserly one.

³⁵ As Justin E.H. Smith has put it recently, “The search for reason beyond the bounds of the human species always ends up as a search for beings that remind us of ourselves.” Smith urges us to pay heed to “a little-known but venerable tradition of thought, extending back to Plutarch, that not only holds that reason is natural, but insists that reason is very widespread in nature indeed.” (Smith, “If reason exists without deliberation,” no page numbers)

attempt—and, conversely, to maintain an ethical interest in myself and my own species that is not dependent on my (and our) being “exceptional” in the world.

Defining (and Not Defining) Attention

Now, to observe the elephant in the room: the term “attention” does not necessarily appear in the lexicons of all of these observers (nor for that matter do they all refer to themselves as “observers”). But it is indispensable to the claims of the dissertation. William James’s famous assertion that “Every one knows what attention is” has a liberating potential.³⁶ As Virginia Woolf said of Gilbert White’s stance within the tradition of natural theology, and his use of the term “Providence”: “In another fifty years Providence would have been neither so inscrutable nor so wise—it would have lost its shade. But Providence about 1760 was in its prime; it sets all doubts at rest, and so leaves the mind free to question practically everything.”³⁷ There are things possible to explore when a term has a certain self-evidence in its effect and force, when it doesn’t need to be defined. As Woolf intimates, this is not something the individual writer gets to determine—it has to do with historical forces that can, in the first instance, allow writers, readers and talkers to take certain words and concepts at face value, considering them foundational and natural, allowing those who invoke them to wander without worrying that they won’t be able to find their way home; or, in the second instance, these forces begin to undermine the self-evidence of those words and concepts and render them no longer suitable as starting points, since they can no longer be invoked without also needing to be interrogated—they then “lose their shade.” As Joshua Cohen notes in his brief and idiosyncratic personal history of attention, James’s confidence in a common knowledge of attention does not stop

³⁶ James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, 403.

³⁷ Woolf, “White’s Selborne,” 191-2.

him from offering a definition.³⁸ It is “a good first line,” Cohen asserts, but it is not James’s first line, nor his last. And perhaps that is the beginning of a mind that “doubts,” one less “free” in the scope of its questioning. James managed to fold into his account an assertion of self-evidence that does not necessarily equate with the definition that follows. I doubt that the definition James ventures is what “everyone knows” (or even was what everyone knew when his *Principles of Psychology* was first published in 1890). There is too much striving towards articulation by James for his definition of attention to be a form of common knowledge. In his very clarity and simplicity he probably fixes the term of attention more firmly than what “everyone knows.” Here is what he writes:

Every one knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatter-brained state which in French is called *distracted*, and *Zerstreuung* in German.³⁹

If everyone knows what attention is, I would venture that everyone also knows how hard it is to define, once they make the attempt. The knowledge of “what” is intuitive rather than definitive. We might also know it, not by its “opposite” (the “confused, dazed, scatter-brained state”) but by its “lack,” as Bishop does. The difference between the opposite and the lack is not just semantic—the state James describes as attention’s opposite can also be understood not as a lack but, as Lucy Alford suggests, a “form” of attention itself. The focalization that James equates with attention is a particular application, whose opposite is distraction. As Alford writes, in terms quite close to James’s but to make a divergent point, “To focus attention on one object is to simultaneously divert focus away from another. Thus both focus and its opposite (diversion or distraction *from*) are attentional phenomena, and both play into the dynamic work of contemplation.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Cohen, “Attention!,” 409.

³⁹ James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, 404.

⁴⁰ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, 54. “Contemplation” is one chapter in Alford’s open taxonomy of poetic attention.

There are those who will ask—what then *is* the opposite of attention? What is *not* attention—what do we have when we lack it? What takes its place, and does it have anything going for it? I don't have a direct answer, but what Bishop calls “lack of observation,” known by its deleterious effects (“cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners—and general unhappiness, too”) might actually have no compensating positive term—nothing takes its place. It is just a lack, a loss, a diminishment. Perhaps the anxiousness to locate attention's opposite is a turning away from this loss, a refusal to see it. James suggests that like attention, “We all know this latter state,” the state of distraction. When he proceeds to describe the familiar experience of this state, he tellingly folds attention back into it: “The eyes are fixed on vacancy, the sounds of the world melt into confused unity, the attention is dispersed so that the whole body is felt, as it were, at once, and the foreground of consciousness is filled, if by anything, by a sort of solemn sense of surrender to the empty passing of time.”⁴¹ Dispersion is not negation, not even lessening, but a change of state; as matter does not decrease when it changes, for instance, from liquid to vapor, but becomes less concentrated, more diffuse.

In the chapters that follow, there is often a play back and forth between the kind of focalized attention James defines, and its more scattered, unwilling counterpoint—as between Alfred Russel Wallace's oceanic, receptive attention from a lifeboat afloat in the Atlantic Ocean, and his sense of what he has lost in the ship's fire, the notes and specimens gathered through painstaking focused attention; or between J.A. Baker's single point of focused desire in *The Peregrine* and his widened and softened focus in *The Hill of Summer*. There is a purposeful turning toward the natural world, but there is also a receptive state of wandering and waiting, that never knows its object in advance. As I will strive to show again and again, the modulations of attention become evident in the writing down, the accounting for it. There is a purposeful focusing of language into a form, but there is also

⁴¹ James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, 404.

the tendency among these writers to build openings into their forms, signaled in rich and various ways: for instance, the steps back from assertion, the deliberate hesitations and unravellings of Elizabeth Bishop; the sonnets of John Clare that tend to “begin anywhere and end anywhere”; or the journal and letter forms of Gilbert White and J.A. Baker, which accommodate the provisional and uncertain, the unfinished and ongoing, the very much alive.

Accounting for Loss and Excess

Many of the accounts of attention to the natural world in the chapters that follow register some form of loss—once again, from Alfred Russel Wallace’s loss of his specimens and notebooks in the fire of *The Helen*, to J.A. Baker’s awareness of the plummeting population and likely extinction of the Peregrine falcon because of its vulnerability to DDT. Whether they speak directly about a past or future loss, all of these accounts, in one way or another, offer testimony of an observer who realizes him or herself to be *at a loss* in responding to the object of attention. The observer’s being at a loss corresponds to an *excess* in the object of attention. From this being at a loss in an encounter with excess arises the formal challenge of each of these observers as writers. How to write in a way that registers not only an entity perceived—a moose (Elizabeth Bishop), a cherry tree (Philippe Jaccottet), an earthworm (Charles Darwin)—but also acknowledges the part that the entity takes with itself, that will not be parted from it? It is the problem of indicating in writing that there is something more than could named—not a transcendent, romantic beyond (which could be appropriated by the writer)—but something apart, separate, independent from the account, and no less real for being unaccountable.

About a half century after James’s definition, in 1947, comes Simone Weil’s account of an attention that exists in opposition with will (*volonté*), which is not “focalizing” and pragmatic like

James’s attention—a way of ensuring that we “deal effectively” with what presents itself to our sensorium—but on the contrary a way of releasing the field of attention from our habitual sorting and occupying of it, to try to adjust ourselves to what we see before us, rather than assimilate it to ourselves:

We do not have to understand new things, but by dint of patience, effort and method to come to understand with our whole self the truths which are evident.⁴²

Attention is bound up with desire. Not with the will but with desire—or more exactly, consent.⁴³

Attention in this sense, in the sense of “attente,” waiting, whose attendant virtue is patience, allows slower truths to become apparent. An unexpected analogy comes to mind: one of Werner Herzog’s most conspicuous documentary methods is to let the camera linger on a person after they have finished talking. Maybe it doesn’t always work, but when it does, the person seems at once more strange and more intimate, more difficult to judge, than when they were talking—disarmed and therefore disarming.

In one of his sonnets for Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell caught a characteristic of the essence:

Have you seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,
cling to the very end, revolve in air,
feeling for something to reach to something? Do
you still hang your words in air, ten years
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
or empties for the unimaginable phrase—
unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?⁴⁴

In this pair of searching questions, superficially yes-or-no but protracted and rhetorical, Lowell attends to his friend’s sustaining capacity for *suspension*, her refusal to compromise with (by

⁴² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 105. [Non pas comprendre des choses nouvelles, mais parvenir à force de patience, d’effort et de méthode à comprendre les vérités évidentes avec tout soi-même. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 191)]

⁴³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 107. [L’attention est liée au désir. Non pas à la volonté mais au désir. Ou plus exactement, au consentement. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 194)]

⁴⁴ Lowell, “For Elizabeth Bishop 4,” lines 8-14, *Collected Poems*, 595.

pretending to imagine) the “unimaginable.” The source of energy in Bishop’s suspension, the “air” in which the inchworm revolves and her words hang, which keeps them up, relates to the second of Weil’s aphorisms quoted above—“Attention is bound up with desire. Not with the will but with desire—or more exactly, consent.” It is a surprising turn to name consent as a species of desire. Desire is in the same field of meaning as attention, but perhaps has other connotations Weil wants to exclude. The sense in which she does mean desire is probably as a vital principle, that which can sustain itself in waiting without waiting *for*. Consent is also the form freedom takes for Weil—agreeing not to look away (we are free to look away or to close our eyes, but not free to change what is there). “If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying.”⁴⁵ It is difficult to know what such necessity would look like concretely, or what action it would entail. From a non-religious perspective, it is also difficult to trust that “necessity becomes apparent” if only we attend—I cannot help but ask, faithlessly, but what if it doesn’t?

But to “suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things” also describes the work of ecological fidelity. The ability to “suspend the filling up activity” (“l’imagination combleuse” in French, which also carries the sense of covering for a deficiency), to dwell at a loss, is fundamentally creative, not in the sense of generating new things, but in the sense that it requires all the “creativity” we have to attend to what already exists, “the relationship of things.” When Weil writes that “extreme attention constitutes the creative faculty in man,” she means to contrast creature with creator, an entirely different order of force. As creatures, we are not capable of increasing the sum of matter (as our awakening to the extent that natural resources are limited, for instance, reminds us). We are of and in relation to the matter that already

⁴⁵ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 43. [Si on suspend le travail de l’imagination combleuse et qu’on fixe l’attention sur le rapport des choses, une nécessité apparaît à laquelle on ne peut pas ne pas obéir. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 103)]

exists. Therefore the creative faculty we have allows us only to become more and more keenly and lucidly aware of what exists.

I am aware of how this notion echoes Martha Nussbaum's essay about Henry James, where she defines his "moral attention" as "not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking what is there, with imagination and feeling."⁴⁶ But note that Weil specifically contrasts attention with "the filling up activity of the *imagination*" (italics mine), while for Nussbaum, "imagination and feeling" are the resources with which James responds to "what is there." It's not news that imagination is a slippery term, but attention for Weil, and the ecological attention of the observers in the dissertation, is quite different from James's attention as Nussbaum describes it, and I think it hinges on the extent to which attention is allowed to exist in tension with imagination. For Weil, the pejorative sense of "imagination" is indistinguishable from the attachment to what is *imaginary*: imagination is "continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass." It is the "filler up of the void" and "essentially a liar."⁴⁷ It isn't that these observers are unimaginative, but that what we might call imagination (or 'creativity') in their work helps them to dwell in, rather than fill up, loss. Similarly Donald Griffin's complaint about the "limited imaginations" of scientists pertains to an unwillingness to dwell at a loss, an interest only in questions that carry assurances of their own answerability. Nussbaum suggests at the beginning of her essay, quoting from James's *The Princess Casamassima*, "Our highest and hardest task is to make ourselves people 'on whom nothing is lost.'"⁴⁸ By contrast, the highest and hardest task for ecological attention is to dwell at a loss, to be "highly lucid" in one's

⁴⁶ Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 521.

⁴⁷ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 16. [L'imagination travaille continuellement à boucher toutes les fissures par où passerait la grâce. [...] L'imagination combleuse de vides est essentiellement menteuse. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 62-3)]

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 516.

incompleteness, to register without bitterness the existence of something independent and in excess of one's own existence, not to be lost because never possessed.

Writing the Intelligence of Attention: Questions of Form and Work

“Attention” as it is used throughout the dissertation approximates a form of turning toward other beings that coincides with an opening of the observing self, a relaxed proprietary hold on the boundaries of one's own being. This attention is a form of turning that develops a feeling for a bond that already exists, between the form of life the observer takes (a human one) and the form taken by the object of attention. The *written accounts* of attention are the acknowledgements of this bond, the response of the observer, but not directly *to* the observed (the response occurs at a delay, when the observed being may have gone elsewhere, and in a form that does not address itself to nor demand anything from the observed being). Their writings constitute what I call the “intelligence” of these observers' attention. How can the examination of an experience that is essentially private and individual become accessible to us? Through writing, attention becomes a bond, becomes binding.

Simone Weil describes a process: “To draw back before the object we are pursuing. Only an indirect method is effective. We do nothing if we have not first drawn back.”⁴⁹ When the observer looks down to write, she must take her eyes off the object of attention. In one sense, this is an inevitable compromise; attention as receptivity is interrupted by the inward turn that allows the observer to gather words with which to give an account of the object and moment of attention. In another sense, it is a “draw[ing] back” that corresponds to an “indirect method” of response. It is an account for the one who writes (and, later, the one who reads) of a moment when another kind of being was present, which can only indirectly be for that being—a gift of dubious or at least

⁴⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 106. [Reculer devant l'objet qu'on poursuit. Seul ce qui est indirect est efficace. On ne fait rien si l'on n'a d'abord reculé. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 193)]

unknown, unknowable value to its indirect recipient. It is not an ode. Still, the sense in which it is ‘for’ the object can drive the act of writing in the first place, as the writer would adjust her sense of the world and her place in it on the basis of the attentive encounter.

The reason behind the phrase that titles the dissertation, the *intelligence* of attention, is foremost a marker of the remove at which these accounts exist from the moment of silent encounter with an object—it is not raw attention itself that we have access to in these accounts, but something brought back from the moment of attentive encounter. It is also intelligence *of* the intelligence *in* the living objects of attention. The doubling that takes place in the moment of intelligently perceiving other forms of intelligence is not the same as *measuring* intelligence, which implies possession of a standard. The accounting for attention’s intelligence, which takes place in the wake of an encounter, can be a way of coming to know the independence of the object even from the observer’s categories of appreciation, its existence in excess of such categories. The writing of these accounts often resists the objectification of the excess that reaches the observer through the object—it is excess in the sense that it is not “for” the observer. The two disciplines of lyric poetry and natural history as practiced by these observers likewise present ways of responding to excess, and inversely, ways of responding to loss.

In not-quite-defining “attention,” I would like to take a cue from Angela Leighton’s opening essay in her book about literary form. Like attention, form is one of those intuitively clear and definitively elusive, indispensable terms. She closes that essay in engagement with Theodor Adorno’s essay, “The Essay as Form,” in which he defined the essay as “an intention groping its way,” and selected “luck and play” as two of its essential elements. “With those,” Leighton writes, “it might be possible to catch at the notion of form, not in a philosophical nutshell, once and for all, but only

along the way, in the part-gamble, part-guesswork which each singular, differently formed work inspires.”⁵⁰

The writing of attention must contend with problems of form, and each of these poets and naturalists has a distinct commitment to rendering an account that has some kind of formal fidelity to the experience and object of attention. Gilbert White believed “the stile should be in some measure adapted to the length of the composition, or the subject in all cases.”⁵¹ In each case we can observe how the observer attempts to align herself formally with the object of attention through her work, to “consent” to belong to the world as it is, by taking the intelligence of attention into account. But this is never a straightforward task.

The self-adjustment that takes place in the writing of attention also involves an ongoing readiness to find oneself out of place. Rather than ordering the observed, drawing it into orbit around one’s human center, the observer accepts a place in the world as contingent and unstable as that of all other beings. Françoise Meltzer offers a trenchant assessment of what is often felt by scholars as the embarrassment of Simone Weil’s life, an obstacle to studying her writings: “Rigorous inappropriateness imposed as something natural was her ontology, at every level. [...] Choosing contexts in which she was clearly out of place, she combined an insistence upon marginalization with the equal insistence that such is the lot of ‘man,’ that inappropriateness, therefore, is a way of living the truth of existence.”⁵² Similarly, Sharon Cameron writes of the sensibility of the filmmaker Robert Bresson, focusing here on *Au hasard, Balhazar*, whose central figure is a donkey: “In the reduction of human and animal bodies to isolated parts—to a crude materiality that is partialized—Bresson is reimagining forms of embodiment so that they appear as strange as they really are (and as

⁵⁰ Leighton, *On Form*, 29.

⁵¹ Cited in Mabey, *Gilbert White*, 123. The quote comes from a letter from White to Thomas Pennant on 12 January 1771.

⁵² Meltzer, “Hands of Simone Weil,” 623.

they sometimes feel): unthinkable as wholes and unthinkable apart from each other.”⁵³ Formally, Cameron argues, Bresson’s technique of fragmentation (both sequentially and in the composition of individual frames) was not a way of representing, but a way of attending to the “strangeness” of what we perceive, its nonconformity with our assumptions, our preconceptions about it. Bresson wore away at the veneer of familiarity when he asked the people in his films to be “models” instead of actors. “ÊTRE (modèles),” he specified in his *Notes sur le cinématographe*, “au lieu de PARAÎTRE (acteurs).”⁵⁴ The difference between being and seeming for Bresson was not something that could be mastered by the performer, but rather something he had to help the model to relinquish, to get past. The most consummate method acting would only get further and further from what he was after. Perhaps counter-intuitively, for Bresson it was a laborious, exacting method, rather than a freewheeling, spontaneous one, that would yield most readily to this strangeness. Bresson’s attempt to render things “as strange as they really are” and Weil’s “inappropriateness” as “a way of living the truth of existence” reflect attitudes of fidelity to beings, to ‘the way things are,’ and a notion that this fidelity could not be directly willed, but would have to come about indirectly, through a labor of attention. Thus Bresson noted, “Eviter les paroxysmes (colère, épouvante, etc.) qu’on est obligé de simuler et où tout le monde se ressemble.”⁵⁵ Paroxysms for Bresson are a kind of fatal short-cut, a “filling-up activity” in Weil’s phrase. The “attente,” the waiting that characterizes attention, also characterizes the writing of attention, in that the work is not to create a facsimile of the observed, which one could set about perfecting, as an actor according to Bresson creates a facsimile of a person, but somehow to achieve fidelity to a being. The uncertainty in advance about what this fidelity means and what it will look like is a consistent feature of the work.

⁵³ Cameron, *Bond of the Furthest Apart*, 18.

⁵⁴ Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, 16. [BEING (models) rather than SEEMING (actors).]

⁵⁵ Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, 69. [Avoid paroxysms (anger, fear, etc.), which one is obliged to simulate and in which everyone resembles everyone else.]

As Simone Weil emphasizes the contrast between the attention and the will, and yet still sees attention as a kind of work, there is an important distinction between immediacy and fidelity throughout the dissertation. The recognition of a resistance in the observing self, a distortion and assimilation at the moment of perception, means that fidelity to another being, the object of attention, requires work of a certain quality. It is not fair to assume that fidelity to another being, attention to its existence prior to and in excess of our own, would ‘come naturally.’ As Cameron suggests, “Bresson’s genius is not [...] merely formal; rather, in his films an aesthetic principle becomes an ethical instrument to carve out—or, rather, to lay bare—an ontology in which the truth of categorical fixities is menaced.”⁵⁶

Working towards fidelity through the work of writing, each of the observers taps into the possibility of attention to generate an opening to a wider field of being than the confines of their own person, to what is beyond self-interest, in a way that does not require the indulgence of self-denial. Self-denial after all can be a form of narcissism (as though everything were riding on getting one’s self out of the way, which ends up rendering the self decisively important after all—this catch is part of J.A. Baker’s struggle).

Weil’s “impersonality,” of which Cameron offers a complex account, is one such alternative to self-denial, in the sense that it sustains, rather than suppresses, being. I embrace Weil’s articulations of attention, just as I embrace Robert Bresson’s alternative expressivity, liberated from the confines of the human face. The salience of these two sensibilities fortifies me to offer the following accounts of attention to and in the natural world, to and with other forms of being, as alternatives to the bind of self-interest. If it is true, as Stephen Kellert suggests, that “the pursuit of self-interest may constitute the most compelling argument for a powerful conservation ethic,” the

⁵⁶ Cameron, *Bond of the Furthest Apart*, 11.

intelligences of attention as gathered here yet suggest that the bonds we come to acknowledge might open us to accepting losses for ourselves, and not only rewards.⁵⁷

Self-Awareness and Self-Effacement

Earlier, I suggested that the designation of “observer” allows both a refusal to intervene, and an awareness of the observer’s own presence in the space and time of attention. In the extreme, as I will come to in the case of J.A. Baker, there is both a visceral physical presence of the observing self, and a violent impulse of self-effacement. To this end, it is worth bringing in Weil’s articulation of a wish:

I do not in the least wish that this created world should fade from my view, but that it should no longer be to me personally that it shows itself. To me it cannot tell its secret which is too high. If I go, then the creator and the creature will exchange their secrets.

To see a landscape as it is when I am not there. . . .

When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart.⁵⁸

In borrowing structures and contours of attention from Weil, I must emphasize that I am not importing a ‘system,’ not least because while Weil’s statements reverberate with each other, she is not beholden to systematic consistency; nor least because for Weil, “Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious.”⁵⁹ While for a few of the observers, especially J.A. Baker, the practice of attention to a beloved creature (like the Peregrine) does take on spiritual intensity, my concern is an entirely worldly and earthly bond among creatures. The term of excess is likewise ethical but not spiritual. For some of the observers there

⁵⁷ Kellert, “The Biological Basis,” 44.

⁵⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 37. [Je ne désire nullement que ce monde créé ne me soit plus sensible, mais que ce ne soit plus à moi qu’il soit sensible. A moi, il ne peut dire son secret qui est trop haut. Que je parte, et le créateur et la créature échangeront leurs secrets. / Voir un paysage tel qu’il est quand je n’y suis pas... / Quand je suis quelque part, je souille le silence du ciel et de la terre par ma respiration et le battement de mon coeur. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 95)]

⁵⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 106. [L’attention extrême est ce qui constitue dans l’homme la faculté créatrice, et il n’y a d’attention extrême que religieuse. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 192)]

exists a Creator (Gilbert White), or spiritualism (the older Alfred Russel Wallace), something behind or beyond the earth, but for me and for the dissertation there is no beyond. The wish Weil expresses above certainly has a religious drive, but the structure of this wish, particularly in the middle fragment that trails off, “To see a landscape as it is when I am not there. . . .,” has broader earthly relevance.

It is a wish that for the present, in the full awareness of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction, can become quite literal. Yet when it comes to fully embodied attentive observation, the observer, like Baker, who has such a wish must also reckon with the fact that he *is* there. As Ponge has it, despite his desire that things be “décrites de leur propre point de vue, [...] ceci est un terme, ou une perfection, impossible.” In brief, “l’on ne peut aucunement sortir de l’homme.”⁶⁰ As I discuss in the third chapter, Ponge, and his younger contemporary Philippe Jaccottet, wrestle with the shame of their human being, especially as it involves them in the disgrace and mendacity of language: “ce à quoi notre nature d’homme nous force à prendre part.”⁶¹

Thus throughout the dissertation, there is a long conversation across chapters about what it means to attend not only to the natural world, to other kinds of being, but to the persistence of one’s own human being against the wish for self-effacement. If endured, the thwarting of such a wish might make possible a reimagining, even a “creative” (in Weil’s sense of attention as “the creative faculty in man”) contraction that resists the ubiquitous expansion of human being. The

⁶⁰ Ponge, “Raisons de vivre heureux,” *Proèmes*, 167. [described from their own point of view, [...] this is an impossible aim, or perfection. [...] We can by no means exit from mankind.]

⁶¹ Ponge, “Raisons de vivre heureux,” *Proèmes*, 167. [that in which our human nature forces us to take part] For both Baker and Ponge, there is an assumed, if inexplicit, species-level implication for this shame. They do not differentiate among human cultures, which would of course complicate the picture of shared responsibility for all manners of atrocity and degradation. I doubt, if given cases of specific cultures and peoples, they would stubbornly maintain the generalization. I am not concerned here with interrogating them on this point: Their immediate awareness, when they attend to other forms of being, that they take part in a form of being (they call human) from which they cannot “exit” constitutes an intelligence.

thwarting of this wish for self-effacement can also create alternative possibilities of company, of keeping company, with other natural kinds.

Ecological Attention: Defining (and not Defining) Nature

Timothy Morton makes a case for why ecology needs to do *without* the idea (and the word) of “nature” that has allowed us to construct ourselves as something apart from it. The force of his “dark ecology” is that it imaginatively takes away this deforming term, “nature,” which we rely upon to reinforce a difference from ourselves. Likewise, he suggests, “The word *environment* still haunts us, because in a society that took care of its surroundings in a more comprehensive sense, our idea of environment would have withered away. The very word *environmentalism* is evidence of wishful thinking. [...] In a society that fully acknowledged that we were always already involved in our world, there would be no need to point it out.”⁶² This observation about the reinforcement of what we think we are trying to reject seems true to me—so much environmentalist writing, he points out, is “inadequate in [its] attempt to generate different ways of making us feel about the state we are in, without changing it.”⁶³ But as Morton tacitly admits in his embrace of John Clare, for instance, who is writing in a Romantic period invested in the idea of nature Morton wants to lay to rest, there is no fresh start without the past.

I am not sure about the need or possibility of clearing away old words (“nature,” for instance) in order to make way for new terms (“dark ecology,” for instance, which differentiates itself from the more naive “deep ecology”). There is a restlessness with terms in the dissertation because of an unsettling I think Morton puts his finger on, each word for “life” and “nature” evoking so much more, and so much contradiction, that won’t be controlled or fixed. It makes

⁶² Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 141.

⁶³ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 140.

sense, living as we are in a time of painful reckoning with the consequences of our volatile presence on the earth, that the words belonging to the field of meaning that touches on our life, other lives, and the earth, would be highly charged. Such words are sensitive to the touch; we can't use them without touching on open wounds. Here are some of the terms and turns of expression I will find necessary at different moments, to inflect the vast particular entity that absorbs, interests, commands, bids for attention throughout the dissertation: living things, the natural world, environment, creatures, animals, plants, vegetal life, avian life or birdlife, living objects of attention, living subjects of attention, living beings—and at the limit marked by Ponge, just “beings,” either non-living, or living a radical alternative to human life. “Nature with a capital N” does not appear in the dissertation in my own words, but I am not so much excluding or banishing it as modulating within it.

The accounts of ecological attention assembled in the following chapters do not make the multiple ecological crises we face any less complicated, nor could they reveal an obvious course of collective action for the planet, especially because their scale is the scale of individuals. Throughout I will have recourse to Elaine Scarry's response in *Thinking in an Emergency*: the individual scale is not obliterated by a collective emergency. Or, as Thom van Dooren argues, the suffering of individual organisms does not cease to matter when the survival of a species is at stake.⁶⁴ It does not mean that ‘tough decisions’ are resolvable to easy ones, or that ultimately someone will not have to suffer. But the mattering of the suffering must not be denied just because it is inevitable, or accepted in

⁶⁴ See for instance van Dooren's discussion of the violence involved in the conservation of the critically endangered Whooping Crane (both towards individual Whooping Cranes in captive breeding, and towards other species considered less vulnerable to extinction and therefore expendable for the sake of the Whooping Crane): “When presented with this situation, perhaps many of us would still choose the violence of a conservation grounded in captive breeding over that of extinction. But making this decision cannot be allowed to erase this genuine ethical difficulty” (van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 115)

advance—attention and its accounts come in ethically at *this* level, the level of fidelity even to the inevitable, even to what we cannot control, or have “consented” not to control.⁶⁵

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter, “Mere Attention,” considers the 19th-century English poet John Clare alongside the 20th-century American poet Elizabeth Bishop. I argue that description takes on ethical and technical complexity in the work of these poets, because it is the primary way of ceding ground to the living objects of their attention. I understand “description” to be the form of writing that follows most directly from observation, aims for the precise rendering of a perceived object, and involves an awareness of the limits of what can be written. These poets do not take description for granted or see it as ornamental or digressive, an attitude which informs a common assessment of their poetry as “mere description.” For Bishop, the problem of description has technical implications—how to use the tools at her disposal to do justice to the excesses of the natural world. For Clare, description gives rise to an ethical quandary, as he finds himself drawn to creatures that are vulnerable and preyed-upon. Ambiguously, in his poems Clare enacts the exposure of these furtive creatures through description, and yet looks to restore their privacy. In addition to close analysis of poems, I consider statements about accuracy as an underrated value in poetry, made in prose by each of these poets. Accepting accuracy as a constraint, Clare and Bishop assign a value to the “mereness” of their task.

In the second chapter, “Disarmed Attention,” I track the way two famed Victorian naturalists, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, admit into their work an awareness of living

⁶⁵ This idea might recall Donna Haraway’s sense of “staying with the trouble,” which is not an incorrect association (and indeed Thom van Dooren cites it just after the passage I’ve quoted from him above), but I am wary of the phrase just because it has become a catchphrase, so easy to invoke complacently, in a way that I fear risks dulling attention despite its call for constantly renewed attention.

objects of attention in excess of what can be known about them. I am particularly focused on moments of discomposure, when the naturalist is ‘stopped in his tracks,’ moments that do not often feature in studies of the theoretical significance of this work. In the moments that matter most for the dissertation, the naturalists become open to the objects of their attention in a way that makes them reckon with an independence. Rather than being in control of the observational arrangement, the naturalist gives a part over to the other life (which in turn may enrich his developing theory, as touching on that very life in front of him). The naturalist’s certainty about his own place in relation to the life before him is undermined. As noted earlier, the moral or ethical power of written accounts of attention to the natural world are far from determined. Such ethical indeterminacy is especially noticeable in this second chapter. For even as I detect an ethical possibility latent in the acknowledgement Darwin and Wallace articulate of the moments in which they’ve been disarmed by the living objects of their attention, these are moments of suspension, which do not attach to particular actions, nor to changes in behavior or conviction.

In the third chapter, “Restless Attention,” I turn to the 20th-21st century Francophone poets Francis Ponge and Philippe Jaccottet, who allow me to explore in depth the problem of fidelity to the natural world as it is worked through in poetic vocations. These poets both write out of a deep ambivalence about the integrity of language. I focus on their effort to recover or salvage poetic writing from a state of disgrace—a state in which it betrays the world observed. Each of the poets in this chapter contends with the thought, even the fear, that it would be best not to write, better to be silent. There is a shame at being human that inflects their writings in different ways. This chapter examines the way each poet reconciles himself to the poetic language he finds possible. Ponge’s method is prolific, reiterative, loquacious, as he finds that there is no way around the medium in which he must work. Jaccottet’s method is also prolific, but his aim is transparency where Ponge’s is thickness, weightlessness where Ponge’s is mass and density. These formal and temperamental

differences suggest alternative attentive responses to a crisis, which makes them of particular interest since I offer my readings of them in context of environmental crisis—in their case, it is a crisis of language, of verbal expression, but it has directly to do with searching the capacities of language to be an adequate response to the other beings that exist in the world, especially those that do not *express* themselves in a way we find legible.

In the fourth chapter, “Ardent Attention,” I bring the 18th-century parson-naturalist Gilbert White into conversation with the 20th-century lyrical naturalist J.A. Baker. Both of these men have iconic status in the tradition of English writing about nature. I focus on the way their writings register a distance exerted by the living objects of their attention, which meets the ardor that drives their activity as observers and as writers. Affection and passionate curiosity (White); eros and anticipatory mourning (Baker) are what they bring to other creatures. What they register and begin to account for in their writing is the way those creatures resist their embrace, even their approach, the way the life of another creature exceeds the shape on which the observer has fastened his ardent attention. Yet it is the ardor of these two observers that allows them to perceive the non-identity between the object of their feeling and the subject that is going about its life. The openness of their forms—the journal for Baker, the letter and journal for White—allows them to move with the objects of their attention, and often in the narrations these forms contain, they include their own bodies in motion; these are live forms in which to respond to the unpredictable movements of other life. They are not forms of capture, holding the object in place so it cannot wriggle away, but forms of passage, where the observer has to move with the object, to keep pace with it, and then part ways.

Finally, I have chosen to end with a coda rather than a traditional conclusion. As the main chapters focus on these observers in the act of recognizing a bond with the objects of their attention, in the coda I have tried to recognize a bond for myself, as observer of these observers, to ask what it could mean to live with the intelligence of attention as I have gathered it from their

writings. For me this means examining my own practice of observing the natural world in the form of birding, and searching my own means of gathering the intelligence of that attention, my own writing of lists and short journal entries. In doing so, I do not mean to place myself on a level with these exemplary observers. I do mean to suggest one way the indeterminate ethics of ecological attention I glean from them might be carried forward.

Chapter 1: Mere Attention

(John Clare and Elizabeth Bishop)

Virginia Woolf saw the particulars of survival in solitude as the chief glory of *Robinson Crusoe*:

A man must have an eye to everything; it is no time for raptures about Nature when the lightning may explode one's gunpowder—it is imperative to seek safer lodging for it. And so by means of telling the truth undeviatingly as it appears to him—by being a great artist and forgoing this and daring that in order to give effect to his prime quality, a sense of reality—he comes in the end to make common actions dignified and common objects beautiful. To dig, to bake, to plant, to build—how serious these simple occupations are; hatchets, scissors, logs, axes—how beautiful these simple objects become. Unimpeded by comment, the story marches on with magnificent downright simplicity.¹

To “have an eye to” something is a colloquial expression of not just perception, but applied perception; vigilance, taking notice. This is urgent perception, perception in an emergency. The lack of impediment, the downrightness, and yet “no time for raptures”: Woolf gives here an account of an intelligence at once restrained and liberated, able to “forgo this and dare that.” I would call it a descriptive intelligence. It is an intelligence especially suited to respond to other living things, to the world not invented by the writer, to nature. Limited by what already exists, it relaxes in some respects and grows newly vigorous in others. Part of Crusoe's power as a figure in our imagination comes from the way he enacts the struggle of a human being learning how to live in the world over again, as from the beginning. Defoe imagines an enlargement of a decisive moment when the human creature comes into the world, which already exists. Each of Crusoe's actions—“To dig, to bake, to plant, to build”—relies in part on the searching intelligence of the human creature who wants to survive, and in equal part on the prior existence of matter and life upon which he can draw in order to sustain his own life. The insistence that (a/your/my) “life depends on” something is not possible to ignore. If I wanted to inspire urgency, I could ask you to apply yourself to such-and-such a task or activity “as though your life depended on it.” I would need to take heed from the story of the boy

¹ Woolf, “*Robinson Crusoe*,” 23.

who cried wolf, not to abuse the invocation of real urgency, lest it grow dull through repetition. Through Crusoe, Defoe has given us a human figure who must attend to the world because his life depends on it.

The lives of the poets I read in this chapter are clearly not at stake in the same way as Crusoe's. For the English poet John Clare (1793-1864) and the American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) Crusoe is an important figure, and he figures here in the stakes of their descriptive intelligence. I give readings of these poets as observers registering the claim of the natural world upon their attention. This claim is aesthetic in the sense that each of them felt compelled to produce lyric poems rather than treatises in response to it. Yet it is also ethical in how it constrains these poets to a standard of descriptive accuracy. Both poets cultivated a serious interest in natural history, which I suggest exerted a force on their poetic practice. Turning on its head the minimizing epithet of "mere description," these poets describe as merely as possible, but with a vivid mereness, as though a certain attention to life depended on it.

Critics of descriptive mereness sometimes target the lack of "selection" on the part of the artist. Rather than avoid the necessity of selection, Bishop and Clare seek to let the objects of their attention determine the basis for that selection: the limit of what they will include is the limit of what the object will share of itself. Clare's descriptive force arises from his eye for a world in motion, his relinquishment of the will to possess by arresting that motion, his fidelity to change and transience. Bishop's descriptive force is in her attitude of waiting for the world to come to the poem rather than wresting things from their places.

The formal argument I want to make is less forceful than Angus Fletcher's theory of poems that are able to *be* rather than only to represent an environment. I focus less on the ontological power of Clare's and Bishop's poems to be worlds in themselves, than on the power of these poems to occupy a subordinate position in relation to the object of attention. To adapt Elaine Scarry, in her

account of the “radical decentering” that takes place in the presence of beauty, their poems “willingly cede ground” to the living objects of their attention.² Fletcher’s “environment poem” grows primarily out of Whitman’s poetics, and describes a poem structured to surround and expand, rather than to give a discrete shape that isolates individual figures as objects of praise or address or dramatic import. Clare is also a writer of environment poems, in that his way of describing is immersive rather than prospective or prospecting, and the boundaries of his poems even when formally straightforward are porous, so that creatures wander in and out and exist in relation, rather than being arrested for contemplation. But the *self* that is so important for Whitman is central for Fletcher, an organizing principle of the environment poem (even as it invites a profound way of inhabiting rather than just regarding that environment). For Bishop and Clare, the presence of the self is registered but limited, checked. They make poems aware of the independence of other lives from the self. This is not the same as reproducing the idea of nature as ‘over there,’ with which Fletcher and Timothy Morton, among others, justly take issue.³ The observing self is implicated in the scenes of Bishop’s and Clare’s poems, but is not the focus of the poems. There is a more outward-facing energy in them than in Whitman’s keenly and diffusely present self. It’s true that his “Song of Myself” is not egotistical in the narrow sense, and that it has to do with a self implicated everywhere in environment, and not with a self that is the center around which environment revolves. But I find it important to distinguish between the way that he attended to environment, loosening the boundaries of the self, and the way Bishop and Clare shape their attention as fidelity to dissimilar life, self-possessed and independent. These two poets, each drawn to the empiricism and concreteness of natural history as a discipline, found poetics that could adopt the constraints of

² Scarry, *On Beauty*, 112. In this account she draws in turn upon Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch.

³ See Angus Fletcher’s *A New Theory for American Poetry* and Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature*. Morton argues, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.” (5) I agree, but I am also suggesting there is a distance of acknowledgment, of gentleness, which is not the same as the presumptuous distance of self-exemption.

that discipline and yet diverge from its positivism. They manage to make room for the separate existence of the observed, to remain attentive to it without ever striving to cover it completely.

Bishop and Clare each strove for fidelity to the world they observed through their poems. And for both, this fidelity was the primary problem they sought to make poems adequate to answer. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry gives an account of the moral opposite of fidelity: “[If a] person or thing outlives its own beauty—as when a face believed ravishing for two years no longer seems so in the third, or a favorite vase one day ceases to delight, or a poem beloved in the decade when it is written becomes incomprehensible to those who read it later—then it is sometimes not just turned away from but turned upon, as though it has enacted a betrayal.”⁴ The error she describes is partly a projection and partly a misidentification: the betrayer is actually the one who turns away or turns upon, and not the changefully beautiful object of attention itself. But it is also a self-betrayal she describes, which “puts at risk not the repudiated object but the capaciousness of the cognitive act.”⁵ It isn’t beauty *per se* I suggest Bishop and Clare render, but something upon which they do not place a limit in advance. While they do often find it, beauty is not fundamental to the account I give of what they find, not a prerequisite for the recognition of aliveness. To go back to see a living thing once esteemed—a kind of bird that reliably migrates through a nearby park, even a friend or lover—and be disappointed is to have expected that creature to repeat its former configuration of beauty, to have remained static.

Fidelity is the ideal towards which these poetics turn; fidelity to the aliveness that exceeds the observing self. In the moral sense, fidelity is the “quality of being faithful; faithfulness, loyalty, unswerving allegiance to a person, party, bond, etc.” The OED entry adds that to have this meaning the word will be constructed or construed with *to, towards*. It implies an orientation, a turning. Then

⁴ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 50-1.

⁵ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 50.

there is the sense of “Correspondence with the original; exactness” which pertains to “description or translation.”⁶ The technical and the moral senses of the word lend something to each other; the sense most immediately relevant in reading these poets is of course the sense that usually pertains to description. This sense can be morally neutral, but usually there is a note of approval in its invocation, just as there is a note of disapproval, perhaps an accusation of self-indulgence, in calling a translation “unfaithful.” (This with the understanding that the ideal of fidelity in description and translation can take a range of forms, following the spirit or the letter more closely.) Coupling the two senses, the “betrayal” of an object of attention takes place when an observer fails to register the object’s independence from her experience of it, and comes to it with an expectation, which must be gratified or disappointed. Extending Scarry’s insights, the expectation of beauty, at least as a particular configuration, is already a failure to accept the object’s independence from the observing self.

Clare and Bishop in Defense of Observation

John Clare wrote of his contemporary John Keats,

[H]is descriptions of scenery are often very fine but as it is the case with other inhabitants of great cities he often described nature as she appeared to his fancies & not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he described.⁷

Clare admired Keats, but it seems he could not take him for a model. Indeed it appears that their admiration and criticism were mutual and remarkably balanced, for Keats told Clare’s publisher John Taylor that in a poem by Clare he had been given to read, “the Description too much prevailed over

⁶ And in a more specialist context, “The degree to which a sound or picture reproduced or transmitted by any device resembles the original.” This meaning is operative in the construction “high fidelity” or “hi-fi” as opposed to “low-fi” (which can be pejorative but can also foreground the medium, in the sense of art, especially music, which uses techniques “deliberately [...] to achieve a raw and unsophisticated sound”).

⁷ As in Bate, *John Clare*, 189. Keats’s comment is reported speech, as far as I know. Bate cites a letter in which John Taylor relates Keats’s criticism to Clare, manuscript number 2245, folio 62 in the British Library Egerton Manuscripts.

the sentiment.”⁸ Keats is beautiful but for Clare unfaithful in an important way, perhaps even unfaithful *because* unfailingly beautiful. Truth and beauty could not be equated for Clare in the same way as Keats famously equated them; not because they never coincide, but because, as the naturalist knows, beauty is not a constant in the living world, which is always in flux. The observer who wants to see ‘truthfully’ cannot require it. For some of Clare’s poems, the very category of beauty would seem not out of the question but secondary or beside the point, as with his “Little Trotty Wagtail” who “waddled in the mud.”⁹

The mutual evaluation of these two poets proved consistent with their distinct poetic gifts. And by contrast, Clare approved of another contemporary, Charlotte Smith, as the only fellow poet he could think of who had ever mentioned a nightjar in a poem:

her poems may be only pretty but I felt much pleas'd with them because she wrote more from what she had seen of nature than from what she had read of it therefore those that read her poems find new images which they have not read of before tho they have often felt them and from those assosiations poetry derives the power of pleasing in the happiest manner.¹⁰

In Clare’s estimation, to be “only pretty” may even surpass being beautiful. Having “witnessed” was the foundation of Clare’s writing, which abounds with verbs of noticing, verbs of attention: the ubiquitous “I love to see,” but also verbs that double as imperatives in the space Clare often leaves between subject and verb: “mark,” “list,” “note.” He backs his own observations with the claim of witnessing, and summons his listener to do the same. This claim has as much to do with the poet

⁸ I disagree with Bate, who provides the quotation and then declares that “Keats’s criticism was just: the greatest fault in Clare’s poetry is an excess of description. He was so eager to do justice to every detail of his environment that he often went on for too long and failed in the art of self-selection.” (Bate, *John Clare*, 189-90)

⁹ Clare, “Little Trotty Wagtail,” Line 5, *Major Works*, 401. Except for *The Shepherd’s Calendar* or otherwise noted, all quotes of Clare’s poems come from the Oxford World’s Classics *Major Works* edition. All orthographic and typographic idiosyncrasies in quoted poems by Clare occur in the text. See also the glossary of the text (507-17) for glosses of dialect words. I haven’t time to engage here with the controversies over Clare editing, but there are strong arguments on both sides—I touch on this when I get to *The Shepherd’s Calendar*.

¹⁰ Clare, “Letter to Messrs Taylor and Hessey, I,” *Major Works*, 453.

having seen the form of life he invokes as it does with recognizing that the life exists without being seen, but for itself. Consider these two stanzas from “Summer Images”:

I love at early morn from new mown swath
To see the startled frog his rout pursue
And mark while leaping oer the dripping path
 His bright sides scatter dew
And early Lark that from its bustle flies—
 To hail his mattin new
 And watch him to the skyes

And note on hedgerow baulks in moisture sprent
The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn
In earnest heed and tremolous intent
 Frail brother of the morn
That from the tiney bents and misted leaves
 Withdraws his timid horn
 And fearful vision weaves¹¹

Following the syntax, we find “I love [...] to see [...] and mark [...] and watch [...] and note.” The objects of these verbs of attention are invariably glimpses of experience with an internal integrity distinct from his own. The frog is “startled,” the snail creeps “in earnest heed and tremolous intent.” He spends the second of these two stanzas attending to the sensitivity of the snail, its own tentative, searching faculty. You might say he anthropomorphizes this snail in the final line, that the “fearful vision” the snail “weaves” could only be apparent “to his fancies.” Yet observing a recurrence of this trope in Clare—the attribution of particular dreams, fears and fantasies to other animals—we begin to see that it marks the limit of what can be observed externally, and yet to grant a private internal existence whose nature can only be imagined.

Clare loves the adverb “inly,” for humans as for other animals, as in “The Blackcap,” who “flirts a happy wing and inly wears / Content in gleaning what the orchard spares.”¹² Earlier in “Summer Images” he observes a “speckled thrush by self delight imbued” who “Singeth unto

¹¹ Clare, “Summer Images,” Lines 99-112, *Major Works*, 124-9.

¹² Clare, “The Blackcap,” Lines 8-9, *Major Works*, 232.

himself for joys amends.” He imagines the pleasure another animal might feel in living its own life, independent of the human observer’s pleasure or perception of beauty. Just as he includes in “January” of *The Shepherd’s Calendar* “geese that gabble in their dreams / Of litterd corn & thawing streams”; and in “February,” “Odd hive bees fancying winter oer / & dreaming in their combs of spring.” We might suppose these lines “fanciful,” but for Clare the imperative to “witness” what one describes does not preclude the inclusion of what cannot be witnessed *directly*. If we must admit that the experience of other animals is not inferable from our own, and that it may be too simple to think geese or bees dream as we do of the things manifest to us about their waking lives, still Clare entertains a dimension of experience private to the animal, which he populates with detail according to his ken.¹³

To criticize Keats’s reliance on how nature appears “to his fancies” implies the risk of a single perspective, which may forget that even “Summer” is not one thing only, but something different from each perspective of creation. The risk of describing other living things only as they appear to one’s fancies is that they will appear only as they exist for the poet, forgetting that they also exist for themselves. The details Clare invents, where he consults his “fancies,” pertain to the existence-for-themselves he grants to other living things, which would otherwise remain abstract to us.¹⁴ This acknowledgment of self-possession assists him in remaining faithful to other lives, just as fidelity in a relationship paradoxically involves acknowledgment of the other’s independence.

¹³ Timothy Morton suggests that Clare “gives us the feeling of environment as open mind” and “helps us to feel the existential quality of doubt,” clarifying that by doubt he means “the effect of things ceasing to be what you expect.” (Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 200) I would connect Clare’s entertainment of the dreams and of the strictly inaccessible inner lives of other animals, with these observations of the open, doubting disposition Clare holds and enables.

¹⁴ For an engagement with the question of how imagination can bring us to terms with the reality of another animal’s existence, see Mark Payne’s *The Animal Part*, especially the conversation he narrates between J.M. Coetzee’s fictional Elizabeth Costello as against Thomas Nagel’s famous argument against the power of the imagination to give us access to the experience of other animals. (13-15) For me the crux of Clare’s recourse to imagination, and yet his insistence on a natural world as it is *not* imagined but directly perceived, is that imagination is what allows him to know *that* there is a part of each living thing he observes that is private to itself; imagination does not give him privileged access to this part, but it allows him to hold open an indeterminate space for it.

Clare's lack of interest in the collection or examination of dead specimens approaches the limits of fancy the other way around. Once again, he asserts, "I love to see," this time to justify his reservations as a naturalist, and here is what he loves to see:

the nightingale in its hazel retreat and the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foliage and not to examine their carcasses in glass cases [...] I have none of this curiosity about me tho I feel as happy as they [naturalists] can in finding a new species of field flower or butter flye which I have not seen before yet I have no desire further to dry the plant or torture the Butterflye by sticking it on a cork board with a pin—I have no wish to do this if my feelings woud let me I only crop the blossom of the flower or take the root from its solitudes if it woud grace my garden and wish the fluttering butterflye to settle till I can come up with it to examine the powderd colours on its wings [...]¹⁵

Description for Clare is conditioned by the fleeting presence of the creatures he would describe. He will neither invent with his "fancies" what he does not observe (which is the poet's temptation) nor capture and kill in order to observe exhaustively (which is the naturalist's prerogative). What I am calling fidelity is the realm of possible attention and description that exists between these two limits.¹⁶ Fidelity is what keeps description mere. He claims to have "none of this curiosity" about him. Curiosity that extinguishes its objects would be in Scarry's terms a kind of betrayal, except that it does "put at risk [...] the repudiated object" and not only "the capaciousness of the cognitive act." This would be curiosity in a meaning the OED pronounces obsolete, "In a blamable sense: The disposition to inquire too minutely into anything; undue or inquisitive desire to know or learn." Yet another ostensibly obsolete meaning Clare would never disown: "Carefulness, the application of care or attention."

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¹⁵ Clare, "Letter to Messrs Taylor and Hessey, II," *Major Works*, 458.

¹⁶ As Hugh Haughton puts it, "The abortive natural history letters also show the *limits* of Clare's toleration of natural history. Poetry without a real grounding in the natural world he distrusts, but he also distrusts natural history which loses touch with the same ground." (Haughton, "Progress and Rhyme," *John Clare in Context*, 58) Clare's is a poetics of "grounding."

Across an ocean and roughly a century, Elizabeth Bishop was dismayed with her contemporaries' failures of fidelity. Like Clare she was a poet with a keen sense of fidelity to the physical world. Her tone sounds more exasperated than Clare's; she is not offering a diplomatic assessment of a named contemporary. But the essence of her complaint, and its connection with her own poetics, bears a striking resemblance to Clare's critique of Keats:

I'm often thunderstruck by the helplessness, ignorance, ghastly taste, lack of worldly knowledge, and lack of observation of writers who are much more talented than I am . . . Lack of observation seems to me one of the cardinal sins, responsible for so much cruelty, ugliness, dullness, bad manners—and general unhappiness, too.¹⁷

Langdon Hammer has called attention to the way Bishop's letter-writing was intimately bound up with her poetics, and this passage comes from the famous "Darwin letter" in which Bishop explores what draws her to the naturalist and his "endless, heroic observations." As Hammer suggests, "the letter's conversational form keeps Bishop's thinking unsettled, mobile, incomplete."¹⁸ The off-the-cuffness of the epistolary form comes through in that final surprising addition after the em-dash. Consider the list of crimes committed under the influence of a "lack of observation."¹⁹ It does not surprise us to hear this fault blamed for inaccuracy, careless mistakes, blunders, or embarrassment, but "cruelty" is an ethical crime, "ugliness" and "dullness" aesthetic ones. And "bad manners" means much more to Bishop than a failure to use the correct fork.²⁰ But unhappiness is perhaps the

¹⁷ Bishop, Letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964. *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (Hereafter referred to in footnotes as *PPL*), 860. This is, of course, the same letter with which I began the Introduction to the dissertation.

¹⁸ Hammer, "Letters: Elizabeth Bishop's 'Art Form or Something,'" no page numbers.

¹⁹ The "worldly knowledge" to which she refers also has an unusual reach. Usually we mean by "worldly" something akin to street-smart, sophisticated, 'acquainted with the ways of the world,' and generally this refers to our way of getting along (or getting ahead) in human society. As the OED has it, "belonging to the world of human existence (as distinguished from the next or other world)." But here Bishop seems to mean something much more capacious, which perhaps includes that "other world," in the sense of the world as others know it; there is an intimation that people seem to get along in the world without ever *getting to know* the world in which they get along, developing an awareness of everything other than oneself that makes up and takes part in that world.

²⁰ See for instance the poem "Manners" from *Questions of Travel*. Bishop, *PPL*, 119. Or see her letter to Robert Lowell, 21 March 1972, *One Art*, 562: "I keep remembering Hopkins's marvelous letter to Bridges about the idea of a 'gentleman' being the highest thing ever conceived—higher than a 'Christian,' even, certainly than a poet." It is the "gentleness" at the root of manners and the ideal of the gentleman that she finds vital. "Lack of observation" is then a failure to be gentle, to leave room for other life.

most surprising of the lot—observation has connotations of discipline and sobriety, and “unhappiness” in this sense probably does not mean a lack of gaiety. Happiness in observation is something more temperate and moderate, but it can be a source of radiance. Bishop enlarges our sense of attention, the capacity of the observer. Aware of observation’s limits—it is not an inventive faculty, but works with what already exists—she felt it had larger consequences than people were usually willing to grant it. These consequences were not only broadly ethical, reflecting the personal constraint that communicates a regard for others, but also aesthetic, invested in recovering a profound source of worldly pleasure that comes from fully attending to the presence of all that is dissimilar from the self.

In her elegy for Robert Lowell, Bishop evokes the beginning of spring: “The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,” and three lines later, “Nature repeats herself, or almost does.”²¹ It is a crux for naturalists as for poets that attention to other living things involves this alternation between the general form of life that connects to others and can contribute to an understanding of the whole world; and the particular life that always erodes the certainty or finality of the first general statement we might make. Bishop’s poem allows for the excess in living things with the rhetoric of qualification, taking three steps forward and two steps back from the general assertion about nature (the qualification is two metrical feet for the assertion’s three). In between those two lines are two others devoted to another bird, “and the White-throated Sparrow’s five-note song, / pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.” Bishop’s acknowledgment of an emotional response to the natural world has an expressive plainness, almost a kind of baldness (see also the “sweet / sensation of joy” that arises in the presence of the moose). Call it sentimentality if you will, but it is also a way of marking without ceremony a happening internal to the observer, which may or may not correspond to the internal life of the creature observed. From the pages of today’s science reporting,

²¹ Bishop, “North Haven,” lines 16 and 19, *PPL*, 177.

she would find ever more reason to observe that “five-note song”: the song of the White-throated Sparrow, already known to be variable, is changing right before our ears.²²

For Bishop, fidelity in observation had also to do with honoring the capacity for resistance with which she credited her objects of attention. In his reading of Robert Lowell’s most celebrated sonnet for Bishop, David Kalstone ventures:

You can hear the gesture of abandon in that last line. Bishop comes forth at the end, his serene antagonist. They share the element of risk, but those empty spaces on Bishop’s board, empty for years, suggest a moment of rest when finally life and observation will provide the missing detail, the inner premonition will find a confirming external response from a mysterious, enduring, independent outer world. Lowell was never that patient or submissive.²³

The last line of Lowell’s sonnet, to which Kalstone refers, is an invocation ending a complicated question (it starts, “Do / you still hang your words in air”) after an em-dash ending the penultimate line: “unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?”²⁴ Kalstone’s “submissive” is a provocative claim on its own. In many contexts that word implies irresponsible pacifism, a failure to assert. But it corresponds to the kind of “ceding ground” described by Scarry and is the essence of ‘mere description’ in the sense I explore throughout this chapter. Bishop lets the world represented do its own part in the making of poems. This form of submissiveness suggests that she took so famously long to finish poems not only because she was so scrupulous a craftswoman, but also because she waited as long as it took for the world to come to the poem. It is a way of working, a way of being that accepts the risk of very low productivity.²⁵

²² Giaimo, Cara. 2020. “Canada’s Sparrows Change Their Tune.” *The New York Times* (Science Times section, “Observatory”), July 14. Giaimo reports on “the jaunty song of the white-throated sparrow. [...] as familiar as the chickadee’s trill and the mourning dove’s dirge”: “over the past half-century, the song’s hook—its triplet ending—has changed, replaced by a new, doublet-ended variant [...] It seems the sparrows want to sing something new.”

²³ Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, 239.

²⁴ Lowell, “For Elizabeth Bishop 4,” Lines 10-14, *Collected Poems*, 595.

²⁵ The quiet force with which Bishop rejected surrealism, as elucidated by Zachariah Pickard, comes from the same place of “submission.” Pickard gives us André Breton’s complaint about art that preoccupies itself with what “would exist anyway.” (Pickard, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Descriptive Poetics*, 43) And this is a way of articulating a criterion or standard for descriptive art: it makes a silent vow of fidelity to the already-existing, refusing to invoke anything that would *not* have “existed anyway.”

If the attitude of submissiveness is ever suspect, it is most so in a state of crisis or emergency, when action seems imperative. But emergency can also be a test case if the submissive attitude has its own force. Such an attitude trusts in an external world that endures. The poet of fidelity neither saves nor changes it, but has a chance to observe it, and finds this chance worth a great deal of trouble. In another book, Scarry argues for the good forces of habit and the necessity of laws especially, not except, in emergencies. She notes an inversion that takes place in an emergency. Unlike in “peace-time” where we seem to assume “that the world stays the same and persons change,” in an emergency “the world is changing more quickly than we can change.”²⁶ The descriptive fidelity of Bishop, which would not elide the “almost” of repetitions in birdsong, can be a way of observing the change of the world even “in peace-time.”

Consider Bishop’s friend and mentor Marianne Moore writing to her in 1956: “Nicey nice’ is perfect. How accurate you are, Elizabeth. That is just how *I* have felt.”²⁷ There is an informal and friendly mischief at play here, but between these two poets the epithet “accurate” is unquestionably one of the highest compliments. When one looks up the adjective in the OED, one finds it often used of instruments (definition 4) or measurements and predictions (definition 3), and in definition 2, “Of a person: careful, precise; tending not to make mistakes or errors; correct.” The OED gives Moore’s compliment to Bishop as an illustration of the latter.

By contrast, the pleasure in and passion for description are enigmatic to Bishop when she identifies it in her friend and mentor, Marianne Moore, in her 1948 review-essay “As We Like It”:

²⁶ Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency*, 10.

²⁷ Quoted from the OED, italics in the original. Citation given as a letter from Moore to Bishop on 9 June 1956. In Moore’s *Selected Letters*, 528. In turn Robert Lowell praised Moore in 1970 for her accuracy: “What startled was your generosity of thought, and the accuracy in carrying it out. I mean that when most people might feel they’ve\’d found a good enough figure, you go on to accuracy.” (cited in Saskia Hamilton’s introduction to Lowell’s *The Dolphin: Two Versions, 1972-1973*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019) Yet as Paul Muldoon brings out in a recent essay, Lowell also compared what Moore was able to *make* of accuracy unfavorably with Bishop’s own achievement. “When he refers, in his letter of 10 June 1957, to ‘The Armadillo’ being ‘an out-of-doors, personally seen and utterly un-Moore’ poem, it’s hard not to read this as a critique of Moore being academic, abstract and, in some profound sense, unsuccessful.” (Muldoon, “Fire Balloons,” 219)

I do not understand the nature of the satisfaction a completely accurate description or imitation of anything at all can give, but apparently in order to produce it the description or imitation must be brief, or compact, and have at least the effect of being spontaneous.²⁸

She does not “understand the nature” of the pleasure, but she knows how it is “produced”—and produces it herself, with a difference. Bishop goes on to observe, in admiration mingled with mild reproof, “The poems seem to say, ‘These things exist to be loved and honored and we *must*,’ and perhaps the sense of duty shows through a little plainly.” She mentions but does not elaborate on “the secondary and frequently sombre meaning of the title of her first book: *Observations*.”²⁹ Probably she refers to the meaning the OED places first:

An action, esp. of a religious and ceremonial nature, performed in accordance with prescribed usage; a customary action, ceremony, or ritual; = OBSERVANCE *n.* 1. *rare* after 17th cent.

For Bishop there is something imposing, even coercive, about the moral imperative implicit in Moore’s descriptions (a prescription smuggled into description). An action performed ‘ritually,’ ceremonially, points beyond itself.

The definition of accuracy in measurements, instruments and predictions implies reference to “a given standard.” Yet in her compliment to Bishop, Moore uses her *own experience* as a standard (“That is just how *I* have felt”), such that the sense of accuracy becomes inherently subjective rather than objective, in tension with the other definitions. The tools of measurement exist at least in part to correct or at least diminish the distortions of subjective judgments, to give an independent reading of an object that reveals it in its ‘actual’ dimensions. One may feel hot or cold, but a thermometer tells the temperature of the air (and sometimes one is sure it can’t be right). So what can accuracy mean when intuitive resonance rather than external confirmation authenticates it?³⁰

²⁸ Bishop, “As We Like It,” *PPL*, 682.

²⁹ Bishop, “As We Like It,” *PPL*, 683.

³⁰ Sarah Riggs quotes David Jarraway, who “locates in [Bishop’s] moment of accuracy” a “paradoxical crisis of vision.” Riggs continues, “The paradox is that what is concealed is all too visible, and that what appears with the assurance of

The playful use of “accurate” in Moore’s letter reveals a tension in the value Bishop and Moore each place on accurate description in poetry—the objective connotation of accuracy, from which it gathers its forceful rigor, and the subjective standard by which the poet and her reader experience it.

This subjective sense of accuracy is not a new phenomenon. The classical notion of *enargeia* included the vividness with which poetic description can bring a scene or a thing to life for its audience. In such cases, “The immediacy of the effect of subjective representation is more important than the strict truth of its contents.”³¹ The sense that accuracy is a paltry achievement in the context of poetry also dates at least back to Longinus, who held that while “correctness escapes censure,” any truly great poet “again and again redeems all his mistakes by a single touch of sublimity and true excellence.”³² The “effect of being spontaneous,” which also preoccupies Bishop in her reflection on the satisfactions of accurate description, resonates with this ancient feeling for immediacy, and both are concerned with “effect” independent of content or object. But for Bishop spontaneity is an elusive quality, one that cannot simply be willed, and in fact it may apply more appropriately to her own than to Moore’s art; Bishop’s way of including adjustments, self-corrections, redirections and indirections, her preference for the “mind thinking” over the thought—all contribute to a carefully fashioned “effect of being spontaneous.”³³ Among recent critics, Gillian White in *Lyric Shame* has offered a nuanced reading of Bishop’s habits of spontaneity,

scientific verifiability is the least certain.” She refers in particular to the date marking the issue of the National Geographic magazine the young Elizabeth encounters in “In the Waiting Room,” a date later investigated by critics and found to be technically *inaccurate*. (Riggs, “Binocular Optics,” 50) In fact, as Erica McAlpine examines in closer detail, Bishop herself realized this inaccuracy about the date of the magazine issue even before she sent it to the *New Yorker* for consideration, and she even confessed it to the editors. It turned out that details from two different issues had merged in her mind. It bothered her—indeed, she tried fixing it—but she decided to leave it as was because the mistake had gotten itself woven into the poem, and there was nothing for it. For a nuanced account of the whole affair, see McAlpine, *Poet’s Mistake*, Chapter 6, 137-55.

³¹ *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* online 2012, s.v. “Descriptive Poetry” by R.H. Webb and P. Weller, http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/prpoetry/descriptive_poetry/0?institutionId=170.

³² Longinus, *On the Sublime* 36, in Loeb Classical Library volume 199, p277.

³³ See Bishop’s quotations from M.W. Croll, “The Baroque Style in Prose,” in her own essay on timing in Hopkins’s poetry. Bishop, *PPL*, 666.

casting them less straightforwardly than previous readers had inclined to. I would clarify that Bishop doesn't simply embody an ethos of spontaneity, but reflects on and performs the difficulty, and sometimes the real awkwardness, of spontaneous description.³⁴ Not least because Bishop recognized the medium of language as far from transparent. Eleanor Cook devotes the second chapter of *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* to Bishop's "Ordinary Diction—Yes, *But...*" There, she points to the ways Bishop manages to use words people generally think they know, but to mean them in ways people generally don't mean them, or aren't fully aware they mean them. "From the first, Bishop was acutely aware of the possibilities of words as they go about their lives. She observed them with her famous scrutinizing eye as carefully as she observed objects."³⁵ She cites Bishop's own sensitivity to shades of meaning in everyday conversations (for instance in teaching, or in an interview with Lloyd Schwartz), her sensitivity to local idiom, her "preternatural sense of new words and fashions in words and a love of good dictionaries."³⁶ This sensitivity to the "possibilities of words," this vigilance which is also an openness, constitutes another form of accuracy. Bishop finds capable of rousing the parts of experience that tend towards the automatic—the need for which recurs, and cannot be answered just once, because the lethargy of the automatic returns.

Such an attitude trusts in an external world that endures, holding that artistic action neither saves nor changes it, but has a chance to observe it, and finds this chance worth a great deal of trouble. The question of poetry's response to the enduring world hovers behind Bishop's reproach

³⁴ For White this topic comes up more in the context of tone and voicing than techniques of description, and I find she is not alone in casting description as one of Bishop's more minor achievements, since it has been used to make her seem a minor poet. Thus she writes, "Critics more inclined to champion Bishop's descriptive skills or to tease out her personal confessions from her understated and often oblique poems or to dismiss them as mainstream 'lyric' miss their more radical nature." It all depends on what we consider "radical"—I say her "descriptive skills" themselves are radical, but for White's purposes they obscure her more significant achievement of "resist[ing] modes of lyric reading." (White, *Lyric Shame*, 96)

³⁵ Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 39.

³⁶ Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 39.

of Robert Lowell, “But *art just isn’t worth that much*.”³⁷ Worth is a relative term, quantified as such in Bishop’s expression, and the greater term in the relation is always the world observed. It is inconceivable on this account that anything the artist perceives could fall in value beneath the work of art that proceeds from it. For Bishop this relation is a constant, a condition. It does not need to be argued for—whatever the artist does or thinks he is doing, it is practically a law of nature that what he creates will not be worth more than the “mysterious, independent outer world.”³⁸

This condition brings my question about “submissiveness” in an emergency into focus. In Kalstone’s description, Bishop as “serene antagonist” has for Kalstone’s Lowell something of a haunting and maddening quality. There is no way to speed her up. This unhurriable pace, calm, self-possessed, produces anxiety in those who imagine or demand exigent circumstances. In such circumstances, an attitude that currently appears cautious and wise becomes a risk. What if “life and observation” never supply the “missing detail”? What if nothing ever comes to occupy those “empty spaces”? It takes as long as it takes, yes, but what if it takes forever, which we never have? Is there no recourse?

Descriptive poetics do not necessitate an absence of other modes—narration, philosophical reflection—but a preference for, trust in, and fidelity to description before other functions of language.³⁹ Which is a fidelity to the objects observed before telling a story or a moral in which they

³⁷ Bishop, letter to Robert Lowell, 21 March 1972, *One Art*, 562. The context is Bishop’s serious and loving moral criticism of Lowell’s distortion and manipulation of his ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick’s private letters to him in his poetry collection, *The Dolphin* (dedicated to his new wife Caroline Blackwood).

³⁸ I use the masculine pronoun as an extension of the context (Bishop’s statement to Lowell).

³⁹ Some of these points about poetic description echo Philippe Hamon’s *Introduction à l’analyse du descriptif*, though his approach is systematic. Angus Fletcher’s account of description and the “environment poem” has also been useful to me, though my claim about poetic form in Clare and Bishop is less positivistic than Fletcher’s (which also takes up Clare). Hamon’s premise is that description deserves its own attention, rather than being a place in a text to relax one’s attention: “le descriptif ne semble être jamais qu’un lieu ou un moment transitoire pour passer à de plus nobles objets d’étude.” (7) [The descriptive never seems but a transitory place or moment before passing to nobler objects of study.] For me there is a twist here, since I am following in this tradition of defending description, but the kind of descriptive intelligence I discover in these poets *is* a capacity to attend to what is furtive and transient; the element of glimpsing, of seeing in passing, is not passed through but dwelt in, sustained. They have a way, then, of embracing the modest or slight reputation of description, of using its very meanness to bring the object into focus.

might figure. The kind of “submissive” attitude that places the world observed before the poem is not for peace-time only, not a flourish or a rest, not to be indulged in only if the narrative economy will afford it. This is work in which description is primary, as Martha Nussbaum defines “moral attention,” which she describes at work in (and demanded by) Henry James: “not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking what is there, with imagination and feeling.”⁴⁰ It is a surprising comparison—for who would ever accuse Henry James of any kind of mereness?—but this just underscores how replete, to the point of bursting, can be the field of one who submits to the limit of “what is there.”

To “take what is there,” that is the task which Elizabeth Bishop and John Clare each set for themselves. It has been suggested that Bishop’s simplicity is deceptive. But her simplicity does not deceive if by deception we mean she really talks about something other than “what is there.” Her simplicity deceives only in the sense that she tries to preserve the opacity of what is there, its strangeness undiminished. The observed world does not grow more knowable or familiar to us through her poems. Bishop seems to have trusted more or less that the world provides the necessary.

Thirty-seven years before she wrote her famous *Crusoe* poem, “*Crusoe in England*,” Bishop wrote in her notebook from Cuttyhunk Island off the coast of Massachusetts, “On an island you live all the time in this Robinson Crusoe atmosphere; making this do for that, and contriving and inventing. . . . A poem should be made about making things in a pinch—& how it looks and when the emergency is over.”⁴¹ Resourcefulness was her response to emergency, “making this do for that,” articulated with a casualness that might exasperate the anxious interlocutor (as though we could say

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, “Finely Aware,” 521. Also cited in Introduction.

⁴¹ As cited in Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 220. Cook notes that the passage comes from the Vassar notebook 72A.3, “Cuttyhunk, July 1934.”

Robinson Crusoe was “in a pinch”). When she finally writes “Crusoe in England,” the poem she conceived in that early notebook, she locates the emergency in the aftermath of what would commonly go by that name. The emergency that preoccupies her comes “when the emergency is over,” when Crusoe returns home.

Swiftness and Ease

Clare too had an affinity for *Robinson Crusoe*. In a brief, stirring passage of autobiographical prose, he recounts,

I became acquainted with Robinson Crusoe very early in life having borrowd it of a boy at Glington school of the name of Stimson who only dare lend it me for a few days for fear of his uncles knowing of it to whom it belongd yet I had it a sufficient time to fill my fancys with new Crusoes and adventures⁴²

That the young Clare’s mind should be populated with Crusoes, plural, cuts against the singularity and isolation of the man on his island. Jonathan Bate tells us that “Clare identified strongly with Crusoe’s solitude.”⁴³ If these Crusoes remain Crusoes they remain solitary, the young Clare “fill[ing his] fancys” not with Crusoes that could keep each other company but whose islands offer alternate realms to explore. As Derek Walcott once asked, rhetorically, “who would want to attend a convention of Crusoes, a conference of hermits?”⁴⁴ Yet as the later Clare imagines, Crusoe could inhabit a kind of solitude that makes room for other kinds of life. The dimension of Crusoe Clare seems to have absorbed was the world-expanding Crusoe, the Crusoe of movement, the curious and exploratory Crusoe.

Very far from Bishop in the speed of his production, he composed swiftly and revised little; rather than laboring over individual poems to achieve the impression of naturalness, he strove

⁴² Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, 46.

⁴³ Bate, *John Clare*, 28.

⁴⁴ Walcott, “The Garden Path,” 128.

restlessly after the poetic forms in which to express natural objects: the “effect of being spontaneous” achieved by different means. Seamus Heaney was exhilarated by his “notational speed.”⁴⁵ Angus Fletcher observes how the rhyming couplets Clare so frequently uses have an unusual lightness. Unlike the couplets of Pope and Johnson, and in contradiction to Clare’s blank verse models of Thomson (and Milton before him), “Clare’s sonnets [...] show how couplets could be made virtually to disappear, by means of an undoing containment of their sharp symmetries within the fourteen-line structure; Clare’s rhymes seem almost not to rhyme, even when perfectly consonant. They fit the disappearing looseness of drifting observation.”⁴⁶ Couplets were a mainstay for Clare, but lively and flexible rhyme schemes also pepper his oeuvre.⁴⁷ It would probably not yield much to conduct an exhaustive systematic study of Clare’s rhyme patterns, except to uncover the extent of their variety. The point is that for him rhyme was part of a formal dexterity, at first glance conventional but more importantly flexible, never pyrotechnic, just capable of sensing and responding to the changefulness of the living world he observed.

Hugh Haughton comments on the difficulty of finding a critical method suitable to Clare’s poetics. The several promising avenues he considers he sets aside as potentially flattening, and reliant on something more “programmatic” than is called for with Clare. He frames the difficulty in the following terms:

One of the most problematic features of Clare’s case is that he does not seem ‘problematic’ at all. Why should it be difficult to understand a poet who isn’t a ‘difficult’ poet? ‘I found my poems in the fields’ he once claimed, ‘and only wrote them down.’ Critics have written Clare down because he does not seem, in their terms, to have adequately problematised his own poems when he ‘only wrote them down.’ [...] he might not seem to modern eyes to have confronted the *problem* of form itself at all, in the way that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake or Keats so evidently did. [...] As a result, [his poems] neither lend themselves to the aesthetic

⁴⁵ Heaney, “John Clare’s Prog,” 67.

⁴⁶ Fletcher, *New Theory*, 37-8.

⁴⁷ “The Happy Bird,” for instance, follows the pattern ABAB (expected enough) followed by the interlocking CDECDE, and rounds off with a pair of couplets, DDDF. “The Lady Fly” of the Helpston period also starts ABAB, then catches the B-rhyme over into BCBC, and the C-rhyme into CDCDCD.

discipline of close reading or the athletic exercise of deconstruction. They sprawl, they ramble, they spill over. Moreover, they are too often, as is said, 'merely descriptive.' If we are open to the idea of 'open form', as we sometimes say we are, we are still evidently uneasy with poetry that is open as Clare's is.⁴⁸

The accusation he cites of the 'merely descriptive' is a commonplace, as I have noted. The illusion of self-evidence, of something being said that went without saying, proceeds from a writer who does not worry about novelty; who takes for granted that everything he writes will go without saying (that is, nothing requires his writing in order to exist). But it is just such congenital modesty of ambition that opens onto an unknown field. It is Clare's status as a "minor poet" that qualifies him for Auden's anthology *Nineteenth-Century British Minor Poets*, and in a less evaluative sense for one of John Ashbery's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, collected in a book called *Other Traditions*. The lower case *o* in the front matter emphasizes this minor status, and Ashbery departs from Auden in caring less about what standards "qualify" a poet as major, defining the minor by default, and more about the generative potential of minor poetry as poetry with "openings."

Equally, the apparent ease of Bishop's poems has been a means to minimize her. Cook points out how various and masterful were her explorations of form and genres, and how little noticed. "One reason that critics pay little attention to Bishop's highly original work with genre is that her work sounds so natural, so unforced, and all the more so as the work matures."⁴⁹ She does not appear to have done much at all, as if the "problem of form" could be rendered unproblematic. The connection between observation and form is not taken for granted: the illusion of direct transcription would suggest that the observer does very little other than let what she sees dictate what she writes, making the product of description more or less 'formless.'

The illusion of effortlessness and "effect of being spontaneous" leads to underestimation of both the achievement and the force of descriptive poetry: the illusion that Clare's poems really *were*

⁴⁸ Haughton, "Progress and Rhyme," *John Clare in Context*, 51.

⁴⁹ Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 200.

simply picked up in the fields (that anyone could have picked them up, and that they are no different from the things one can pick up in fields), or the illusion that Bishop's work seems "so natural, so unforced" because it really required very little effort. The form of the poem, for Bishop as for Clare, becomes difficult to detect because calculated to recede behind the object of attention. But presence of form reflects the way the object has come into focus through observation. The form becomes a way of seeing. As Mark Payne has recently argued, for Clare the form of pastoral is also a way of learning from nature the meaning of "freedom," and reciprocally, of preserving a sense of the value of natural freedoms even as the world of "human contrivance" curtails them. If Clare cannot actually give back to his creaturely neighbors the basic freedoms that other human agents have taken and are taking away, he can be piercingly clear in his perception of what is lost, not just for himself but for other forms of life.⁵⁰

Bishop locates in Darwin a distinct disposition for a kind of transcendence through matter. In what resembles an account of mystical experience, she writes of how after "endless, heroic observations,"

then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.⁵¹

The "perfectly useless" here connects with the "perfectly accurate" of her review-essay on Moore. Uselessness could be perfect in its way, as the persona of "The End of March" well knew, speaking of a "proto-dream-house," a "crypto-dream-house":

⁵⁰ Payne, *Flowers of Time*, 28-29. Alan Bewell makes a commensurate claim about the "tenancy" of nature for Clare: "Clare rejected the idea that nature has no property in itself and that nonhuman beings have no right to the land they occupy. Against the modern legal definition of land as a private freehold possession, he reasserted the moral economic claim that nature and country folk, by virtue of their ancestors having lives in their places for centuries, could claim traditional tenants' rights, at the very least 'for an undisturbed existence.'" (Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 282) Clare's open-form poetics could then be a way of recognizing such claims, even as they are wrested from the claimants.

⁵¹ As discussed in Introduction, often quoted, to the point that it has been widely christened the "Darwin letter," this passage comes from a much longer letter. See Bishop, letter to Anne Stevenson, 8 January 1964, *PPL*, 860-1.

I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.⁵²

The life described is the life of an observer, a life of “look[ing]” and “watch[ing]”—apparently passive, doing “*nothing*, / or nothing much.” The line break holds a great deal in the balance, echoing lines from “Poem,” earlier in the same collection: “—the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust. Not much.” That “little,” that “not much,” makes up the enduring irreducible element. In a letter to Robert Lowell long before that poem was published, Bishop confided, “And then I’ve always had a day-dream of being a lighthouse keeper, absolutely alone, with no one to interrupt my reading or just sitting—and although such dreams are sternly dismissed at about 16 or so, they always haunt one a bit.”⁵³ Why are such day-dreams sternly dismissed? Perhaps because of the irresponsibility or ‘lack of ambition’ they seem to indulge. And yet in the day-dream Bishop does have a job, whatever she imagined it to entail besides reading and sitting—so even in the day-dream, “with no-one to interrupt,” she does not entirely excuse herself from a sense of community, of social existence that lays claim. A lighthouse keeper’s job, though it may contain long stretches of boredom, is vigilance. A lighthouse exists to mark boundaries, to protect sailors and ships from and in emergency. It is not an escape from reality; all of the things in it can be found in daily existence. It is a day-dream of banality transfigured.

Francesco Rognoni has written an engaging short essay on Bishop’s marked copies of Darwin’s *Autobiography* and *Voyage of the Beagle*, in which he draws out the frequently offbeat nature of the moments in those texts that capture Bishop’s attention. There is one marked passage he quotes

⁵² Bishop, “The End of March,” Lines 32-7, *PPL*, 168.

⁵³ Bishop, Letter 21 to Robert Lowell, 27 July 1960, *Words in Air*, 335. Also cited by Eleanor Cook in *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 244.

(pronouncing it “unremarkable”) that, looked at through Bishop’s eyes, seems to express an entire ethos: “Francis [Darwin] says of his father that ‘It seems only to have gradually occurred to him that he would ever be more than a collector of specimens and facts, of which the great men were to make use.’”⁵⁴ Darwin’s fame depended on the fact that the notion to be more than a “collector of specimens and facts” eventually *did* occur to him. But for Bishop it was this more limited, diffident side of Darwin that held the most vital potential. In a similar spirit, I have heard from people who find *Robinson Crusoe* quite boring until Friday shows up—who wants to read about somebody figuring out how to make pots? But for Bishop, as for many lovers of Crusoe, it is the ‘making do’ that enthralls. Perhaps for Bishop these less promising moments represented the possibility of attending to the world unselfconsciously, of returning to a state of (secular) grace in which the world did not recoil from human attention; not because the world itself was different but because it was possible—and necessary—to look at it differently.

Then ‘transcendence’ through matter is not quite right for Bishop’s Darwin, especially considering the movement she specifies is “sinking or sliding,” not upwards but down or on a level (and Bishop was keenly attuned to levels, for instance in the pivotal passage from “At the Fishhouses”—“Down at the water’s edge [...] up the long ramp / descending into the water, thin silver/ tree trunks are laid horizontally / across the gray stones, down and down [...]”).

In an observation very like Woolf’s of Crusoe, J.M. Coetzee notes the “pure submission to the exigencies of a world” in Defoe’s novel, which “through pure writerly attentiveness” become “transfigured, real.”⁵⁵ This account suggests a less mystical, more grounded connection between description and its objects than transcendence. Less mystical, even in its biblical associations.

⁵⁴ Rognoni, “Reading Darwin,” 241.

⁵⁵ Coetzee, “Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*,” 20.

“Transfigure” and “transform” are very nearly synonyms.⁵⁶ The noun forms of both in the OED also include the definition “metamorphosis.” They diverge in their secondary associations and the contexts in which they are conventionally used, which reveal a significant underlying feature of constancy within change, the “outward appearance” at once the intense object of attention, and the beginning of awareness about an inaccessible, *unchanged* inward existence or interior. “Transform” has a second life in mathematics, physics, electricity, molecular biology, and cytology, all generally referring to change that retains something of the original. The fact remains that the new form arises out of the old matter or entity, that there exists a continuity between the original form and the form under which the thing now appears. Otherwise there would be no wonder in it.⁵⁷ The object of description must *not* be transcended, but dwelt with, attended to. And through description, which issues from attention, the poet bears witness to the reality of objects. The significance of Crusoe for both Clare and Bishop has to do with their separate discoveries of their own descriptive powers. Bishop’s mode of description has an affinity with Crusoe on his island, learning how to do everything over again from the beginning. Even in poems that are not explicitly descriptive, for instance the early poem, “Love Lies Sleeping,” Bishop works to re-learn and articulate the act of perception over again from the beginning, effecting a transformation from “inverted and distorted” to “distorted and revealed.” The transfiguration of objects makes them real to the observer in a way

⁵⁶ The OED gives “To transform” as the condensed definition of “Transfigure,” after “To alter the figure or appearance of; to change in outward appearance.” OED online, March 2021, s.v. “transfigure.” <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/204719?redirectedFrom=transfigure>.

⁵⁷ Beyond the generic sense, “transfigure” carries associations with Jesus Christ, the “change in [his] appearance on the mountain” described in the recognized personage. There the visual change has to do with shining and whiteness, phenomena of light: a process of illumination. In part, then, the wonder comes with the knowledge that this transfigured Jesus is one and the same who was known to Peter, James and John before—the wonder that they could have walked beside one who contained this light and *not* known it. The second half of that phrase “transfigured, real” recalls another colloquial expression: that we know something exists and yet in a certain moment, under certain conditions it ‘becomes real to us’—or in the negative, I might wonder at how ‘I knew it before, and yet it wasn’t real to me until now.’ See Matthew 17:2 (King James version): “And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,/ And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”

they had not been before. Description for her does not reiterate the obvious, but interrupts the obvious, stirs us out of the automatic and involuntary, to wake up a part of us that “lies sleeping.” As Stephanie Burt writes in an essay about Bishop’s rainbows, those particular optical phenomena (and their relatives, like the iridescence of oil or certain bird feathers) reminded Bishop that “what we see is not just what we see,” but always both constructed by our perception and apart from it.⁵⁸

“Obvious” is then another penetrating word for grasping the value of poetic description. It means “Plain and evident to the mind; perfectly clear or manifest; plainly distinguishable; clearly visible.” 1583 marks the earliest incidence of this relatively value-neutral sense in the OED. It takes on a pejorative connotation fairly quickly, as early as 1617: “Lacking in subtlety, sophistication, or originality; banal, predictable.”⁵⁹ To attend to what is “clearly visible” strikes the critic of the obvious, the critic of mere description, as redundant, wasteful. Why lavish attention upon what is readily available to everyone who looks? Yet it is just the “perfect clearness” of the obvious that tends to make it invisible. It is in this sense that poetic description recognizes a need to wake up the parts of experience that tend towards the automatic—a need that recurs, that cannot be answered just once, because the lethargy returns, of relying on the automatic operation of the senses. In the same way other modes of writing—oratorical, theoretical, speculative, etc.—engage us to think and experience in ways we do not automatically. But we tend to know that our minds at their most inert do not tend to think in those ways. It is just that we are tempted to assume familiarity with the obvious, and not with what immediately confronts us with its difficulty.

Clare’s Catalogues

⁵⁸ Burt, “Elizabeth Bishop at the End of the Rainbow,” 323.

⁵⁹ The OED gives the following example: “Tis but wasting paper to reckon vp these obuious sayings.”—from *Worming of Mad Dogge*, written under the pen-name ‘Constantia Munda,’ 1617. OED online, March 2021, s.v. “obvious (*adj.*),” definition 1b, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/130096?redirectedFrom=obvious>.

The relationship between John Clare and his publisher John Taylor was complex and involved. As Tim Chilcott characterizes it, Taylor's role "was at once both supportive and critical, both dispassionate and interventionist."⁶⁰ Chilcott's edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar* is a gift to the reader who wants to see concretely how Taylor worked with Clare's text, presenting Clare's final manuscript alongside the final version as Taylor reworked and published it (with Clare's blessing); *en face*, like an original and a translation. Rather than make a totalizing claim about the positive or negative effect of Taylor's alterations, and rather than fetishizing the raw Clare for being 'raw,' it allows us to contemplate the changes with an editorial eye of our own, on a case-by-case basis. Chilcott makes his own case in the introduction to the text, a useful corrective against the wholesale rejection of Taylor's involvement. He points out that the usual characterizations of the passages Taylor removed are misleading, and ascribe to him more prudery than he really seems to warrant; and that Clare welcomed, even invited, the publisher's interventions, which complicates any attempt to depict the peasant poet as bullied or mishandled by a civilizing force. Erica McAlpine makes a similar case in her chapter on Clare in *The Poet's Mistake*, where she debates the conflation in one of Clare's mist poems between "wonder" and "wander": "It seems to me there *is* a difference between the errors permissible under Clare's own terms for himself as an authentic peasant poet pursuing natural description and those that would surely embarrass him."⁶¹ I am compelled by these arguments when it comes to "mistakes," which however in the case of Clare, as McAlpine concedes, are often hard to disentangle from vigorous idiosyncrasies. Yet I will put in another word or two for Clare's original manuscript as the more vigorous of the two versions presented in Chilcott's valuable edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar*; more vigorous in its descriptive intelligence, which includes the poetics of its descriptions as well as breadth of content.

⁶⁰ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd's Calendar*, x.

⁶¹ McAlpine, *Poet's Mistake*, 84.

In his introduction Chilcott quotes the opening lines of “August,” placing the two versions alongside each other. He then goes on to say,

The strengths and limitations of these two versions are characteristic of the poem as a whole. To the trained Clare reader, the complete absence of punctuation in the left-hand manuscript version (together with the use of ampersands and the occasional spelling variant) can evoke a powerful sense of natural, easy, unforced utterance. This is a seemingly artless, uncontrived language, where every detail is given equal syntactic weight, without any subordination or shaping by signals of commas, colons, semi-colons, or full stops. The wheat, the barley, the oat land, the valley, the beans, the village—all advance equally into a foreground of capacious and democratic attention. But the rich simultaneity of reference that results is bought at a price.⁶²

He considers that the published version provides a “rhythmic and syntactic clarity” the manuscript lacks. “As detail followed detail in the manuscripts, the poetry began to risk sameness.”⁶³ Taylor (and his partner James Hessey) revised correctively against this tendency. While Chilcott acknowledges a mutual resistance between the two visions (if not quite a mutual exclusivity)—some of that “rich simultaneity of reference” will have to be sacrificed if we are to have “clarity”—he seems to grant that this is a sacrifice worth making. “Against the plenitude and vigour of lived rural experience, both Taylor and Hessey began to voice significant words of a counterpoint: *select, refine, reflect, distil*. The mere catalogues of rural affairs, as they began to be seen, needed to be shaped and honed.” He summarizes a few sentences later, “Whereas Clare seemed to want to say everything, Taylor wanted him to say something.”⁶⁴ The values of selection and distillation, of shaping and honing, have an aesthetic and formal basis.

But they are not the definition of having a form or an aesthetic, and Clare’s intuitions towards inclusiveness and simultaneity are part and parcel of his distinct poetic sensibility. If the value of form and aesthetic is not isolated but bound up with a work’s way of being in the world, of moving us, of having meaning, etc., then the lightness of Clare’s form is a way of holding without

⁶² Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd’s Calendar*, xiii.

⁶³ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd’s Calendar*, ix.

⁶⁴ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd’s Calendar*, ix.

imprisoning, of seeing without fixity. Chilcott validates Taylor and Hessey in their cultivation of a subtly but importantly different sensibility. A tacit ideal of the poem standing on its own, asserting a certain independence from the world described, underlies the sensibility according to which Taylor edits. Chilcott offers the following lines from Clare's "May" manuscript, deleted in the published version:

My wild field catalogue of flowers
Grows in my rhymes as thick as showers
Tedious & long as they may be
To some they never weary me⁶⁵

For Chilcott, this constitutes an "admission," and supports Clare's acceptance of the pruning his editors would supply. But Clare's bare assertion, "they never weary me," also cuts the other way. As much as he acknowledges the existence of more selective sensibilities, he does not partake of them. The insatiable appetite for catalogues suggests a poetics that registers a vastness it can never exhaust. Rather than tending towards completeness, as a systematic list might, his catalogues in their spontaneity evoke profusion and generation, tapping into the energies of the living world. Honing and shaping, selection and distillation, offer a "counterpoint," as Chilcott says, but I don't see why this is a higher good in itself. "With prolixity came associated concerns: catalogues of flowers or plants, or birds, or animals, that generously reached out to capture a whole world, but that did so at the expense of imaginative shaping and design."⁶⁶ Is it inconceivable that this is a price worth paying? He uses the phrase "necessary contraction" for Taylor's treatment of the manuscript, and acknowledges that this "is not a phrase that has often been applied to Clare's drafts of *The Shepherd's Calendar*." But the value he ascribes to the plenitude contracted is incomplete: "Viewed simply as a social and historical document—which has frequently been the case—the poem could scarcely be long enough. Detail after detail provides an extraordinary sense of rootedness, of what it was like to

⁶⁵ Clare, "May" (manuscript version), lines 193-6, *Shepherd's Calendar*, 94, 96.

⁶⁶ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd's Calendar*, xviii.

live at that time and in that place.”⁶⁷ Unfairly, it seems to me, he relegates the value of “detail after detail” to its status as a document, and locates its status as a poem in the “contraction” of those details. He offers a beautiful image of the tension between manuscript and published form, which sounds like poetry to me on both sides, just different kinds of poetry: “Whereas the thrust in the manuscript version is centrifugal, outwards towards any number of things, the thrust in the published version is centripetal, inwards towards one thing alone.” But then he goes on to insist that *The Shepherd’s Calendar’s* “documentary fullness or historical insights stand at best alongside (and many might argue well behind) its imaginative persuasiveness, the tension and force of its verbal utterance. And poetic utterance concentrates.”⁶⁸ Must it?

Chilcott has made a case for what’s gained in the transformation. And the text he has made available makes it possible to assess the changes for oneself on a case-by-case basis. I would like to retain a sense of what’s lost, even though I would not go so far as to say that Taylor ruined or fatally compromised Clare’s original. He seems to have been deeply sympathetic with the work on its own terms, to have recognized the beauty of Clare’s eye for detail, preserving a great deal of the poem’s richness. But the very ideal of selectivity and condensation misses out on some of what’s aesthetically radical about Clare, especially about the *Shepherd’s Calendar*. Here is an instance not of reduction but of rearrangement, from “February”:

Ploughmen go whistling to their toils & yoke again the rested plough & mingling oer the mellow soils Boys shouts & whips are noising now The shepherd now is often seen By warm banks oer his hook to bend Or oer a gate or stile to lean Chattering to a passing friend	The shepherd now is often seen Near warm banks o’er his hook to bend; Or o’er a gate or stile to lean, Chattering to a passing friend: Ploughmen go whistling to their toils, And yoke again the rested plough; And, mingling o’er the mellow soils, Boys shout, and whips are noising now. ⁶⁹
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⁶⁷ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd’s Calendar*, xviii-xix.

⁶⁸ Chilcott, Introduction to *Shepherd’s Calendar*, xx.

⁶⁹ Clare, “February,” lines 33-40, *Shepherd’s Calendar*, 44-5.

The inversion I notice revolves around the placement of the “now.” The revision made in the published edition brackets the stanza with “The shepherd now is often seen” and “Boys shout, and whips are noising now.” The manuscript gives a more flexible grammar to that second phrase, but also reverses and crowds those assertions of immediacy into the center of the stanza. The difference in rhythm between the two versions reflects a difference in energy, perhaps an expression of Chilcott’s “centripetal” and “centrifugal” thrusts of the two versions more generally. In the manuscript version, we start with the ploughmen whistling and end with the shepherd chattering. They are not stanza-punctuating verbs, but verbs of passing time, idling verbs. In reversing the two halves of the stanza, the published version starts with the appearance of the shepherd on the scene, and ends with the most dramatic action of the stanza, “Boys shout, and whips are noising now.” In the manuscript version, “Boys shouts & whips are noising now,” since Clare uses no punctuation, the boys could be plural or possessive. So we could understand both the shouts and the whips to belong to them, or only the shouts; alternatively we could understand boys, shouts and whips as three separate agents of “noising.” The grammar and punctuation of the revision reduce these options to one. I don’t say one or the other is better, but the manuscript allows for a world of fluid and shifting relations, “outwards towards any number of things,” while the published version clarifies one precise meaning, assigning one job for each word, “inwards towards one thing alone.” The concentration of “now” and “now” in the center of the manuscript stanza gives a little quickening of energy, a short sprint surrounded by leisurely walks; as against the stanza starting and ending in “now” phrases in the published version, which steadies and spreads that energy over the stanza, effecting a more regular pace. I dwell at such length on these differences in order to bring into relief a quality of Clare’s poetics that moves, to co-opt Chilcott’s terms, centrifugally rather than centripetally. The “sameness” and “redundancy” Chilcott flags as risks of Clare’s inclusiveness I would suggest similarly are worth the risk, for recurrence, surfacing and resurfacing are part of the

world Clare evokes. As John Ashbery has put it, “more of the same was precisely the name of his game.” He characterizes the *Shepherd’s Calendar* as “a distillation of the natural world with all its beauty and pointlessness, its salient and boring features preserved intact.”⁷⁰

Repetition is by no means foreign to the poetic tradition in which Clare works, so the problem of “redundancy” appears to be specific to the cataloguing impulse. Yet within the descriptive catalogue, the place of repetition has not only to do with poetry’s music, but also with reference to an outside world that really does contain more than one of each thing. Perhaps especially now, in a crisis of falling populations among so many of our wild species, repetition of the same can be a means to recognize where abundance still exists, rather than only prizing rarity.⁷¹ So while the published version suppresses a “redundancy” of badgers’ shrieks in “March,” it erases the possibility of reference to the sound heard again, returning because in the time of the poem and of the world it returns. Clare’s sense of a formal *continuity* between nature and poems is unusual, even “idiosyncratic,” as M.M. Mahood characterizes his

[...] way of re-writing. For him, ‘true poetry’ was ‘not in words/But images that words express.’: images that already existed out in the natural world, so that he can speak of the landrail’s cry as ‘one of the most poetical images in rural nature’. It follows that revision is not a matter of putting things better but of seeing them better.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ashbery, “Grey Openings” 10 & 11.

⁷¹ Among recent critics, Ursula Heise has mounted a lucid critique of the values implicit even in the IUCN Red List categories, which classify according to the urgency with which we must attend to these species if we are not to lose them, but by the same token cannot help but value the threatened more highly than the flourishing. “The more endangered a species is, the more valued it becomes, in a logic that resonates both with the capitalist valuation of scarce resources and with the cultural fascination, inherited from the Romantic age, with impending death—the aura of ‘the last.’” (Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 72) Heise wonders that “extinction and endangerment are defined positively, whereas species that thrive are tagged by means of negation or approximation: ‘near threatened’ and ‘least concern’—as opposed to, say, labels such as ‘safe,’ ‘stable,’ or ‘increasing.’ In conservation biologists’ jargon, a species that moves from Vulnerable to Near Threatened is ‘downgraded,’ whereas one that moves from Vulnerable to Endangered is ‘upgraded,’ in an odd reversal of the value judgments that usually come with upgrading and downgrading.” (72) Indeed, it is hard not to detect in the category of “Least Concern” a note of dismissal. Even among such a nature-loving tribe as bird-watchers, there are those who will drop everything and travel some distance to catch a glimpse of a single furtive bird after a rare sighting, as when a Kirtland’s Warbler was spotted at Grant Park in Chicago last spring, but scarcely take notice of a goldfinch, let alone a robin or a cardinal, taking these more common birds for granted.

⁷² Mahood, “bard of the wild flowers,” 131. Her quotes are from Clare’s poem “Pastoral Poetry,” lines 1-2 and a letter to James Hessey in August 1823. (*Middle Poems* vol. III, 581 and *Letters*, 282)

To take Clare's poetics on his own terms, then, one cannot refer him to a literary standard that stands apart from the natural world (which could lead to asserting as Chilcott does without qualification that "poetic utterance concentrates"). In the words of Elizabeth Helsinger, in his bird's nest poems, "perceiving is distinguishing the telling marks of identity, [...] or the rhythms of bird songs, carefully studied and adapted as the forms of Clare's own songs."⁷³ It is in this sense that for Clare to say he found his poems "in the fields" was not coy or merely modest, nor did it resolve the difficulty of writing in fidelity to the natural world. It communicated his sense that poetic form could be directly responsive to the living objects of the poet's attention, and conceived not only as part of a literary tradition, but as part of a natural world containing the poems of fields and landrails alongside those of the human poet.

The Forms of Natural History Poetry; Names and Namelessness

Inextricable from questions about Clare's poetic form are his serious flirtations with the discipline of prose natural history, including his ambivalences. The self-justification of his "wild field catalogue of flowers" would hardly have been necessary in the context of a botany text. Yet justify he must, because he never could reconcile himself to the "dark system" he felt science, as a vocation, would have required him to accept.⁷⁴ As Hugh Haughton puts it, "Poetry without a real grounding in the natural world he distrusts, but he also distrusts natural history which loses touch with the same ground."⁷⁵ Alan Bewell puts Clare's ambivalence about natural history in more positive terms: "But the decision not to write in the vein of contemporary natural history did not mean that Clare was any less committed to studying and writing about nature. Instead, it reflected

⁷³ Helsinger, "Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet" 524.

⁷⁴ See essays by Chambers and Gaul in *John Clare in Context* and Mahood's chapter on Clare in *The Poet as Botanist* for other considerations of Clare's complex relation to the science of botany.

⁷⁵ Haughton, "Progress and Rhyme," 58.

his belief that poetry was the proper medium for its representation. The richness of the natural history poetry that followed is one of Clare's great legacies."⁷⁶ There is a rich tradition of "natural history poetry," from Lucretius on through Erasmus Darwin, but that tradition is largely didactic. Closer to Clare, and a direct influence on him, is the tradition of nature poetry that includes James Thomson's *The Seasons* and the work of the 'peasant poet' before Clare, Robert Bloomfield. The difference with Clare's "natural history poetry" is that he felt pulled by two disciplines he felt to be distinct, poetry and natural history, each of which, without the other, risked compromising fidelity to the natural world.

The "real grounding" in nature as Haughton calls it, to which Clare holds himself accountable, resists abstraction and removal of living creatures from their homes, whether by the scientific or the poetic imagination. As Bewell observes,

The difference between how Clare and contemporary naturalists represented nature had little to do with questions of attention to detail, but instead with how this knowledge was to be used. Naturalists were not interested in observing the individuals of a species as individuals, nor were they interested in the literary, cultural, or social associations connecting a plant or animal to a place: for them, a marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) in Kent was the same plant when found in Northborough, and calling the latter a "horse blob" only confused matters. Clare [...] uses his natural knowledge to insert or embed himself and his readers in the particularity of the world he observed, and he was profoundly critical of the manner in which contemporary natural history forcibly ripped living beings from their socioecological communities.⁷⁷

This mattering of context is significant not just because it differentiates between individual organisms of the same species based on place, but because in tying local names to the individuals of a place, the "associations" are understood not as something belonging exclusively to human imagination (a model that sees nature as raw material shaped by culture), but as a living relation, a "community," in which marsh marigolds and humans each take part. Clare would no more elide the distinctions between the marsh marigold inhabitants of Kent and Northborough than he would

⁷⁶ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 275.

⁷⁷ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 276.

conflate the human inhabitants of those places. At the same time, “[Clare’s] goal is not to present an individual subjective experience of nature (as one finds in the poetry of Wordsworth), but instead to recover, and thus to preserve, common traditions of experience which had developed over centuries.”⁷⁸ Despite Clare’s first-person presence in the poems, this remark about a kind of impersonality seems equally true, and it is worth bringing out the seeming contradiction between what Bewell has just said about “individuals” of species mattering to Clare, and what he says here about the “individual subjective experience of nature” not being Clare’s point. The ethical value of individuality, an individual observer of an individual observed, is ecologically situated, such that calling things by name means recognizing them as individual members of a species in a community. For Clare the local names for each form of life were forms of acknowledgment that could address both the individual and its species without contradiction. He rejected Linnean nomenclature as a designation of species only, abstract and alien, a “hard nicknaming system of unutterable words.”⁷⁹

In chapter 3, I will examine a clarifying contrast in the contemporary Franco-Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet, who does sometimes know the names by which birds and flowers are called, but does not exert himself to find out where he doesn’t know. For Jaccottet, not-knowing names can be one way of respecting difference. Between these two poets, in addition to obvious historical, geographical and linguistic differences, there is a great difference in the faith accorded words themselves, particularly words as “names.” For Clare to know the right local name of a flower would mean taking it in the context of its life and history, being part of other human lives, being called by its name by other human voices. As M.M. Mahood writes in her essay on Clare’s ambiguous relations to botany,

⁷⁸ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 277.

⁷⁹ Clare, journal entry, 24 October 1824, *Prose*, 117. “Nicknaming” seems to have here the opposite sense from its modern usage, which generally refers to the practice of giving familiar names within community to individuals. Knowing someone’s nickname and calling them by it now signals intimacy rather than alienation.

Given [his] feeling for the essential character of a flower, something as instantly recognisable as a friend's laugh or turn of the head, Clare could have little use for procedures that would consign [a certain orchid] to order *Gyandria*: class *Monandria*: genus *Orchis*: species *mascula*. For him it was not a dried and labelled specimen but a living neighbour. Hence his greatest need was for a name to greet it by.⁸⁰

Mahood quotes from a letter Clare wrote to an "unidentified botanist," from which I will quote at slightly more length. He is expressing his enthusiasm for botany, "this delightful study":

I do not mean the mere science for of that I know but little but the reflections it creates to see the various colours of field flowers & the eternal variety of shapes & different tintings of the leaves of herbs & trees & when we notice these things we feel a desire to know their names as of so many friends & acquaintance⁸¹

From the "mereness" of science he differentiates his own mereness, with self-deprecation. Yet in distancing himself from science and particularly from Linnaean classification, he also relinquishes a source of names that do not duplicate but exceed his stock of local names. As Mahood observes, though Clare names "370 plants" in prose and poetry, plenty of flowers remain nameless for Clare especially but not only in his early poems, because they simply *had* no local names. She quotes from an autobiographical fragment of Clare's a succinct statement of his conundrum about names: "I find it would require a second Adam to find names for them in my way and a second Solomon to understand them in [Linnaeus's] system."⁸² Evidently he decided he would do without the name when he could not find it "in [his] way," and just as he attends sadly to the silence of birds in "Birds, why are ye silent?" he finds a way of attending to the nameless flowers without either ignoring them or betraying their namelessness.

Most poignantly in the Northborough poem that begins "Thou little tiny nameless thing," he thematizes his want of name for a flower whose face he recognizes. Namelessness to Clare is not

⁸⁰ Mahood, "bard of the wild flowers," 121.

⁸¹ Quoted by Mahood in "bard of the wild flowers," 121. The letter can be found in Storey, *Letters of John Clare*, 283-4. Dated August 1823. "Unidentified" because unknown: Clare apparently did not know at that time that the author of the *Flora Domestica* sent to him by one of his publishers, James Hessey, was a woman (Elizabeth Kent), so he addresses his letter of appreciation "Dear Sir."

⁸² Quoted by Mahood, "bard of the wild flowers," 121. The larger fragment can be found in *John Clare by himself*, 62.

a superficiality, but a mark of not having been noticed, and not having a place, in community. He not only attends to but empathizes with the flower's nameless condition. As Bewell notes in the later context of Clare's "exile" in two asylums (Clare's Northborough period was roughly 1832-7; he was in High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest from 1837-41 and in Northampton Asylum from 1841-64, the end of his life): "Clare's sense of exile [...] speaks of the discovery that even nature, that most rooted of things, has no more claim to place in the modern world than a poor agricultural laborer."⁸³ Even before the more extreme exile of asylum, the uprooting from Helpston to Northborough, most famously captured in "The Flitting," constituted a loss of environment, and of the self that felt known by that environment. As Jonathan Bate writes, "the three miles might as well have been three hundred."⁸⁴

So with this nameless flower, Mahood writes, "[Clare] shares his growing realisation that he for his part may also become nameless," alluding to his imminent loss of mental bearings and commitment to asylum, but also perhaps to the loss he had already suffered, of a place where he knew with native familiarity the names of his ecological "neighbors" and reciprocally, would feel himself called by name in that place.⁸⁵ He addresses the "tiney" white flower:

Ive wondered what could be thy name
All humble and unknown
& thought with spring thy lowly claim
Was something like my own⁸⁶

The tenuousness of such a life's "claim" (Bewell's word and also Clare's in the third line above) on the lives that surround it is part of the difficult fidelity Clare forges. In such moments, the mereness of description means to find a way to attend to a life that has no name. He would do the same on his own account in the much-anthologized late poem, "I Am," which starts out, "I am—yet what I

⁸³ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 270.

⁸⁴ Bate, *John Clare*, 387.

⁸⁵ Mahood, "bard of the wild flowers," 121.

⁸⁶ Clare, "Thou little tiney nameless thing," lines 9-12, *Poems of the Middle Period V*, 127.

am, none cares or knows.”⁸⁷ Fidelity on this scale is fidelity to the “lowly claim” of a being stripped of identity, a bare existence, yet with “as large a share of sky/ As any flower that blows”—a being which it is worth noting *would* have a place, an identity or at least the provision for one, in the relative egalitarianism of the Linnaean system Clare rejects. It is in this case the *local* world he condemns as heedless of this creature’s existence, “disdained” by boys gathering flowers, and “trodden down where cuddy went.”⁸⁸ But rather than seek remedy from the botanist—who, interested in classifying every distinct form of life, would be especially excited by rather than disdainful of an as-yet-unnamed flower—he preserves and honors it “in [his] way,” in its very namelessness. He places it by where it grows “Mid cowslaps & the buttercups/ & daisys snowy flocks” and what it resembles, “Thy little chickweed zembling flowers.”⁸⁹ After all, he notes that it thrives in spite, or even because of its anonymity—“Thou’rt too obscure for foes,” he says to it.⁹⁰ Just as not all members of a community are equally conspicuous and desirous of being known, he seems to honor that this flower’s general escape of notice might suit it best in the end. Its way of getting along in the world is to stay under the radar. Likewise, he plays with the conventions of the ode, using the form of direct address in the opposite of an ode-like manner, so that I would hesitate even to call it by its literary name, apostrophe. Rather than draw a spotlight and sing praises, he engages in this lower-voiced, confiding, almost conspiratorial address, which never betrays the low profile of its addressee.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Clare, “I Am,” *Major Works*, 361.

⁸⁸ Ibid, lines 15 & 21. A “cuddy,” the glossary informs, is either a donkey or a stupid person, either of which might trample the nameless flower.

⁸⁹ Clare, “Thou little tinea nameless thing,” lines 13-14 & 33, *Poems of the Middle Period V*, 127-8.

⁹⁰ Clare, “Thou little tinea nameless thing,” line 38, *Poems of the Middle Period V*, 128.

⁹¹ In more political terms, Elizabeth Helsinger has argued that Clare’s poetics sought an alternative relation to the natural world than one of ownership, which the trauma of land enclosures and privatization made urgent. She writes of his “poetics of the commonplace in which seeing is reconceived as heeding, or paying attention: a nonpossessive form of perception.” (Helsinger, “Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet,” 523) This search for a “nonpossessive form of perception” applies as aptly to Clare’s turn away from the practices of natural history as it does to his critiques of land enclosure.

Bishop and the Happiness of the Outsider

Currents of Bishop criticism have favored Bishop the careful observer, the modest describer; and then currents move in another direction in favor of Bishop the subtle and trenchant intellect, the genius of tone, shading into the politically acute, lesbian “outsider” Bishop of Adrienne Rich.⁹² But returning to Rich’s 1983 essay, a review of Bishop’s *Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, we might find an alternative to this division at its root. Rich herself initiates the political and gendered thread, not disagreeing with the dominant consensus of Bishop criticism, which “was mostly appreciative of her powers of observation, her carefully articulated descriptive language, her wit, her intelligence, the individuality of her voice.” But, Rich writes, “I want to [...] go on to aspects of her work which I have not yet seen discussed. In particular I am concerned with her experience of outsiderhood, closely—though not exclusively—linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity; and with how the outsider’s eye enables Bishop to perceive other kinds of outsiders [...].”⁹³ Yet I do not see why the “lesbian writing under the false universal of heterosexuality, the foreigner who can take little for granted,” traits which “inhabit Bishop’s poetic voice and eye,” should exist disconnected from those “powers of observation” and “carefully articulated descriptive language” the earlier critics had appreciated, and later critics still appreciate. Without wholly embracing the biographical focus of Rich’s argument, we still might gain insight into Bishop’s poetics as well as her ethics, if we focus on what the stance of an “outsider” made possible in her work.

⁹² For accounts that uphold Bishop as describer, see for instance Zachariah Pickard’s *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Description* and David Kalstone’s *Becoming a Poet*, which uses both biography and textual analysis to develop a complex account of Bishop’s distinct sensibility. For accounts that seek to rescue her from one-dimensionality and emphasize other qualities of her work, see for instance (in addition to Rich), Gillian White’s Introduction and chapter on Bishop in *Lyrical Shame*, and Bonnie Costello’s *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*.

⁹³ Rich, “Eye of the Outsider,” 127.

The ideal of objectivity, as “knowledge that bears no trace of the knower” sounds in some ways like an “outsider” ideal, since it distances the observer from the observed.⁹⁴ But the motivation for this distance is not self-evident in Bishop’s case; not a quest for knowledge (at most for what is “like what we imagine knowledge to be”), but perhaps a search for clear perception and the language in which to render it.⁹⁵ Rich makes it a question of Bishop’s lived experience as a Lesbian, a traveler, a lonely child accustomed to uprootedness. In this account, the motivation for keeping a certain distance from her objects of observation arises out of a contingent combination of forces that have shaped Bishop’s character, and that have strong ethical implications. I don’t disagree with this explanation as far as it goes, but where Rich looks for a genealogy, we might also look for a phenomenology: a *description* of the way Bishop inhabits and observes from that “outside,” of how she registers in language the difference of the objects of observation from her own position of difference. This is where Rich’s insight into Bishop is most acute: she suggests that “Bishop’s outsider’s eye enabled her to perceive other kinds of outsiders.”

This statement resonates with the condition of many of the “Brazilian poems” and the poems dealing with race that Rich takes as exemplary of the Bishop she finds undervalued, but it also resonates with figures Bishop draws from literature, like the Prodigal and Crusoe. Bishop’s tone, so hard to put one’s finger on, does not so much channel other voices as render them opaquely and obliquely, tries to observe them while at the same time giving them a kind of privacy, freedom from prying. When the voice of the poem *is* the voice of one of these “outsiders,” as with her “Crusoe in

⁹⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 17.

⁹⁵ From Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses” (lines 76-83, *PPL*, 52)

If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

England,” or “The Riverman,” one often has the sense that they are opaque even to themselves. They are not figures of heroic introspection, nor geniuses, but lonely, bewildered individuals overwhelmed by experience. The speaker of “The Riverman” never seems entirely in command of the “ambitious” vocation he feels called to, “to become a *sacaca*, a witch doctor who works with water spirits.” Ever a novice, he says,

Every moonlit night
I'm going to go back again.
I know some things already,
but it will take years of study,
it is all so difficult.⁹⁶

Even in the end, with a faint, indeterminate suggestion of suicide (especially if we are unpersuaded by his supernatural posturing), he comes off less as an initiated man of spiritual powers than as a child playing games:

Godfathers and cousins,
your canoes are over my head;
I hear your voices talking.
You can peer down and down
or dredge the river bottom
but never, never catch me.
When the moon shines and the river
lies across the earth
and sucks it like a child,
then I will go to work
to get you health and money.
The Dolphin singled me out;
Luandinha seconded it.⁹⁷

The poem itself has a mysterious power separate from the powers claimed by its speaker: Bishop modulates the voice of this figure, allowing him to speak for himself without explaining himself. The empathy of an outsider for other outsiders allows Bishop to make us feel at once as though we are

⁹⁶ Bishop, “The Riverman,” lines 67-71, *PPL*, 86-7.

⁹⁷ Bishop, “The Riverman,” lines 149-158, *PPL*, 89.

intimate with these outsiders, and yet that there is something elusive, something unaccountable (to us) about them.

To say that Bishop's "outsider" stance allows her to perceive non-human beings is something quite different. Rich doesn't explore this dimension of her claim, but there is an important sense in which Bishop's fish, sandpiper, moose, seal, dogwood, elms, white-throated sparrows, pelicans, etc. are *not* "outsiders." Bishop observes them when she and they are both at the edges of the space they occupy, coming outside of themselves a bit, investigating each other (the moose "in the middle of the road" in front of the bus; the "fish" out of water; the seal "at the water's edge" who is "curious about" the observer). Her observations of the natural world register acutely how those creatures carry on lives with which she, the observer, has only the briefest and most contingent contact. She and they both belong to an "outside" world, but not defined in opposition to a closed and excluding inside. Put another way, to observe and describe as Bishop does *is* to be outside, on the outside, and to dwell there.

The moments of contact Bishop registers between a human self and an animal like the seal or the moose are often characterized by mutual curiosity and tentative exploration. The human side in the passing encounter is as much approached as approaching. The moose "approaches; it sniffs at / the bus's hot hood."⁹⁸ Two stanzas later,

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

"Curious creatures,"
says our quiet driver,
rolling his *r*'s.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Bishop, "The Moose," lines 137-8, *PPL*, 162.

⁹⁹ Bishop, "The Moose," lines 151-9, *PPL*, 162.

When the observer in “At the Fishhouses” visits the water’s edge and keeps encountering “One seal particularly [...] evening after evening,” she sings him Baptist hymns.

He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.¹⁰⁰

Both of these encounters register the curiosity of the animal towards human presence. The “Curious creatures” the driver remarks on are curious in at least two senses; objects of our curiosity, and in possession of their own faculties of curiosity. The humans in each case are curious about the animals too, but certainly not in the “blamable sense” through which Clare distances himself from the violence of natural history. Their way of showing it is to stay still, to be in place and to allow the animal to investigate them after its own manner: “—Suddenly the bus driver / stops with a jolt, / turns off his lights”¹⁰¹ halfway through a stanza. The “I” of “At the Fishhouses” sings deliberately for the sake of the seal, to see how he will respond, to see if he likes it. She cannot know if he does, but nor can she betray him, for she expects nothing from him. It is a kind of offering in exchange for the pleasure, which he has already given by appearing to her, the inexplicable “sweet / sensation of joy,” as present here as with the moose. “Then he would suddenly disappear, then suddenly emerge,” she follows the seal, allowing for his retreat and return, “almost in the same spot,” no nearer. The two suddennesses are placed successively in time, “Then, [...] then,” but like the three steps forward and two steps back of the lines from “North Haven” (“The Goldfinches are back, or others like them”; “Nature repeats herself, or almost does”), there is a steadying movement in the line, a shift in direction between its two halves. This is how she manages to let the world come to

¹⁰⁰ Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” lines 55-9, *PPL*, 52.

¹⁰¹ Bishop, “The Moose,” lines 131-2, *PPL* 161.

the poem, with this kind of patience, which accepts the halting rhythms of actual contact with other living things.¹⁰²

In such moments the status of the outsider is not an unhappy one (and as Bishop loved Darwin, she would also be attuned to the sense in which he put humans back into nature, no longer outsiders in any destined hierarchical sense). It helps to articulate this, because in Rich's sense, the outsider suffers an implicit injustice by the very fact of being relegated to the outside of a "false universal." Whereas in the cases that most interest me, the stance of an outsider carries with it a quiet curiosity, gentleness, even pleasure. These are elusive, sensitive situations inhabited with attention and restraint.

The conditions at "The End of March" could speak for a great deal of Bishop's observational life:

Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.¹⁰³

These are the conditions under which Bishop tends to describe, and despite the share of unhappiness her biographers make plain, there is also a precarious outsider's happiness in attending to what other lives, other forms of life, are willing to share of themselves.

Description and Loneliness

¹⁰² The *unreturned gaze* is an important part of this fidelity to the varieties of interspecies encounter. In an unusual essay, making a persuasive claim that we might read "The Moose" in cinematic terms, J.T. Welsch pays particular attention to the coordination of "looks" in this and Bishop's other animal poems. There is no "meeting of gazes," Welsch notes, for instead the moose, with "casual disinterest," "looks the bus over" while the passengers collectively catch partial glimpses of her. "Even in her earlier poem, 'The Fish,' where we do have a clear speaker-subject *I* (and eye), and where sustained attention to the animal's visual organs sits at the centre of the poem, Bishop pointedly resists the more Romantic formula, noting that those eyes 'shifted a little, but *not* / to return my stare' (*Poems* 44, emphasis added)." (Welsch, "'The Moose' as Movie," 203)

¹⁰³ Bishop, "The End of March," lines 3-5, *PPL*, 167.

Paradoxically, answering to the charge of merehness leveled at description requires an internal understanding of description's limits, and the way Bishop and Clare acknowledge them.

Observation, and its outlet in description, console but also sharpen loneliness.¹⁰⁴ And the "outsider" after all often has an enlarged capacity for loneliness. Despite the necessity of writing down, the attention these observers practice toward and in the natural world is silent, and demands prolonged periods of isolation to sustain. The object that absorbs the attention in the labor of description does not replace absent companionship, but offers an alternative to it. Likewise the distinct pleasure of observation is excluded from companionship. The passion for description can be born of loneliness, and solitude sought for the way it disposes the observer towards an object that withholds secrets. Solitude and loneliness are not synonymous, but for my purposes their shading into each other is of the essence. Christopher Ricks looks at the tension between loneliness and the occupations of solitude the other way around: "If a poem cannot but be company (and so may be too easily, too built-in, an assuaging of loneliness), at least it can incorporate an understanding of the limits of the sympathetic imagination."¹⁰⁵

[I]n the very moment in which a great poem realizes loneliness for us, it acknowledges humanely the limits of the human imagination. A poem can claim so much, yes, and can claim only so much. And the 'close reading' of poems, a lonely activity which can yet be shared, may do something to ameliorate our propensity to evacuate the suffering, not only of others but of ourselves, into abstraction.¹⁰⁶

The figure of Crusoe, with whom both Bishop and Clare felt a kind of affinity, has a way of bringing consolation by the very fact of his survival, and yet somehow becoming secretly, silently bereft the moment he is rescued, as though the kind of loneliness he suffered cannot be completely accounted for.

¹⁰⁴ Bishop famously said, or her lifelong friend Robert Lowell famously remembers her saying to him, "When you write my epitaph, you must say that I was the loneliest person who ever lived." Letter from Lowell to Bishop, 15 August 1957, *Words in Air*, 225.

¹⁰⁵ Ricks, "Loneliness and Poetry," 263.

¹⁰⁶ Ricks, "Loneliness and Poetry," 281.

Bishop imagines the pitch of loneliness Crusoe must suffer upon return to England, where the objects he once loved, that once lived for him, will shun him—the knife drained of meaning, everything ossified into artifact: “How can anyone want such things?” reads as both mocking of the museum, which perversely values dead objects, and despair at the fact that they are lost to him, they have taken back their secrets—that he “wants” them in the sense that he *lacks* them and cannot find his way back to them. “Now it won’t look at me at all,” he says of the knife. The reciprocal relationship between Crusoe and the objects, the way they kept him company, was a supercharge only possible in solitude. Returning to society, he betrays them, and they withdraw from him. Once they consoled him in the absence of human society; now human society cannot console him for the loss of them.¹⁰⁷ Yet again there is the question of tone, of Crusoe’s opacity to himself. If for Bishop Crusoe is not quite the “heroic observer” that Darwin was, it is because he loses his sense of the objects when he can no longer make use of them, when he no longer *needs* them; his strength and his failure arise from his sensitivity to this loss. Bishop’s descriptive intelligence involves the acknowledgment that objects do not always ‘consent’ to being described; the labor of description lies in the attention to a limit on the side of the object, exerted by the object. For Bishop, to “take the side of things” as Francis Ponge (whom Bishop also read) famously endeavored to do, is to allow the objects of attention to retreat into themselves in our accounts of them.

So when the knife will no longer look at Bishop’s Crusoe, he can no longer really describe it. As objects do not always cooperate in description, nor on the other side do words always come at will to ease the effort of description. Eleanor Cook points to the 19th-century anachronisms of the poem, most famously the Wordsworth passage, which has Crusoe say,

¹⁰⁷ Perhaps the bow of Philoctetes is the precursor for Crusoe’s knife. As Jane Stabler notes in *The Artistry of Exile*, “At the beginning of Sophocles’s drama, Philoctetes’s obsessive attachment to his ‘beloved bow’ is a conspicuous sign of his alienation.” (Stabler, “bow shot of exile,” 37) She makes this connection explicit through William Hazlitt, who identified “the address to the earth” as “a familiar trope of exile,” thus seeing “Philoctetes as the precursor to Robinson Crusoe.” (Stabler, “bow shot of exile,” 38)

[...] The books
I'd read were full of blanks;
the poems—well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
“They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss . . .” The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.¹⁰⁸

The forgotten word ‘solitude,’ being suppressed, admits of many reverberations. The word literally identifies his current condition, yet he will “look it up” when back in society. There is the possibility that he forgets out of pain—to name the state he’s in might salt the wound of it. Yet perhaps he has forgotten the name for what holds no meaning when it has no alternative—or perhaps it is the incongruity of the reality he knows with “bliss.” The fact that the poem Crusoe tries to recite has not yet been written catches him in an “affectionate anachronism,” as Christopher Ricks phrases it,¹⁰⁹ but also provides its own modest answer to the question of why he can’t remember (and why the books might be full of blanks): memory is for the past, and here is an incompletely prescient Crusoe. Bishop imagines the solitude not only of Crusoe returned from his island but of a character out of history, and in a foreign poem.

As Crusoe endures the withdrawn gaze of his knife, Clare’s famous poem of homesickness “The Flitting,” gives a face to his native landscape, written upon his migration from Helpston to Northborough. It begins,

Ive left my own old home of homes
Green fields and every pleasant place
The summer like a stranger comes
I pause and hardly know her face¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Bishop, “Crusoe in England,” lines 92-9, *PPL*, 154.

¹⁰⁹ Ricks, “Loneliness and Poetry,” 272.

¹¹⁰ Clare, “The Flitting,” lines 1-4. For entire poem, see *Major Works*, 250-6.

The standard of recognition between self and landscape, tested by the change of season, implies a contract not entirely dependent upon the self. The sensation of strangeness arises as much out of the observer feeling unknown as unknowing:

No—pasture molehills used to lie
And talk to me of sunny days
And then the glad sheep listing bye
And still in ruminating praise
Of summer and the pleasant place
And every weed and blossom too
Was looking upward in my face
With friendships welcome 'how do ye do'¹¹¹

The face wanting recognition now is Clare's. The plain rhyme repeated between "place" and "face" makes a gesture towards 'personification,' in the sense that summer is said to have a face, the weeds and blossoms are said to "look", etc. But to write of *exchanging* looks with nature, as expressed in both Clare and the season having a "face," also destabilizes the point of reference. Of course it takes a liberty to say that Crusoe's knife, or the landscape around Helpston, ever 'looked back' at Crusoe or Clare, respectively. But implicitly, Bishop's Crusoe and Clare each express a sense of being at the mercy of the object, so to speak, and having a certain fidelity to it—not expecting it to oblige the observer at the drop of a hat. In a later poem, "Birds: Why are ye Silent?" Clare expresses a similar vulnerability to the withdrawal of presence. In this poem in nine sections he describes a variety of birds he glimpses but does not hear. It is a lonely, almost pleading poem. In the fifth section he names the date, "February the tenth," when "Even sparrows scarce chirp." He seems to count the days until the company of birdsong will return. But it is also a way of exercising his fidelity to descriptive accuracy: he will not have the birds sing in his poem just because he misses them, so instead he will make a poem about their *not* singing.

¹¹¹ Clare, "The Flitting," lines 121-8, *Major Works*, 253.

Clare did not write a ‘Crusoe poem’ as Bishop did. But Crusoe does come up in in this late untitled poem of solitude:

There is a charm in Solitude that cheers
A feeling that the world knows nothing of
A green delight the wounded mind endears
After the hustling world is broken off
Whose whole delight was crime at good to scoff
Green solitude his prison pleasure yields
The bitch fox heeds him not—birds seem to laugh
He lives the Crusoe of his lonely fields
Which dark green oaks his noontide leisure shields¹¹²

The poem’s strangeness has multiple sources—the capsized syntax of lines five and six, the contagion of green—but one of the strangest things about it is the gradual personification of Solitude. At first there seems to exist a person for whom solitude constitutes a “charm [...] that cheers,” the one who has the feeling. But eventually “he” comes to seem identical with Solitude—there is no other candidate to claim the pronoun. Projecting back, if Solitude is itself, who can exist as its company, to be cheered by it? But then it slowly dawns that there is a kind of company that solitude, and only solitude, affords. And it isn’t the company of the self, but the company of dissimilar life. The heedlessness of the bitch fox and the birds is essential to the “charm [...] that cheers,” but still solitude registers their presence. It is not the same as isolation in a windowless room, perhaps knowing intellectually or by report that these creatures exist somewhere. Presence heedless of the observing self: this does something to a person.

As previously noted, the bare declaration of ardent attention, “I love to see” (“note,” “look,” etc.), abounds in Clare’s poems. At once it connects him lovingly to the objects of his attention, and mediates that love. He does not expect the animals and flowers and trees to be his company in quite the same way a human could be. Capable of missing them, and of feeling claimed or addressed by them, he also loves them for the inner lives to which he does not have access, loves them for the

¹¹² Clare, “[There is a charm in Solitude that cheers],” entire poem, *Major Works*, 390.

way they “heed him not.” Here is the inverse of Bishop’s insight that “lack of observation” leads to “cruelty” and “unhappiness.” Solitary observation not only engenders a distinct happiness, a “cheer.” It also offers a way to break the “hustling world” which not only permits but delights in crime scoffing at good.

That world, “broken off” at the line break, is also broken *open*. The creatures that were always going about their lives appear in their aspect of indifference, heedlessness—which for Clare is a marvel, because it also enables a suspension of the animals’ fear. Attention that takes joy in the heedlessness of its objects becomes a stay against cruelty. Descriptive fidelity is then not dependent upon a mutual contract, on anything promised in return; but if the more familiar meaning of fidelity as marital has any resonance here, it is because of this oblique companionship, and the promise written into so many marriage vows to remain attentive to the other, expressly through changes. In traditional marriage vows these changes are linked to the passage of time (for better or worse, in sickness and in health) and to the contingencies of fortune and misfortune (for richer, for poorer). In the fidelity practiced by Bishop and by Clare to other living things, there is a recognition of the company they enjoy, that “sweet / sensation of joy,” and an equally binding recognition of the sovereignty of the other life.

The Presence of the Observer Exposed

For Clare, sensitivity to the objects of observation gives rise to ambivalence about the audacity of human prurience and acquisitiveness towards the natural world. This ardent ambivalence comes through especially in some of the bird’s-nest poems. Adam Phillips writes shrewdly about the connection between Clare’s own wariness of ‘exposure’ to the outside world, his sympathy with the

vulnerable and exposed, and his awareness of exposing the vulnerable even further through the acts of paying and drawing attention that constitute his poems.

‘The rich man’, he wrote—the two parts of himself and the two economic classes doubling for each other—‘is invisible’, but the poor man is ‘caught in the fact of an overt act’. John Clare has been celebrated as a poet who celebrates the pleasures of observation, but his poetry is equally alert to the terrors of being seen. His poems often expose different forms of solitude—nests, love-affairs, madness, hiding-places, private walks, furtive creatures, poems—but in order to make plain the perils and ambitions of exposure. [...] Clare began to realise that description—defining and evoking through vivid representation—could be complicit with, and even analogous to certain forms of ownership. [...] There is a conflict about description itself, enacted in his poetry; that description may be redemptive—provide a voice for otherwise marginalised people and experiences—but it may also be predatory and encourage other predators. Once nests are located they are there (asking?) to be stolen from. So Clare’s distinctive clarity is always accompanied by a more paradoxical and protective celebration of obscurity, and silence and mist.¹¹³

This assessment of the “conflict about description itself” suggests an alternative to defending poets like Bishop and Clare head-on against charges of ‘mere description.’ These defenses are useful as they draw our attention to other dimensions of the work these poets do—illuminating their engagement with poetic tradition, and especially questioning characterizations that over-emphasize and condescend to their apparent simplicity and transparency.¹¹⁴ But to deny that these poets describe—copiously and ardently—in poem after poem, denies not only a distinctive pleasure taken in their work, but also the distinctive intelligence that shapes description.

An early poem of the Helpston period that captures Clare’s “paradoxical and protective celebration of obscurity, and silence and mist,” “Mist in the Meadows,” Clare gives his own account of a scarcely expressible visual experience:

The evening oer the meadow seems to stoop
More distant lessens the diminished spire

¹¹³ Phillips, “John Clare’s Exposure,” 180-1.

¹¹⁴ See for instance Adam White’s *John Clare’s Romanticism*, which admirably seeks to contextualize Clare not as a minor poet, outsider or anomaly but as a worthy and coherent contemporary of the other Romantics. Goodridge and Thornton in their essay “John Clare: the trespasser” (*John Clare in Context*) give a nuanced political reading of Clare as responsive to enclosure. Yet it still obscures the literal descriptive integrity of the poems, too readily assuming Clare’s descriptive ‘layer’ is thin, light, simple, and somehow separable from the deeper meaning, which they suggest lies in what description points to beyond itself.

Mist in the hollows reaks and curdles up
 Like fallen clouds that spread—and things retire
 Less seen and less—the shepherd passes near
 And little distant most grotesquely shades
 As walking without legs—lost to his knees
 As through the rawky creeping smoke he wades
 Now half way up the arches dissappear
 And small the bits of sky that glimmer through
 Then trees loose all but tops—I meet the fields
 And now the indistinctness passes bye
 The shepherd all his length is seen again
 And further on the village meets the eye¹¹⁵

This poem describes an illusion, and gives it the status of an event. If we adopt the poem's perspective, the mist does not deceive us about reality, but momentarily alters reality, or transfigures a region of reality (the meadows before the fields). The play of the illusion, the shepherd "As walking without legs," aware of the reality, nonetheless takes a kind of delight in the enchantment that overcomes it. The poem describes not only the way objects appear in the medium of mist, but the action of the mist itself, how it "reaks and curdles up / Like fallen clouds that spread."¹¹⁶ The enjambed transition from lines four to five, and especially the phrasing that begins line five, admits to an obscurity about things, an obscurity Clare does not attempt to correct. Instead he observes things in their obscurity, a dynamic process rather than fixed state: "things retire / Less seen and less," and he goes on to record this lessening. The abruptness of the clearing-up in the last four lines, in the space of an em-dash, corresponds to experience (mist does indeed seem to settle and lift as suddenly); but it also accords with Phillips's claim that Clare "celebrates" the mist in itself as well as what it obscures. Or that indeed he celebrates the mist for the protection it affords the vulnerable. He has also crossed over into a different region—Clare the speaker of the poem has been in movement the whole time, so the sudden lifting of the mist at the end does not unveil the meadow

¹¹⁵ Clare, "Mist in the Meadows," entire poem, *Major Works*, 195.

¹¹⁶ In fact Bishop also takes an interest in the mischief of low clouds. Her *Crusoe's* "island seemed to be/ a sort of cloud-dump."

so much as it expresses a transition into the field from the misty meadow. The structure of the poem does not clear up its obscurity, but rather moves through it. Were the poem to stay in one place and follow the same sequence, the implication that clarity triumphs over obscurity would be difficult to deny. But passing from a region of obscurity into one of clarity leaves things as they are, allows them to “retreat.” By the end the mist becomes almost a character, the quality it confers on objects condensing and moving—“the indistinctness passes by.”

Clare’s attention to the ephemeral and intangible is also an interest in things that alter our perception of solid objects. He does not appear frustrated by the obscuring or modifying forces of mist, twilight, wind, and on the opposite end of the spectrum, blinding noon light.¹¹⁷ On the contrary, his entire body of work, if one drinks it in swiftly, gives the impression of a constantly moving, changing world with certain frequently and unapologetically recurring elements. Most glimpses are fleeting. Even Clare’s many short poems centered around single creatures usually have porous boundaries, with other figures wandering through. This is especially the case where a predator or prey animal that is part of the central creature’s world enters into its poem: the “snuffing dogs,” “tracking gunners,” and the “fox” that “prowls its unnoticed round” appear in “Partridge Coveys.” The “skulking cat with mischief in its breast” haunts the end of “Hedge Sparrows.” The “silk-cased insects” are sought in vain by “The Blackcap.”¹¹⁸ And this is a random sampling.

Without stressing the point too much, I would connect the swift momentum and energy of Clare’s poems with the way he seemed to need to keep moving in his writing, rather than allow poems to slowly materialize as Bishop did. For him to work a piece too carefully might risk stagnation. He was famously uninterested in revision. So his interest in the way certain atmospheric entities could come and bring a change over things for a spell and then dissolve has to do with his

¹¹⁷ See in *Major Works* especially “Twilight,” 368-70; “Rural Evening,” 70-74, esp. line 40; “Noon,” 24-5, esp. lines 3-8; “[Noon],” 65; “Spring Wind,” 388-9.

¹¹⁸ These poems can be found on 232-3 of *Major Works*.

larger sense of a world in which living things were always coming, going, passing through. Clare gives to the objects of his attention a freedom of movement, replicated in his own restless formal variety and virtuosity. The simplicity of his refrain, “I love to see,” has all kinds of objects, and it never begrudges the brevity of an appearance.

The poems organized around times of day or seasons—most robustly in *The Shepherd's Calendar*—support the ideal conditions for the profusion of living things Clare never tired of listing. These are less scene painting, as one might say of his models, Thomson in his *Seasons* or Cowper in *The Task*, than they are paratactic and immersive accounts of life unfolding. Margaret Koehler's *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* studies Cowper, Thomson and contemporaries who did practice and invite a particular ethics of attention. Yet as she brings out, they tend to focus on attention as an ethical good in itself. Attention on this account improves the observer. Nature is a particularly good trainer of attention for these 18th-century poets, but it doesn't appear to have its own distinct *claim*. Lily Gurton-Wachter has performed a similar study for Clare's generation, but Clare appears nowhere in it. I doubt this is an oversight. More likely it is because her study focuses on the more robustly theorized or philosophical attention of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Keats, with a look back at Cowper as an early Romantic and a study of Charlotte Smith, whom Clare admired for her accuracy. Clare by contrast with other poets of these centuries formulates no theory or ethics of attention outside of the criticisms and approbations of his contemporaries based on whether they have witnessed the natural world they describe in their poems. For Clare it is nature that necessitates attention. I suggest the implicit ethics (for he does not make them explicit or systematic) apply primarily to the claim of the living beings he finds in nature, and subordinately to the faculty that registers them.

Clare seems to have observed a change in perception as a real change, as real as any other. That the snow or the light or the mist is as much a part of things 'as they are' as physical color,

fragrance, structure, sound. Anything about the world may be modified, but nor is there a stable, 'neutral' time or weather in which to perceive things. Rather than being distorted, a thing might change formally according to atmospheric phenomena. At the end of "Snow Storm," he expresses a change that comes over things:

Domestic spots near home and trod so oft
Seen daily—known for years—by the strange wand
Of winters humour changed—the little croft
Left green at night when morns loth look obtrudes
Trees bushes grass to one wild garb subdued
Are gone and left us in another land¹¹⁹

It is "another land." In one sense, the suggestion of magical transformation is figurative. But it is also a revelation that the way one has "known for years" a place, or a thing living in that place, does not have a claim to exclusive authority. One has known the place under one of its aspects, but the snow has as much claim to reality as that more familiar aspect. He entertains an active innocence, suspending the prior knowledge of snow he surely has (that it melts, that the trees and bushes it conceals remain essentially as they were before), attending only to its phenomenal existence. There is a shade of nuance between describing an illusion, accompanied by the knowing wink that it is an illusion, and describing as Clare does a world that changes into another from time to time.

The visceral presence of the seasons throughout Clare's poetry takes part in this testament to a fluctuating world. So too his avoidance of stable pictorializing perspectives. As he enters into one of his atmospheric expansions, he often registers its existence as though translating it each time it enters into the life of another creature. Thus the late strange "Spring Wind" uncovers a world that trembles in a multitude of places. "Now the trees in the hedges are heaving like hair / And bushes are shaking like living things there."¹²⁰ Over the course of the poem, the wind visits, to name a few:

¹¹⁹ Clare, "Snow Storm," lines 23-8, *Major Works*, 200.

¹²⁰ Clare, "Spring Wind," lines 19-20, *Major Works*, 388-9.

grasses, wheat, streams, willows, bullrushes, flags, an “ozier bed” with white lilies, the face of the poet himself, sedges, a mouse-nest, bees and crickets.

I see these two tendencies—to explore a single phenomenon severally, and to embrace atmospheric change as profoundly altering, as long as it lasts—as intertwined. Despite his ardor for diminutive beings, Clare’s attention tended to respond to a world all at once, and to disperse his own being over a space, rather than concentrating it into a single point. He accepted the changes that could come over things as phenomena, describing without trying to explain them, and accommodating the different ways they would be felt in different corners, by different forms of life.

Fluctuation and Grounding

Clare attuned himself to the fluctuations of the world by following movement—comings and goings, rises and falls. The world he saw contained a natural dramatic force, but without a closed form. The drama of one of his most anthologized poems, the sonnet sequence in rhyming couplets, “[The Badger],” echoes that of an entirely different natural phenomenon in the sonnet “[Showers].” The sequence, which follows the drama of a badger-baiting, observes cruelty without commentary, and does not frame the victim as a fragile creature. We can glimpse Clare’s own penchant as a scrappy fighter, even if a losing one, in the badger’s more than defensive response to provocation. As much as his attention often gravitated towards the delicate and vulnerable, he also liked to preserve the fierceness danger could bring out in even the gentlest creatures. The badger is not always a gentle creature, but the situation of the poem places him under attack, hunted and harassed. In return, “He runs along and bites at all he meets,” and the penultimate sonnet in the sequence details his glory in fighting back. For instance,

The dogs are clapt and urged to join the fray
The badger turns and drives them all away

Though scar[c]ely half as big dimute and small
He fights the dogs for hours and beats them all¹²¹

In the final two lines of that section,

He drive[s] the crowd and follows at their heels
And bites them through the drunkard swears and reels

The spirited hero of the poem is outnumbered, making the end inevitable, but the final sonnet marks a series of reversals in momentum, painfully following the way the badger keeps coming back at his pursuers as long as he has breath. No doubt it is the fight in the badger that makes him worth baiting, and that makes him vulnerable to the provocation in the first place. Badger-baiting would not otherwise be a pastime. To attend to the badger's fighting spirit in itself does not necessarily go against the feeling of the crowd. But there is a cumulative effect to the reversals, such that the poem channels its energy into the badger's resistance.

Rather than take the position of the baiter who would be excited by this resistance, the poem endures and stumbles under each blow. Which perspective the poem favors is an ethical question, and not a difficult one to answer intuitively, but also not an easy one to parse technically, for Clare never says the baiters are wrong or cruel. He even allows the poem to grasp the force of their excitement.¹²² How to express rage at injustice is a perennial artistic problem, for it is not necessarily most effective when most explicitly accusatory. In this case attention to the badger's experience, which does not exclude attention to the baiters' experience, exposes the violence of fear with

¹²¹ Clare, "[The Badger]," lines 33-6, *Major Works*, 247. Entire poem on 246-7.

¹²² Clare would not condone the upper-class versions of these sports either, and I would argue that his badger-baiters are human beings before they are representatives of their class. As Daniel Heath-Justice notes, class prejudice has often attended the condemnation of such sports as badger-baiting. "While the middle and upper classes also practiced cruel entertainments [like fox-hunting, which entailed similarly inhumane killing for sport], when economically marginalized communities practised blood sports, reformers condemned the acts as dangerous evidence of cultural and political degeneracy." (Heath-Justice, *Badger*, 173) Clare's case is unusual, for he partakes of the class that baits badgers but hates the practice and loves the badgers. While Clare's own consciousness of his low class was complicated by his literary (middle or upper-class) vocation, I don't find the badger poems so unambiguously class-centric as Heath-Justice does when he writes that "the more sympathetic the speaker is to the badger and the natural world, the more negative the response to the working class that he blames for nature's diminishment." (Heath-Justice, *Badger*, 114)

something like a naturalist's objectivity; not in an anatomical sense (Clare does not give the descriptive details of the badger as a naturalist would), but in the sense that it follows the unfolding of the event turn by turn. As a live sports-commentator might, he gives it 'blow by blow,' without seeming to privilege or lay stress on one part as more saturated with significance than another. In a way that may be difficult for a modern nature-lover to accept, there is even a necessity to his never letting go of the human perspectives, brutal as they are. To immerse fully into the plight of the hounded badger, to the exclusion of its human and canine pursuers, would be a kind of escape into the badger's being. It is as M.M. Mahood writes of Clare's sympathy with both weeders and weeds in his poem "The Village Doctress": "Weeds must be hunted down but, as in all predatory situations, the hunter's need to understand his prey brings him into secret sympathy with its claim on life: here, with the 'lonely joys' of plant existence."¹²³

We experience the badger's forward momentum as checked, frustrated by the crowd. For a few lines thus cornered the badger regains his footing:

He tries to reach the woods a awkward race
But sticks and cudgels quickly stop the chace
He turns agen and drives the noisey crowd
And beats the many dogs in noises loud
He drives away and beats them every one

The dreaded unstoppable outnumbering force returns:

And then they loose them all and set them on

For one more turn he holds his own:

He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd agen

Until finally brute force prevails, cruelly:

Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies

¹²³ Mahood, "bard of the wild flowers," 118.

There is a fury in this poem, which comes from the elaboration of these multiple turnings of the tide, so that one begins to feel the affront of it in how it wears away at the resilient creature fighting for its life. We often call violence “gratuitous” when it exceeds what is necessary in order to disable or disarm (as in self-defense) or simply kill (as in war); or in literary or artistic representations of violence, we call it gratuitous when the scene of violence extends beyond what seems necessary, or gives details that contribute nothing except to make the violence more vivid. Yet one might call the violence of “[The Badger]” gratuitous in the sense that it describes for us every turn, making us feel the brutality repeatedly rather than just once. The badger’s repeated counterattacks are integral to this extension of violence (which is why the men find it engaging). Gratuitousness becomes here a dimension of fidelity not only to the unfolding event but to the badger’s status, not as monolithic victim but as fierce creature who manages against significant odds almost to give as good as he gets.

This is a long way around to a larger observation of Clare’s attention to fluctuation, and how that attention tends to leave his forms open—to give a sense of a world that starts before and continues after the boundaries of the poem. This sounds a great deal like Fletcher’s “environment poem,” and so it is, except that it contains an awareness of life going on whether he is there to see it or not. In a passage many subsequent writers on Clare have quoted, Ashbery loves the way “Clare often starts up for no reason, like a beetle thrashing around in a weed patch, and stops as suddenly.”¹²⁴ I would expand upon the characterization he draws a moment later of Clare being “already there, talking to you before you’ve arrived on the scene.”¹²⁵ I would add one further remove, and say that this effect comes from the fact that the world observed is already there, ‘talking to’ Clare before *he* has arrived on the scene. Just for instance, when he writes of “the little wren that many a time hath sought / Shelter from showers in huts where I did dwell,” one hears the chance

¹²⁴ Ashbery, “Grey Openings,” 15.

¹²⁵ Ashbery, “Grey Openings,” 16.

encounter, the pleasure at a visit from the wren who was previously elsewhere. The encounter in Clare brings with it a happy acknowledgment of the fullness behind the mere glimpse he catches.

The badger's death is a clear ending and closure. But this closure is less a function of Clare's own sense of tragic form than it is of death as a natural fact. Humans have instigated it. Without them the badger would be as he is at the start of the poem, "grunting on his woodland track," but the matter-of-factness of the badger's death makes for an abrupt ending. The poem ends on a moment for which we have been prepared by the poem's premise, but not prepared by its rhythms. It is a grim death for the badger, but we are blocked from the stance of knowingness that would allow us to feel we have mastered the meaning of it. There is nothing inevitable about how many times the badger makes a comeback, and the penultimate couplet has him *playing* dead. So when he actually dies, we have scarcely had time to wipe the smile at his cunning from our faces.

Attention to fluctuation is a kind of fidelity that goes against reduction to a single trajectory. The sonnet "[Showers]" thus begins, "The fitful weather changes every hour," and ends with the couplet, "Here two or three were met to shun the rain / That slowly cleared and faster fell again."¹²⁶ For Clare things often happen "agen" and "again," within the space of a single poem as well as across poems. Unredundant repetition reins in an equally keen sense of change—the "fitful weather changes," but "every hour." This capacity to track fluctuations including repetition, which Angus Fletcher refers to as "diurnal knowledge," resists summarizing or collapsing all of the minor variations between two distinct and familiar events. This sense of fluctuation is what gives "[The Badger]" its smoldering effect—it is not enough to witness the attack and the outcome. Descriptive fidelity follows unfolding in time and not only appearance in space, if the badger's life and death are to be acknowledged as his own. Rather than stand outside and condemn or lament what hurts the

¹²⁶ Clare, "[Showers]," lines 1 and 13-14, *Major Works*, 200.

tender observer to see, he makes himself swift and slight, to follow the contours of this dynamic and violent last event in the life of the badger.

The spatial corollary to the temporal quality of fluctuation is the sense of grounding, which eludes a problem of constructing landscape, that of distinguishing foreground from background. With a poem in motion—either a moving observer or an observer absorbed in the movements of another creature—perspective changes from moment to moment. Consider the vigor of the Northborough sonnet “Hares at Play.” When the hares enter in, varying prepositions place them in relation to the landscape: they are “on,” “in,” “round,” and “through.” They disappear from the poem without preposition, for then they go *under* the ground, where we can no longer attend to them because we cannot follow.

The fidelity to immersed perspective, then, is also fidelity to the privacy of the creatures observed, especially as Clare loved best the furtive, diminutive, and superlatively sensitive. As John Barrell writes, “[The] words at the beginning [of ‘Emmonsails Heath in winter’], ‘I love to see’, although they mean what they say, are there mainly to provide the simplest possible framework, the least intrusive one, to contain the images in the poem, so that we may read the poem as, simply, a succession of images all of equal weight.”¹²⁷ This comment about simplicity of framework gives the poem not only the flexibility Barrell claims for it, but also a lightness of foot to the “I”—who can cover the ground the more nimbly without the encumbrance of a grander pretense for looking. For Clare, Barrell suggests, no ‘background’ exists to the landscape. Rather,

Each place exists as a manifold of things seen, heard, smelled, and for Clare each thing exists only as foreground; he does not detach himself from the landscape as Cowper does, or post himself on a ‘commanding height’, but describes only what is immediately around him. The attempt, then, is not so much to describe a landscape, or even to *describe* each place, as to suggest what it is like to be in each place.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Barrell, *Idea of Landscape*, 155.

¹²⁸ Barrell, *Idea of Landscape*, 166.

This 'being in each place' has a tendency to prevent odes, at least formal ones. Clare's sensing self figures in the places of the poems, not abstracting from them so as to observe objectively, but implicating himself as involved with where he is. Timothy Morton says that "Clare helps us to stay right here, in the poisoned mud."¹²⁹ However much he might seek to honor the forms of life he describes, he does not suppress the observing self. Hence the frequency of pleasure and delight, and later depression and sadness, expressed openly in the poems.

As in Bishop, his feelings are addressed, named directly in the poems, but this directness also means there is room for much more than subjectivity in them. Clare avoids both extremes—lofty distance from the object, and excessively intense focus on a single object—as forms of perilous exposure. To be far away, and high above, and to take in all, is to assume the perspective either of a surveyor who wants to exploit, or a predator who wants to spot movement—to see without being seen. To linger and stare at a single creature for too long agitates, intrudes, invades. The observation that Clare "begins anywhere and stops anywhere," especially striking in the unexploited compression of the sonnet, also sheds light on Clare's furtiveness, discreetness, and that of his subjects.¹³⁰ As though the form could be placed anywhere, like a frame that contains the beginning of one entering figure and the end of one leaving figure.

In her own way, Bishop avoids full- or overexposure. She exercises strategies of obliquity, indirection: The eyes of the fish "shifted a little, but not/ to return my stare./—it was more like the tipping/ of an object toward the light."¹³¹ And here is the seal again from "At the Fishhouses": "He

¹²⁹ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 201.

¹³⁰ Quoted from Arthur Symons by John Ashbery. Ashbery continues, "Eighty years later, this is not a foible that will raise many hackles: isn't that what poets usually do? Perhaps that is why Robert Graves, more of a modernist than Symons, praised Clare as being 'technically admirable' and having 'the most unusual faculty of knowing exactly how and when to end a poem.' It's hard not to agree with both of them." (Ashbery, "Grey Openings," 15) To follow Ashbery's suggestion and find synthesis between the seemingly opposite remarks, this "knowing exactly how and when to end" that Graves praises would imply that it is not so easy to give the impression of "begin[ning] anywhere and end[ing] anywhere." Just as the "effect of being spontaneous" does not necessarily imply spontaneity of composition.

¹³¹ Bishop, "The Fish," lines 41-4, *PPL*, 34.

stood up in the water and regarded me/ steadily, moving his head a little.”¹³² Each creature has a way of attending, a way of moving, but benefits from the poet’s discreetness, her restraint from over-interpretation. The qualification of movement in each case, “a little,” makes as if to correct for the temptation to exaggerate the creature’s readiness to be known or grasped—particularly in the fish’s case, where mutual recognition can’t even be taken for granted. Furthermore, this “little” corresponds to the “little that we get for free,” the “Not much” of Bishop’s “Poem,” which she elaborates, “About the size of our abidance / along with theirs.”¹³³ In the line break, which allows for the kind of heedless existence of dissimilar life Clare also sought, a measurement is taken. It is a measure of the relation that is possible between the describing self and the living objects that exist apart—and a suggestion that any measure of a world must make room for both.

Conclusion

Freud begins his essay “On Transience” with an anecdote of a summer walk with “a taciturn friend” and “a young but already famous poet.” The poet’s “aching despondency” in confronting “the proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect” is the occasion of the essay.¹³⁴ Apparently the identity of the young poet has never been confirmed, but he has a representative quality about him, a ‘poetic temperament,’ we might say. Bishop and Clare do not in this instance conform to type. Freud’s insight into the human, only especially the poet’s, response to transience is structurally similar to Scarry’s account of the one who feels “betrayed” by the no-longer-beautiful. For Freud, those “who seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost.”¹³⁵ Yet the privilege

¹³² Bishop, “At the Fishhouses,” lines 55-6, *PPL*, 52.

¹³³ Bishop, “Poem,” lines 58, 59, 60-1, *PPL*, 166.

¹³⁴ Freud, “On Transience,” 176.

¹³⁵ Freud, “On Transience,” 179.

of “renunciation” presumes that one holds the object in one’s grasp, possesses it, in the first place. “But have those other possessions, which we have now lost, really ceased to have any worth for us because they have proved so perishable and so unresistant?”¹³⁶

Description that does not have a kind of mastery as its goal has more power to be faithful to its object in both the moral and technical senses—relieved of the pressure to “capture,” it can register the movement, change, and *self*-possession that constitute an object of attention, especially a living one, over time. Vulnerability, perishability, transience, are as necessary to the lives attended to as strength, resilience, persistence. Part of describing other living things in the midst of their own lives, is never quite seeing them on their own, never separating or isolating them from the worlds they inhabit. The observer’s own presence becomes part of that world, absorbed but not dissolved in the act of attention. The observer recognizes independence from the observing self, a strictly unfathomable fullness in the other form of life.

To recognize the independent force of another life involves the observer in an act that requires presence, a certain space taken up—in the world and in the poem. But this self-awareness can give way to self-forgetting when attention to the other life begins to take hold. The art historian Svetlana Alpers characterized the “world” of Vermeer’s women as “a world apart, inviolate, self-contained, but, more significantly, self-possessed. [...] Vermeer recognizes the world present in these women as something that is other than himself and with a kind of passionate detachment he lets it, through them, be.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Freud, “On Transience,” 179.

¹³⁷ Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 224. There is precedent for comparing at least Bishop’s descriptive art with Alpers’s Dutch painters. James Merrill shares in his afterword to David Kalstone’s posthumously published *Becoming a Poet* that Kalstone was a close friend of Alpers, and that her famous study of Dutch 17th-century art, *The Art of Describing*, “struck him as bearing uncannily upon his own. In particular the polarity between Dutch painters and those of the Italian Renaissance, the latter felt by historians even in our time to be somehow more ‘important’ than the genial naturalists beyond the Alps—couldn’t this be fruitfully applied to a view of Bishop and Lowell?” (Merrill in Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, 258)

The work and the art of letting be would be a way to frame the kind of fidelity sought in these descriptive poetics. To let be is not to ignore the other, but indeed to “recognize the world present” in them. Bishop and Clare each made poems bound by the negative constraints of natural history (not to invoke what has not been observed, to strive for accuracy in every positive detail), yet also poetic objects responsive to the objects of observation. In this way they explore what it might mean to be faithful to the independence of other lives from the observing self.

It isn't that description has no mere-ness to support the epithet—but it is ‘mere’ for each in the sense that it is a poverty entered into for a reason. Because the limit on the side of the object—accommodated in Bishop's waiting for the world to come to the poem, Clare's insouciant perpetual movement, his sense of comings and goings glimpsed—meant for each that the resources of poetry would be placed at the disposal of the observed world, rather than the other way around. As Clare said the poor man must, they submit to being “caught in the fact of an overt act,” or in Bishop's phrasing, they make do with “the little that we get for free.” The poverty of their means was yet more than enough to afford a rare closeness to furtive things, furtive lives.

Chapter Two: Disarmed Attention

(Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace)

Charles Darwin wrote to Henry Fawcett in 1861:

Above thirty years ago there was much talk that geologists ought only to observe and not theorise; and I well remember someone saying that at this rate a man might as well go into a gravel-pit and count the pebbles and describe the colours. How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service.¹

And Alfred Russel Wallace wrote in a footnote early in *Island Life* (1880), his book that went towards founding the science of biogeography:

I cannot avoid here referring to the enormous waste of labour and money with comparatively scanty and unimportant results to natural history of most of the great scientific voyages of the various civilized governments during the present century. [...] The same species have been collected again and again, often described several times over under new names, and not unfrequently stated to be from places they never inhabited. The result of this wretched system is that the productions of some of the most frequently visited and most interesting islands on the globe are still very imperfectly known, while their native plants and animals are being yearly exterminated, and this is the case even with countries under the rule or protection of European governments.²

For both Darwin and Wallace the chief sin of this kind of natural history (observation without theory, collection without context) is its wastefulness. It is never a waste to observe carefully, but it is a waste to observe in a vacuum—to behave as though a single gravel pit were the whole world, or as though one’s own voyage of discovery were unprecedented. They object to mindless looking in natural history as self-indulgence on the part of the observer, a failure “to be of any service.”³

Think again about what is imagined to be wasted in these cases. Certainly time, resources and manpower in the situation Wallace laments. But it is not just “labour and money” he ultimately

¹ Cited in Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 73, but endnotes give an incorrect citation to a different letter. The letter to Fawcett is from 18 September 1861. See Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 3257,” accessed on 23 February 2021, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter.DCP-LETT-3257.xml>.

² Wallace, *Island Life*, 7 (fn).

³ This failure is the wrong kind of “being at a loss,” which each of the observers in the dissertation values and comes to terms with, and arrives at independently. See the discussion of Gilbert White’s “being at a loss” with regard to the brood parasitism of the Cuckoo in the Coda.

pronounces wasted—it is also the “native plants and animals [...] being yearly exterminated,” which is to say the life itself which natural history undertakes to study. He complains of a redundancy on the one hand (the same species collected again and again) and a negligence on the other (the imperfect knowledge of even frequently visited places). On my reading of the passages I will bring together from Darwin and Wallace, a living thing in itself cannot be redundant, in the sense of an exact repetition with no ontological status of its own. In terms of evolutionary theory, individual lives are both decisively important and vanishingly insignificant, since they are the concrete existence of species, and yet the time scales of evolution can make individual life spans almost imperceptible. In the passages that follow, these naturalists are arrested by individual lives. In their critiques of observation without theory or context, it is the irresponsible naturalist who wastes attention and makes redundant collections, who mistakes a new individual for a new kind, thus wasting individual lives. There is a direct link between redundant observation and collection and the existence of unobserved, neglected terrain: the naturalist on both sides fails to account for the world in its proportions. Gathering many of one and none of another species, his waste of the former prevents him from seeing the latter. Similarly in Darwin’s gravel pit, it is not the pebbles or their colors that are redundant, but the efforts of the naturalist who would describe them mindlessly. The descriptions would then be wasteful, not the profusion of individual pebbles.

This distinction is of the essence in considering the attitude towards objects of attention I bring into focus in this chapter. I will speak of an *excess* on the side of the objects of attention, but excess on the side of the object is never waste. Rather it disarms, and demands to be taken into account. Darwin and Wallace, in their fundamentally different styles, wrote as a way of taking this excess into account. Writing was also, probably foremost, a way of organizing thought, abstracting from particulars in order to explore driving mechanisms and general laws. Darwin’s *On the Origin of*

Species and Wallace's *Island Life* each synthesize many instances of observation in order to offer theories of great explanatory power. But the distinctly literary force of their writings testifies that they were doing something else too. If they held it was wasteful to amass particulars while remaining blind to the patterns that organize them and the larger world in which they take part, they still recognized the indispensable, irreducible unit of the individual life as commanding attention. There is the way it commands attention as testing, deciding, in Darwin's terms, "for or against some view," which is the way that a particular might force the revision of a general theory, and the promise of further particulars to hold the theory as ever provisional. But particulars, especially living particulars, also have a way of being more than the role they play in such decisions. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison give a working definition of objectivity at the beginning of their history bearing that one word as its title: "Objectivity preserves the artifact or variation that would have been erased in the name of truth; it scruples to filter out the noise that undermines certainty. To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower [...]"⁴ This is the epistemological value of the particular, which is ever in excess of the general. The object is never redundant insofar as it varies from the type. To take the "noise that undermines certainty" into account is to accept a limit on how far it is possible to generalize.

But there is another excess of value that emerges in the act of attention to a living object, and it comes through in the writing of that attention. It becomes evident for Darwin and Wallace especially in accounting for moments of discomposure. In these moments they describe an awareness of the object in excess of what can be known about it: the individual pebble, the life not taken as a specimen, lays claim to the naturalist's attention and momentarily disarms him. He becomes open to the object of his attention in a way that makes him reckon with its

⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 17.

independence—rather than being in control of the observational arrangement, he gives a part over to the other life (which in turn may enrich his developing theory, as touching on that very life in front of him). The naturalist’s certainty about his own place in relation to the life before him is undermined.

It is the way the attention and its conditions are narrated in these moments that interests me: starting with Darwin’s account of his attention to the Fuegians, and Wallace’s account of his attention engaged from a life boat in the middle of the Atlantic. Both instances register a kind of emergency or crisis of attention. Wallace in a period of limbo between shipwreck and rescue, the collections of an entire expedition all but lost to him, his attention deprived of its objects; Darwin shocked at the Fuegians’ aspect, conditions, way of life, his attention overwhelmed by its objects. These emergencies reveal their protagonists in opposite emotional states: Darwin’s shock opposed by Wallace’s “apathy.” Yet each according to his temperament attests to his attention working under exigent circumstances, circumstances in which he was deprived of self-possession, in some sense powerless. These are both instances of disarmed attention—attention working beyond the limits of the will.⁵

In prelude to these instances, consider the following literal moment of disarming, in which Wallace lowers his gun before an object of his attention, the black jaguar:

I involuntarily raised my gun to my shoulder, but remembering that both barrels were loaded with small shot, and that to fire would exasperate without killing him, I stood silently gazing. In the middle of the road he turned his head, and for an instant paused and gazed at me, but having, I suppose, other business of his own to attend to, walked steadily on, and disappeared in the thicket.⁶

He entertains briefly the ordinary or automatic response (to shoot in order to collect), but when he judges the “involuntary” response imprudent, stops himself, and enters into a different order of

⁵ To use the terms of Simone Weil, developed at greater length in the introduction to this dissertation.

⁶ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 166.

encounter with the animal—a voluntary one. In this case, counterintuitively, the “involuntary” response would have been to act, while the voluntary one is to remain still. As so often throughout his travel writings—both here and in the *Malay Archipelago*—he registers the other’s awareness of him, looking back. Literally disarming himself in the moment he remembers he lacks the proper ammunition, the gaze of the jaguar disarms him again. There is a graceful placidity in his account of the formidable predator; the jaguar “turned his head, and for an instant paused and gazed” at him. None of these actions—turning, pausing, gazing—is threatening. Each is self-contained, intransitive. Yet the jaguar he describes is not disarmed, for from there Wallace expands, entering into the experience *other* creatures have of the predator: “As he advanced, I heard the scampering of small animals, and the whizzing flight of ground birds, clearing the path for their dreaded enemy.” The sense of hearing takes over from that of sight as the jaguar retreats from his field of vision, and he follows its movement indirectly, through the audible response of prey to the presence of predator. Wallace is disarmed, going from superior to subordinate in relation to the animal before him—a reversal that enables him to attend to the predator’s prey.

The moment of deferred collection enlarges and blurs, rather than narrows and focuses, the field of the attention. Shot and killed, the animal would become specimen, available to unlimited anatomical examination. The observer would be able to render it completely, inside and out as far as possible “without any traces of the knower.” He would know what it is at the finest degree of detail. Instead his account preserves of necessity a certain distance. The detail he manages is accordingly scant: “a large jet-black animal” with “long curving tail.” And as Wallace follows the jaguar’s gaze back to himself, subject and object share and even blur into one another in the field of attention. Elaine Scarry’s description of what happens when we see something beautiful could well be a description of Wallace and the jaguar: “we find we are standing in a different relation to the world

than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede ground to the thing that stands before us.”⁷ Wallace describes himself quite literally “ced[ing] ground to the thing that stands before [him].” There is no compensation for the lost specimen—the account he gives is not an attempt to recuperate as much information as possible under the constraints of a less than ideal situation. There is no compensation, but nor is anything wasted. Rather he gives up on an objective account of the jaguar in favor of another kind of account, one that entangles subject with an object whose life is entirely without redundancy.

Wallace’s Oceanic Attention

The early book that contains the encounter with the black jaguar, *Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, exists in spite of a staggering loss—Wallace’s loss of all of his specimens and notebooks in a fire aboard the *Helen* on the way back to England. He salvaged as much as possible from memory and a few journals, “fragmentary notes and papers,” and did his best to ensure that the book would support his ambition to research the origins of life on earth. In a way, the book itself is a compromise analogous to the lowered gun in the face of the jaguar. The “small shot” of the remaining evidence would not sustain the kind of rigorous report of findings he may initially have envisioned. Darwin wrote to Wallace’s friend and travel companion Henry Walter Bates that he was “a *little* disappointed in Wallace’s book on the Amazon: hardly facts enough.”⁸ Darwin’s criticism has been interpreted as evidence of unfairness and lack of sympathy for Wallace’s

⁷ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 111-112. This passage also figures in the Introduction as a description of the attentive encounter with other life, with implications for an alternative to anthropocentrism.

⁸ Cited in Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 71. Emphasis in the original. The letter from Darwin to Bates is dated 3 December 1861 and can be found in *Life and Letters* vol. II, 380.

situation.⁹ I suggest the possibility that Darwin was in fact sympathetic to the situation (as Wallace assumes in his preface that any naturalist would be), but found the attempt to recover such a loss through memory alone an intractable compromise. Not that Darwin didn't also write from memory, but the paucity of "facts" he diagnosed in Wallace's *Narrative of Travels* was not surmountable, given the irretrievable loss of specimens and notes. For Darwin even *The Origin of Species* contained hardly facts enough, and it was Wallace's own formulation of natural selection that prompted him to publish sooner than he otherwise might have.¹⁰ He would have waited and waited for more. On multiple occasions in his letters he expresses ambivalence about writing, a longing to subsist on pure observation. Darwin's definition of "facts" is not self-evident, but it seems likely that Wallace's lost specimens, if not 'facts' in themselves, would have been necessary in order verify observations and give them the objective solidity of fact.¹¹ His tepid assessment of Wallace's *Narrative of Travels* might then reflect his skepticism about the very possibility of recovering the loss of the objects of attention.

As Wallace had lost the facts he collected, he had lost the direct link to the moment of observation. *Recollection* is a process of tracing back to the moment of observation in the mind—a path with no record, no map. Wallace himself doesn't use the term, but it carries a useful echo of the primary form of labor the wreck of the *Helen* turned to "waste"—that of collection. The OED calls

⁹ By H. Lewis McKinney in the introduction to the Dover edition of Wallace's *Narrative of Travels*, p. xi, where he judges that the mark of the losses on the text "no doubt led Charles Darwin to remark unfairly that the work hardly had enough 'facts'—meaning material he could incorporate into his own work." Sandra Knapp notes how "terribly unfair" it was that critics including Darwin "deplored the lack of facts [...] considering that [...] they knew his collections had all been lost." (Knapp, *Alfred Russel Wallace in the Amazon*, 170) Schmitt suggests, "Darwin apparently did not take [the book's] conditions of production into consideration." (Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 71)

¹⁰ There are many accounts of this historic moment of co-discovery and the pressure it exerted on Darwin to publish. See chapters 1-3 of Janet Browne's *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*, the second volume of her two-volume biography. From Wallace's side, see chapters 7 & 8 of Peter Raby's *Alfred Russel Wallace: A Life*.

¹¹ As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park remind us, the word has a dynamic history. Two common threads have been "particulars as opposed to universals" and the impetus to "cordon off the data of experience from conjectures or arguments founded upon those 'givens.'" (Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 230) How a scientist uses this word is unlikely to be value-neutral, but its particular valence must have partly to do with the norms and standards of the period, partly with the convictions of the individual.

recollection “the mental operation by which objects or ideas are revived in the mind.” It also bears the meaning “Serious concentration of thought, *esp.* religious meditation.” When the moment recollected is specifically a moment of attention, and a thing seen in a state of absorbed attention, this process of tracing back is a secondary act of attention. The effort to recollect such a moment requires a concentration, a surrounding stillness akin to the primary act of attention that is being recollected. Though the “objects [...] revived in the mind” do not have the objective validity of tangible objects, or of objects recorded in the moment of observation, their very retrieval is an act of attention, of “serious concentration.” For in such a situation, it is still an effort to recall the object as it was, to see it again in memory, rather than an object summoned to mind to take part in a fantasy.

Wallace’s decision to produce the book in spite of the missing “facts,” partly economic, partly determination to salvage as much as possible of what was lost, was certainly a compromise. Yet because of this deficiency of hard evidence, the book is a fascinating document of recollected attention. The account he gives of the fire itself, the moments of loss, and the precarious period spent in a lifeboat, record attention under extreme conditions. Wallace gives the following account of his behavior in the moment of crisis, a part of which in retrospect seems to him ‘unaccountable’:

I went down into the cabin, now suffocatingly hot and full of smoke, to see what was worth saving. I got my watch and a small tin box containing some shirts and a couple of old notebooks, with some drawings of plants and animals, and scrambled up with them on deck. Many clothes and a large portfolio of drawings and sketches remained in my berth; but I did not care to venture down again, and in fact felt a kind of apathy about saving anything, that I can now hardly account for.¹²

The account involves not only loss of property and the precious fruits of loving labor, but of will, agency, pathos. The “apathy about saving anything” is unaccountable from the moment of writing, but it survives in memory. This apathy about saving anything inaugurates a period of observation set off from the rest of the narrative, brought to a close in the moment of rescue. As in the passage of

¹² Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 272.

encounter with the black jaguar, the impossibility of a given reaction initiates a series of extraordinary observations that would not have been possible under ordinary circumstances. In both instances Wallace describes a kind of freedom in letting go of the idea that he might “save anything,” or that he might keep anything in his possession; but he attends nonetheless.

Wallace’s description of time spent adrift only intensifies this image of him as an observer exposed, who can act only by attending. It would be easy for a reader to skip over or underestimate this part of the text, because the moment of rescue (“We were saved!”) is so dramatic, and the moments after the rescue aboard the *Jordeson* contain Wallace’s famous reflections on the enormity of his loss. Thus Cannon Schmitt considers “Wallace’s description of the ten days [...] weathered in a small open boat 700 miles from the nearest land” to be “brief and matter of fact, its single strongly marked emotion reserved for the moment of rescue.”¹³ Yet Sandra Knapp reminds us that during this period, “Wallace [...] continued to observe with a true naturalist’s eye.”¹⁴ I suggest the brevity of the episode and the lack of “strongly marked emotion” belong to an altered state, attention liberated in a state of apathy. The abject situation opens up for him a new vantage for observation. After a couple of days in the most arduous and uncomfortable position, he notes:

I now found my hands and face very much blistered by the sun, and exceedingly sore and painful. At night two boobies, large dusky sea-birds with very long wings, flew about us. During the night I saw several meteors, and in fact could not be in a better position for observing them, than lying on my back in a small boat in the middle of the Atlantic. We also saw a flock of small birds fly by, making a chirping noise; the sailors did not know what they were.¹⁵

In these passages, Wallace finds himself unable to go looking for anything, but able to record what appears to him. It is a position of receptivity, communicated most strikingly in his expression that he “could not be in a better position for observing [the meteors], than lying on [his] back in a small

¹³ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 57.

¹⁴ Knapp, *Alfred Russel Wallace in the Amazon*, 162.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 275.

boat in the middle of the Atlantic.” His littleness within the boat’s smallness, his “position” not only with respect to the nearest land but physically, “on [his] back,” may be “matter[s] of fact.” But he also marks this prostrate position as ideal for the observations it makes possible. Less dramatically than his other passages on the experience of human insignificance in the vastness of nature, this passage creates a link between such a recognition of smallness and the possibilities it opens up for the observer.¹⁶ It is a position and a condition of expanded attention.

On the 15th, just before their rescue by the *Jordeson*, “The sea was full of minute *Medusae*, called ‘blubber’ by the sailors: some were mere whitish oval or spherical lumps, others were brown, and beautifully constructed like a little cap, swimming rapidly along by alternate contractions and expansions, and so expelling the water behind them.”¹⁷ The absorptive detail of this description, mesmerizing in the rhythmic movements it details, seems to serve almost as a form of self-preservation, for the very next sentence in the paragraph recalls the excruciating conditions under which it was observed: “The day was very hot, and we suffered exceedingly from thirst. We were almost in despair about seeing a ship, or getting on to the Islands [of Bermuda.]”¹⁸ Through the inexplicit logic of sentences in proximity, the sight of the *Medusae* seems to slake the thirst of the observer.

Dolphins, too, hold a special luminosity during the period of exposed observation, observation from within a state of emergency. On the 12th of August, “Many dolphins swam about

¹⁶ See the Bird of Paradise passage discussed later in this chapter, but also passages collected and subtly analyzed in Sandra Knapp’s essay on “Wallace, Conservation, and Sustainable Development.” As she notes, these passages stand in tension with the fact that “human beings were at the centre of his thoughts about nature” and that in his final assessment, “Nature existed for human beings,” even if he thought human beings needed to reflect deeply upon the sustainability of their exploitations of nature. (Knapp, 218) I am not sure the tension between human centrality and human insignificance in Wallace’s writings can be resolved. But I would like to suggest that periodically he allowed another order of things to assert itself, in which he absorbed the full implications of his assertion in *The Malay Archipelago* that “all living things were *not* made for man.”

¹⁷ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 277.

¹⁸ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 277.

the boats; their colours when seen in the water are superb, the most gorgeous metallic hues of green, blue, and gold: I was never tired of admiring them.”¹⁹ Only a few pages later, post-rescue, the dolphins return, this time in their capacity as food, and Wallace remarks, “I did not see so much to admire in the colours of the dying dolphin; they are not to be compared with the colours of the living fish seen in the blue transparent water.”²⁰

This fact about dolphins changing colors as they die has been noted by other observers, before and since—“the dolphin which gives up the sea’s rainbows only when he dies,” as D.H. Lawrence has it.²¹ Frederick Pease Harlow reported in 1928 that dolphins “are known for their brilliancy of color. When dying they change from a silver white to all the colors in the rainbow.” Harlow continues the play between admiration for living and dying dolphins, yet establishes a rather cool equivalence between the two: “There are few objects more dazzling than the dolphin while leaping out of a rippling wave into the bright sunlight; and the beauty of the dying dolphin is wonderful to watch as it changes color.”²² In *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopaedia*, 1895 edition, we find the dolphin, “the beauty of whose colors when dying are so celebrated,” accompanied by the following explanation:

The change of color in the dying dolphin consists merely in the fading of the beautiful golden green of life to the dull leaden hue of death, a change which takes place very quickly, the paling being occasionally interrupted by a flush of momentary increase of color. This phenomenon is seen in most brightly colored fishes, and in the case of the dolphin it has become considerably exaggerated by the repetition of the story. It is due to the withdrawal of blood from the pigment cells, or chromatophores, the temporary access of color being produced by a temporary increase of circulation caused by muscular effort.²³

¹⁹ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 276.

²⁰ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 278.

²¹ Lawrence, *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, 60.

²² Harlow, *Making of a Sailor*, 173. Harlow follows with an insouciant remark and an account of dolphin-fishing: “As for me—I’d rather watch it dangling in the bright sunshine on the end of a trolling-line, struggling to be free as I pulled it hand-over-hand from under the ship’s bow, singing out at the top of my voice: ‘On deck! On deck! Bring out a gunny sack. I’ve caught a dolphin.’” (174)

²³ *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopaedia* (1899), vol. 2, s.v. “dolphin.”

The effort to de-mystify the color-changes of the dying dolphin (the “merely,” “quickly,” “occasionally,” “momentary” down-playing the effects) sets off the preference for the color of the living dolphin, the “beautiful golden green.” This passage agrees with Wallace in its evaluation, and also gives context to Wallace’s assertion—that he did not find “so much to admire in the colours of the dying dolphin” functions not only as a local observation, but as a criticism of the preference for the multi-colored spectacle of the dying animal over the particular beauty it sustains when alive. It is difficult not to read into Wallace’s passage a preference for the color of the living dolphins *because* they are alive and in their element, and not merely because the colors happen to be more beautiful in life than death (in which case he could prefer the opposite if the color phenomena of life and death were reversed). For in one sense he could be heard to issue a moral imperative: “they are *not to be compared* with the colours of the living fish seen in the blue transparent water.” [my emphasis]

Lawrence’s expression, that dolphins “give up the sea’s rainbows only when [they] die” suggests a myth about the phenomenon—that the dolphin contains, or is guardian of, “the sea’s rainbows” throughout its life, and releases them through its skin when it dies. Lawrence takes up the “celebrated” reputation of this phenomenon, but makes it almost tragic—and if the encyclopedia entry is right, the “giving up” lets the rainbows escape, not to be harnessed or captured by those who would take hold of the dying dolphin.

Emergency makes possible observation of another order—the object present to the observer in a way that cannot be sustained once the emergency is over. Recall from the first chapter Elizabeth Bishop’s Crusoe, who laments the draining of meaning from his knife on the shelf when he is back home in England, no longer in a state of emergency. The knife was essential to Crusoe’s survival on his island, whereas Wallace does not draw upon the nutritive value of the dolphins in his state of emergency (indeed they contribute to his physical survival only after his rescue). But as he narrates

it, the sight of them in their element refreshes him in a state of exhaustion. He “was never tired of admiring them,” though dreadfully tired as a body. As the sight of the *medusae* seems to slake his thirst, the sight of the dolphins seems to replenish his waning energy. Thus he establishes implicit connections between his own physical depletion and the replenishing value of other living things—as though during this period of “apathy,” his life were continuous with theirs, rather than the ordinary condition of needing to acquire and consume other living things in order to be replenished by them.

One response to emergency is, of course, panic. Another is purposeful action fired with adrenaline, as when people are reported capable of superhuman feats under pressure. Apathy, in Wallace’s sense, is neither fight nor flight. His lucidity under duress suggests the faculty enhanced for him is that of perception. No doubt, as an after-the-fact narration, this lucidity is performative for his readers as well as recollected from his experience. The crafted dramatic quality of Wallace’s narrative, both here and in *The Malay Archipelago*, belonged to a genre of naturalists’ travel narratives with its own conventions. If it is true as Schmitt assesses that Wallace’s account of his time in the life-boat is “brief and matter of fact, its single strongly marked emotion reserved for the moment of rescue,” these pages also form a breath or a pause in the drama, an account of what continues to register for this observer unmoored from his usual reference points.²⁴ His attention adrift does not fasten onto objects but floats, and registers their movement around him. Both the *Medusae* and the dolphins are in specific motion, the former wondered at for their rapid swimming “by alternate contractions and expansions.” He observes both the dolphins and the boobies (the two “large dusky sea-birds with very long wings”) moving “about” him in their respective modes. Surrounded by the objects of his attention as he is surrounded by water, uncertain whether he will live, his “apathy

²⁴ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 57.

about saving anything” corresponds to an excess. His attention is reduced to necessity in the sense that Simone Weil upholds, when she writes, “Every act should be considered from the point of view not of its object but of its impulsion. The question is not ‘What is the aim?’ It is ‘What is the origin?’”²⁵ Attending to the life that surrounds him is what he cannot help but do. The fruits of his oceanic attention do not accumulate towards a theoretical insight as those of his applied attention had and would. Instead exigent circumstances reveal that what sustain him are the lives of other living things, which lay claim to, and necessitate, his attention.

Darwin and the Struggle for life

Keeping in mind Wallace’s oceanic reflections, consider the way Jonathan Lamb describes the efforts of description typical of another class of sufferers at sea, those afflicted with scurvy.²⁶ He notes in particular the disease’s resistance to description. This is what happens when an object of observation ceases to be passive, when it inhabits the attention in such a way as to evacuate words. The experience of disease exists in excess of its diagnosis, as the individual organism exists in excess of its species. Lamb writes of how the “malign genius of scurvy, elsewhere called its je ne sais quoi, was sufficiently active to embarrass the descriptive resources of its victims.”²⁷ Lamb gives as an epigraph to one of his chapters the following words of Thomas Trotter from his 1792 *Observations on the Scurvy*: “Throughout the whole symptoms of this disease, there is something so peculiar to itself, that no description, however accurate it may be, can convey to the reader a proper idea of its nature.”²⁸ Such a sufferer feels as though his disease is ‘incommunicable,’ in the sense that it cannot be shared in language; and here, specifically in written language, since Trotter invokes a reader rather

²⁵ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 40.

²⁶ See Lamb’s *Scurvy: The Disease of Discovery*.

²⁷ Lamb, *Scurvy*, 9.

²⁸ Quoted in Lamb, *Scurvy*, 27. The quotation can be found in Trotter, *Observations on the Scurvy*, 71-2.

than a listener. Lamb writes of the isolating effect of scurvy, the impossibility of commiserating with others also experiencing the disease, because the experience is incurably private. The stubborn subjectivity asserted is also the insistence that the experience has no adequate comparison—and as diagnosis compares symptoms to symptoms others have experienced, it would seem as though scurvy were not only “peculiar to itself” as a disease, but also peculiar to each of its sufferers. The descriptive problem of accounting for individual, private suffering always exceeds characteristic symptoms that allow diagnosis. This excess is analogous to the excess the individual living thing presents to the attention, beyond what makes it possible to identify its species.

The “peculiarity” of a thing “to itself”—its “je ne sais quoi”—stands in tension with the ways it suggests comparison and relation. Wallace and Darwin come equipped in their observations of living things with a working theory to test, with a store of comparative specimens, illustrations, and accounts of other observers. All of this is brought to bear on each instance of observation. And yet, when a thing is alive, it always has something “peculiar to itself.” There is a question, then, about whether placing a living thing in relation obscures its particularity, or rather clarifies its particularity to particular others; its relatedness itself is particular. Furthermore, as in the case of scurvy, absolute peculiarity is profoundly isolating, so to claim something is absolutely incomparable is also to isolate it, to deprive it of company. Returning to Darwin’s gravel-pit, “one may as well count the pebbles and describe the colours”—not only, as Darwin meant it, as a defense of theory, but as a defense of comparison and relation. To observe as though each pebble were independent of all the others, not only entrenches one in a stubborn myopia, but also obscures the relation to other pebbles that is actually part of each pebble. If it were only a matter of avoiding the extremes, of moderation as a virtue in observation as in all other things—a clear solution would present itself, but a solution in opposition to the intelligence of attention. Some combination must recommend itself; a

combination of recognizing the real relatedness of a living thing to others of its kind, to others of related kinds, to others yet of extreme distance on the one hand, and on the other, sensing its unprecedented and irreplaceable aliveness, the respect in which there was never another and never will be another *quite* like it. Even Bishop's poem recognizes this combination when she qualifies the return of the goldfinches.²⁹

Yet such a recommendation obscures the tension that exists between the two; the tension between the act of comparison and the act of contrast, when all of the attention is bent on the one or bent on the other. It is always possible to say things are like other things in some respects, and not in others. But when the comparative work establishes the inextricable interrelatedness of all living things, as Darwin's and Wallace's theories of evolution and biogeography do, the contrastive work must shift to another register if it is not to be irrelevant. The contrast emerges from the excess, the life of a living thing, which brooks no comparison.

This tension for Darwin between relatedness and independence, is most evident not in his attention to the very small and evolutionarily distant—earthworms, barnacles—where indeed he seems most at home, most in his element. Rather the tension emerges in his observations of what is manifestly very like himself, namely other human beings, yet who live in a way and under circumstances that alienate him—most acutely in his observations of the Fuegians during the Voyage of the Beagle.³⁰ On the one hand, his characterization is ungenerous, xenophobic; but it is also shattered and restless, for these others are feared for their closeness rather than their difference, or rather the closeness within their difference.

²⁹ See previous chapter, discussion of Bishop's elegy for Robert Lowell, "North Haven." "The goldfinches are back, / or others like them."

³⁰ I focus here not on the Fuegians Captain Fitzroy had brought on the Beagle to be returned to their home after a period of experimental Europeanization, the famous Fuegia Basket, York Minster and Jemmy Button—about whom there is a great deal to say, but whom Darwin seems to take more in stride. They appear in the *Voyage of the Beagle* a ways into his account of Tierra del Fuego, with little fanfare: "I have not as yet noticed the Fuegians whom we had on board." (184) They do not shock Darwin as the "wild" Fuegians do.

Having now finished with Patagonia and the Falkland Islands, I will describe our first arrival in Tierra del Fuego. A little after noon we doubled Cape St. Diego, and entered the famous strait of Le Maire. We kept close to the Fuegian shore, but the outline of the rugged, inhospitable Statenland was visible amidst the clouds. In the afternoon we anchored in the Bay of Good Success. While entering we were saluted in a manner becoming the inhabitants of this savage land. A group of Fuegians partly concealed by the entangled forest, were perched on a wild point overhanging the sea; and as we passed by, they sprang up and waving their tattered cloaks sent forth a loud and sonorous shout. The savages followed the ship, and just before dark we saw their fire, and again heard their wild cry. The harbour consists of a fine piece of water half surrounded by low rounded mountains of clay-slate, which are covered to the water's edge by one dense gloomy forest. A single glance at the landscape was sufficient to show me how widely different it was from anything I had ever beheld.³¹

Pausing here, one gathers an overall impression of wildness, of land and people both: “A group of Fuegians partly concealed by the entangled forest, were perched on a wild point overhanging the sea.” The partial concealment of the people is passively descriptive, but also contains a possible connotation of active hiding; the entangled forest is their accomplice in this concealment; to “perch” is a creaturely verb, especially avian, and the description suggests the Fuegians’ adeptness in these surroundings, as a “wild point overhanging the sea” would make a precarious perch for any but the deftest creature. The alternation between the land and the people, both “savage,” gives a sense of how inextricable they are from each other—their belonging to each other—and dramatizes Darwin’s reaction to his first sight of them. There is an obliqueness, a possible displacement or elision, in the comment that “A single glance at the landscape was sufficient to show me how widely different it was from anything I had ever beheld.” For as the people are part of the landscape, they are part of its startling difference, the all-at-once impression of difference it gives. And “difference” is a quality for which Darwin ultimately has a healthy regard, being unwilling to overlook it in accounting for the variety and multiplicity of the natural world, in which he will more and more confidently come

³¹ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 182.

to include human beings. Up close, the encounter with Fuegians themselves becomes more prominent than the landscape, and difference becomes more emphatic:

In the morning the Captain sent a party to communicate with the Fuegians. When we came within hail, one of the four natives who were present advanced to receive us, and began to shout most vehemently, wishing to direct us where to land. When we were on shore the party looked rather alarmed, but continued talking and making gestures with great rapidity. It was without exception the most curious and interesting spectacle I ever beheld: I could not have believed how wide was the difference between savage and civilized man: it is greater than between a wild and domesticated animal, inasmuch as in man there is a greater power of improvement.³²

A few pages later, he restates the difference he feels between himself and the Fuegians even more forcefully, all but rejecting them: “Viewing such men, one can hardly make one’s self believe that they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world.”³³

Yet his astonished reaction communicates all the more forcefully his awareness that they are in fact human beings; that is, that they are of his own kind. Otherwise he would not be so astonished—for he is familiar with the wide range of possible aspects and behaviors among other animals. It is that they are, like the landscape, “so widely different from anything [he has] ever beheld,” and yet *are* human beings, that astonishes him. Astonishment is attention assaulted, and the opposite of Wallace’s “apathy”; rather than engaging in an act of calm and deliberate attention, as he would with plants, earthworms, barnacles—Darwin finds the Fuegians force themselves upon his attention, and he can hardly get or keep his bearings.

He does not seem to reflect on the fact that in the case of his own species, he might be more sensitive to difference than in any other species. As Cannon Schmitt observes, “Darwin anthropomorphizes non-human animals in order to group them with civilized humanity against

³² Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 182-3.

³³ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 190.

savages, who are thus effectively exiled, left without a place in the web of life.”³⁴ In this view, civilized humans are allied more closely to other animals than they are to “savage” humans. Schmitt cites a remarkable passage from a letter Darwin wrote to Charles Kingsley, from which I excerpt:

I declare the thought, when I first saw in T. del Fuego a naked painted, shivering hideous savage, that my ancestors must have been somewhat similar beings, was at that time as revolting to me, nay more revolting than my present belief that an incomparably more remote ancestor was a hairy beast. Monkeys have downright good hearts, at least sometimes, as I could show, if I had space.³⁵

The idea that savage humans are *more* difficult to accept as relations than monkeys does not arise from the objective qualities or characteristics of one and the other, but from the way that looking at savages provokes in Darwin an uncanny self-image. It is therefore effectively harder for him to attend to them than it is to attend to monkeys. Schmitt also picks up on the double-sense of the word “reflection” in a passage from the *Descent* where Darwin once again recalls the Fuegians: “The astonishment which I felt upon first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors.”³⁶ Schmitt argues that for Darwin, “Fuegians constitute a nightmarish double—as the term ‘reflection’ suggests: a thought or idea, ‘reflection’ can also, of course, refer to the image produced by a polished surface.” He has Darwin “recoiling from his own image as if from a distorting mirror.”³⁷ I would add to this assessment that for an observer such as Darwin, it poses a particular kind of problem when a “reflection at once rushe[s] into [one’s] mind.” The reflection of the self is blinding, and blocks the separate existence of the other from view. On the one hand this

³⁴ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 55.

³⁵ Cited in Schmitt, 49. The letter from Darwin to Kingsley is from 6 February 1862. Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 3439,” accessed on 9 March 2021, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LET-3439.xml>.

³⁶ Darwin, *Descent of Man*, vol. II, 404. Also cited in Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 48.

³⁷ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 49.

seems a strange problem for Darwin to confront, if indeed he was able to perceive aspects of himself in such creatures as earthworms, barnacles, spiders, plants.

It cannot be accidental that he went about his work most serenely when his attention was fixed upon creatures like barnacles and earthworms, whose difference from himself goes without saying, and yet whose surprising affinity with himself delighted him. For such creatures he had boundless patience and admiration. By seeming contrast, on the 19th of January 1833, he recounts,

I shall never forget how wild and savage one group appeared: suddenly four or five men came to the edge of an overhanging cliff; they were absolutely naked, and their long hair streamed about their faces; they held rugged staffs in their hands, and, springing from the ground, they waved their arms round their heads, and sent forth the most hideous yells.³⁸

The emphatic energy of the description matches the statement of its indelible status in his memory (“I shall never forget”). And Darwin’s encounters with primitive man reveal him as profoundly shaken, not so much by the *difference* between the Fuegians and himself, as by the specific *identity* between them and himself. To go so far as to say one finds it difficult to “make oneself believe” that the Fuegians are “inhabitants of the same world” pushes them further away than many more distantly related creatures. “World” has senses of varying scale, multiple of which may have been operative for Darwin at this moment—the most expansive being “The earth and everything on it” or “The material universe; the cosmos” but far more narrowly, “a person’s normal or habitual sphere of interest, action or thought.”³⁹ Darwin’s attention oscillates throughout his work between one small living thing at a time to all living things throughout the history of time, between small and vast senses of world. The suddenness of the expansion or contraction can be dizzying.⁴⁰ So his sense

³⁸ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 194.

³⁹ OED online, March 2021, s.v. “world,” definitions 6a, 8 and 10, respectively. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/230262?rskey=v0eVdE&result=1>.

⁴⁰ As examined in the first chapter of this dissertation, Elizabeth Bishop saw Darwin in the movement between scales in a “sudden relaxation, [...] his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.” See Bishop’s Letter to Anne Stevenson, January 8, 1964. (Bishop, *PPL*, 861)

of “world” could be by turns inclusive, shared by all living things including himself; and exclusive, barely large enough to include himself and members of his own species living differently on another continent. Yet it was the extreme difference of the Fuegians’ “world,” in the sense of the climate they inhabit, that leads him to acknowledge their equality with all living beings. Capaciously, a world includes many interrelated kinds, and Darwin would never naturally have made such a remark about the non-human creatures with whom he shares a world.

Yet throughout his writings, Darwin takes it as part of his work to “make [him]self believe” what attention reveals to him. He would come to assert that reality did not always make itself easy to believe.⁴¹ Thus in the *Origin*,

Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the universal struggle for life, or more difficult—at least I have found it so—than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind. Yet unless it be thoroughly engrained in the mind, I am convinced that the whole economy of nature, with every fact on distribution, rarity, abundance, extinction, and variation, will be dimly seen or quite misunderstood.⁴²

Believing the struggle for life requires both an acceptance of the outcome, which may obliterate the individual, and eventually the species, and recognition of the individual force that struggles. The exercise of “bear[ing] [a] conclusion in mind,” of “engrain[ing] in the mind,” of *knowing* a thing, possibly against our pleasure, continually brings Darwin back to the difficulty of bringing the observed world into the mind, and accounting for it in language. I suggest that this difficulty of accounting for the observed applies as much to the excess of living creatures as it does to abstract truths (like the “struggle for life” writ large), or geological and evolutionary time scales. This is excess not in the sense of variability, which is integral to the process of natural selection, but either the disarming excess of a living creature that stops the observer in his tracks in the moment of

⁴¹ Simone Weil says of affliction that it “compels us to recognize as real what we do not think possible.” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 73) In this sense we might say that Darwin is compellingly *afflicted* by the Fuegians.

⁴² Darwin, *Annotated Origin*, 62.

attention, or the realization through writing of an excess that escaped attention in the moment. The realization for instance that corals and barnacles are living animals is not just a matter of classifying them as such, but of *getting it into one's head*, or writing it into one's attention, that what does not appear alive is nonetheless as alive as oneself. The “ease” of “admitt[ing] in words” and the corresponding “difficulty” of “bear[ing] [...] in mind” sums up the problem of getting words to carry such a thing as “the universal struggle for life” into the very bones of the reader (and writer). Yet without these words, there is even less chance of bearing a difficult truth or “conclusion” in mind.

The challenge of bringing the observed world into the mind also comes through in Darwin's multiple expressions of a preference for observation over writing. After the publication of his book on orchids, Darwin returned to his hefty, more synthetic work on variation under domestication (conceived as support and substantiation for the ‘abstract’ that was *On the Origin of Species*). At this time Darwin remarked to George Romanes, “It is so much more interesting to observe than to write.”⁴³ Similarly, after the publication of the book on variation, he wrote, “What a splendid pursuit Natural History would be if it was all observing and no writing.”⁴⁴ Did he consider the books intensely focused on particular forms of life less “written” than the large-scale theoretical works? Or did he feel less authority over them? George Levine, advocating that we should actually read Darwin (and not only know the gist of his ideas), tends to downplay the remarks Darwin made about his preference for observation over writing. Against Darwin's expression at the end of a letter to Lyell, that “A naturalist's life wd be a happy one if he had only to observe & never to write” Levine notes that “[a]gainst his own instincts, but with the same assiduity with which he observed

⁴³ Cited in Browne, *The Power of Place*, 200. Letter from Darwin to G.J. Romanes on 19 June [1878]. Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 11560,” accessed on 9 March 2021, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-11560.xml>.

⁴⁴ Cited in Browne, *The Power of Place*, 304. Letter from Darwin to J.D. Hooker on 3 February [1868]. Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 5835,” accessed on 9 March 2021, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-5835.xml>.

nature, he became a real writer because he (correctly) believed he had to.”⁴⁵ I am persuaded by this account, but compelled to focus on the resistance to writing that comes before its overcoming, and often recurs with Darwin when a writing project is finished. Something about the value of observation—and the problem of writing—for Darwin gets obscured if we read those remarks only as expressions of habitual modesty. While there is no question that much of Darwin’s thinking happened in writing, we might still learn something about the relationship between observation and writing for Darwin if we consider what his ambivalence about writing might mean at face value. I would propose that for Darwin writing itself was an act of disarming, as much of himself as of his projected reader. Yet writing is also always a selective act, contracting even when it means to communicate or describe expansion, whereas observation allows the observer to suspend his selective faculty, opening him to excess, even encourages him to do so. In the alternation between observation and writing, Darwin navigated between the expansive possibilities of the one and the selective necessities of the other.

Darwin lays bare his own struggle to “engrain in the mind”—his own and his reader’s—the relationship between the Fuegians and himself. I see an analogy between this struggle, and the effort revealed elsewhere to attend to the aliveness of other living things. Some will find it unaccountable that Darwin, who manages to present to us the peculiar aliveness of barnacles and earthworms, to raise these creatures in our awareness, balks at the peculiar aliveness of the Fuegians, which should resemble his own so much more strongly than that of his precious invertebrates. Yet writing clarifies observation exactly here, where he finds himself wanting to look away.

His revulsion reveals a constraint upon his attention. Revulsion limits or even stops attention, as the observer turns away from the revolting object. Yet for an observer like Darwin it

⁴⁵ Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 3.

also marks an object as unobserved. And rather than take his revulsion as an observation in itself (to conclude that the Fuegians are by nature revolting), he takes it as a lapse in his own power of observation. He resists the thought that the Fuegians should be revolted at their own existence. It has been said that Darwin's writing provides very little evidence of self-reflection and, I would add, especially in comparison with a writer like Wallace. But he was not insensitive to the potential distortions of his own perspective. And it may be a mistake to look for direct self-reflection in one so inclined to understatement and indirection.⁴⁶ His awareness of himself comes through when he finds himself getting in the way of observation, getting between himself and the object of his attention. Thus writing becomes for him a form of indirect observation, through which he negotiates his thwarted or constrained attention. His reflections on the "miserable" state of these fellow creatures, and their baffling choice of land to inhabit, lead him to a curious sort of admission:

Although such reflections must at first seize on the mind, yet we may feel sure that they are partly erroneous. There is no reason to believe that the Fuegians decrease in number; therefore we must suppose that they enjoy a sufficient share of happiness, of whatever kind it may be, to render life worth having.⁴⁷

It is the barest concession. It follows a formula of logic: "There is no reason to believe"; "therefore we must suppose..." Yet the content of the supposition is the very conviction of aliveness: "that they enjoy a sufficient share of happiness, of whatever kind it may be, to render life worth having." His disgust and revulsion are not effects of attention but rather thwart or stall his attention.⁴⁸ The attention he pays is repaid in another currency, leaving an excess that cannot be converted but that

⁴⁶ See for instance Levine on the connection between understatement in Darwin's style and the conviction that phenomena could be "explained implicitly by reference only to normal causes," connecting understatement also to Darwin's commitment to gradualism. (Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 63)

⁴⁷ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 192-3.

⁴⁸ Darwin expresses particular disgust at the dirtiness of the Fuegians—"their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, their gestures violent." (*Voyage of the Beagle*, 190) Tim Dee muses on dust and dirt in his recent book mostly on gulls, *Landfill*, ranging from Henry Mayhew to Mary Douglas. He cites the latter: "No single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit." (Dee, 82) The Fuegians were out of place both in terms of descent, as intimately related yet unrecognizable to Darwin; and in geographical terms, for they subsist in a location Darwin experiences as uninhabitable by humans.

has irreducible value. The force of the conclusion he draws about the “reflections” that “must at first seize on the mind” comes from a fact (that the Fuegians persist in the struggle for life), not from an impression. He has made clear that his impression is one of misery. Yet it does not stand to reason for him (or for us) that his impression corresponds with the reality of the Fuegians. What may seem a parsimonious definition of, or basis for, happiness—that they do not decrease in numbers—is also an exacting one. He reasons that what continues to live, and manifestly to struggle for life, enjoys enough of something he calls “happiness” to make it worth the struggle. Perhaps the struggle for life is indistinguishable from happiness, by this account. At any rate, happiness matters in Darwin’s attention to life more broadly. He asserts in the second half of *The Descent of Man*, which develops his theory of sexual selection in humans as well as other animals: “With birds the voice serves to express various emotions, such as distress, fear, anger, triumph, or mere happiness.”⁴⁹ Like John Clare (see Chapter 1) and Gilbert White (see Chapter 4), he does not hesitate to extend happiness to non-human lives. This happiness is an excess that cannot be dispensed with, which is neither redundant nor wasteful, but which does not necessarily accord with assumptions of parsimony either. Again, in accord with Gilbert White, Darwin accepts that many animal actions, including human ones, may arise ‘merely’ out of “‘instinct,” and yet asserts that animals can have a rich experience of their own instinctive actions:

It has been argued, that the song of the male cannot serve as a charm, because the males of certain species, for instance, of the robin, sing during the autumn. But nothing is more common than for animals to take pleasure in practising whatever instinct they follow at other times for some real good. [...] Hence it is not at all surprising that male birds should continue singing for their own amusement after the season for courtship is over.⁵⁰

At once, Darwin has his eye out for a baseline, a minimal explanation for the forms life has taken—instinct, not decreasing in number—and grants that for the life existing in these forms, there is more

⁴⁹ Darwin *Descent of Man* vol. II, 51.

⁵⁰ Darwin *Descent of Man* vol. II, 54-5.

than the explanation accounts for, an excess in the dimension of experience. In such an instance of agitated subjectivity as Darwin's encounter with the Fuegians, it is looking away from the observed that allows him to see and write their aliveness more clearly, as he sees more clearly his own failure to see. He gathers an impression of misery because he himself would be miserable if confined within such an existence. The resemblance of the other to himself obscures his attention. Seeing himself in the other he errs as to the extent of the resemblance and impoverishes the other by seeing this other as a miserable version of the self, rather than as complete in, and "peculiar to," the *other's* self.

There are other ambiguous evocations of the Fuegians in Darwin's other major texts, which Schmitt opens up in his brilliant analysis of Darwin's "memory of the human." But I have not found another passage where he comes so near to articulating the limitations of his own attention and the excess that shapes or escapes it. The Fuegians' tenacity in the struggle for life is an unanswerable challenge to his deeply felt memory of their wretchedness.

Is there a contradiction between the revulsion Darwin describes in his experience at the sight of the Fuegians, and their indelible status in his memory? If as I suggest he knew he had not seen them adequately, how is it that he can call them to mind more vividly than many of the other living things he observed in a less agitated state? He does not report an equal status in his memory for other living creatures, creatures towards which he exhibits almost inordinate fondness. Schmitt draws our attention to Darwin's frequent recurrence to the episode of his first sight of the Fuegians throughout his writings. And indeed he does refer to it with remarkable consistency. But in the way that a detective knows to suspect a person is obscuring or withholding when she repeats her story too exactly, Darwin seems to advertise a lacuna in his memory of the Fuegians. They come to him in a flash, the same way each time.

Darwin's shock at the Fuegians matches in force and opposes in affect Wallace's "unaccountable" apathy after the wreck of the *Helen*. In both senses of apathy, Darwin's shock opposes it—rather than a lack he has a surplus of feeling, rather than freed he is constrained by what he observes. The memories of Fuegians that recur throughout Darwin's writings appear more as memories of his own shock than memories of the observed; there is perhaps an implicit admission in the dedicated act of attention that the presence of the object cannot be replaced by its recollection. It arouses a distinct awareness of its separate existence.

Darwin's criticism of the missing facts in Wallace's *Narrative of Travels* comes back into focus, and turns against him, for the "fact" of the Fuegians eluded his attention upon first seeing them, until he returned to them upon reflection. Like Wallace's recollections, Darwin's return to the Fuegians involves him in a secondary act of attention. Schmitt brings out the disruptive quality the Fuegians have in Darwin's account: "Astonishing rather than advantageous or disadvantageous, painful or pleasurable, Fuegians disrupt the organizational structure of the passage in which they appear, refusing to take their place in the litany."⁵¹ I suggest that if they disrupt the texture of Darwin's writing, this is a signal that they have disrupted the steadiness of his attention. Yet finally this disruption enforces the attention, as Darwin loosens the hold of the "reflections" that "must at first seize the mind" to allow for the existence of facts he could not grasp in the moment of perception, but must ultimately "make himself believe." Writing is for an audience, and contains something of the observer in it. Darwin's ambivalence about writing could have to do with the way that it takes his eyes away from the objects of his attention, projecting a reader, where in observation he could address his faculties solely to the interesting object. If, as he famously wrote to Joseph Hooker, he felt that writing about the mutability of species (even to write that he was "almost

⁵¹ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 40.

convinced”) was “like confessing a murder,” the spectre of the reader must have sometimes been terrifying indeed.⁵² Writing also requires that he himself take on a solid presence; it is not possible to become lost in writing in the same self-forgetful way as it is possible to become absorbed in life external to and other than the self. There is a writerly capacity for lightness of presence, which John Keats named “Negative Capability”—“when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”⁵³ For Darwin as author, writing could not but make his own presence carry weight; being in doubt and uncertainty went hand in hand with taking his place in the account. With the Fuegians, the very act of attention was also the beginning of writing, as they disarmed him of the power he would develop throughout his vocation, to lose himself in the deeply other.

Wallace and the Struggle for Life

Darwin had an early enthusiasm for hunting which deserted him later in life, and rarely does he write an account in detail of an animal struggling for its life because of his own actions. Wallace, by contrast, gives quite vivid accounts of hunting and collecting in both *Travels on the Amazon* and *The Malay Archipelago*, in some of which he was directly involved and in others where he relied on native hunters. Where Darwin quietly concludes that the Fuegians must be other than they appeared to him, and in the *Origin* gives us a maxim—that “Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the universal struggle for life, or more difficult—at least I have found it so—than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind”—Wallace observes the struggle for life directly, in the course of hunting

⁵² Letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker 11 January 1844. Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 729,” accessed on 3 March 2021, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-729.xml/>.

⁵³ Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats of December 21, 27(?), 1817, *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, 889. See also Keats’s letter of February 3, 1818 to John Hamilton Reynolds, in which he writes that “Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.” (Keats, *Norton Anthology*, 890)

and collecting, and does not flinch from the description of animals trying (sometimes successfully) to escape his own net or gun. He writes about the difficulty of capture in a way that makes vivid the labor of natural history. An entire essay might be devoted to the moments in Wallace's two travel narratives where he relates the struggle to capture.

In passages difficult for the softhearted to abide, he even writes of creatures that, once wounded, continue to struggle. The tenacity of life is an object of wonder and respect, yet also an object for the naturalist to overcome, as he ultimately takes the life he observes in its struggle. To give a brief and pungent illustration, nothing speaks quite as much for itself as the details he gives of orangutans pushing back against his efforts to procure them as specimens. As an outlier, here is his account of his first sighting of a "Mias" (the native word, which he preserves in many cases, for Orangutan):

I was out collecting insects, not more than a quarter of a mile from the house, when I heard a rustling in a tree near, and, looking up, saw a large red-haired animal moving slowly along, hanging from the branches by its arms. It passed on from tree to tree till it was lost in the jungle, which was so swampy that I could not follow it. This mode of progression was, however very unusual, and is more characteristic of the *Hylobates* than of the *Orang*. I suppose there was some individual peculiarity in this animal, or the nature of the trees just in this place rendered it the most easy mode of progression.⁵⁴

His first sight of a Mias commemorates an animal of possible "individual peculiarity." It is a moment of possible divergence between an individual and its type, and it is briefly arresting. Here, as in the passage on the 'black jaguar' in *Travels on the Amazon*, he gives an account of his encounter with an animal as it passes through the range of his own senses and movement. This is not the animal apprehended, but observed on its own terms, without any attempt to prevent its passage into the swampy regions where Wallace "could not follow." Whether this is because he lacks the proper ammunition (he is out collecting insects after all), or has not yet formed the intention to shoot, or

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 31.

wants to observe the Orang's behavior, he includes it in the narrative as a moment of surprised attention. While absorbed in his insect-collecting work he is caught unawares by its "rustling in a tree," and for the time being he seems only interested in taking in the peculiar existence of this "red-haired animal."

Soon after, however, he sets about acquiring specimens.⁵⁵ Here is one of several accounts:

It fell at the first shot, but did not seem much hurt, and immediately climbed up the nearest tree, when I fired, and it again fell, with a broken arm and a wound in the body. The two Dyaks now ran up to it, and each seized hold of a hand, telling me to cut a pole, and they would secure it. But although one arm was broken, it was too strong for these young savages, drawing them up towards its mouth notwithstanding all their efforts, so that they were again obliged to leave go, or they would have been seriously bitten. It now began climbing up the tree again; and, to avoid trouble, I shot it through the heart.⁵⁶

The animal struggling for its life is the object of Wallace's attention, and here he engages the attention of naturalist, hunter, and collector. There is a surprising comparison to be made between this episode and Clare's badger poem, except that here the writer, who chronicles the animal's will to live, also ends its life. I find here an ambiguous pathos I do not know if Wallace intended. Indeed, it may strike a modern reader as pitiless, for Wallace does *not* consider the animal an object of pity. But his account of the struggle to kill is bound up with his account of the Orang's struggle to live, in a way that cannot be reduced to the outcome. He also includes one that gets away: "I fired at it, and on seeing me, it began howling in a strange voice like a cough, and seemed in a great rage, breaking off branches with its hands and throwing them down, and then made off over the tree-tops."

Another he finds ten days later, "which behaved in a very similar manner, howling and hooting with rage, and throwing down branches. I shot at it five times, and it remained dead on the top of the

⁵⁵ Wallace "shot and procured as many orangutan specimens as he could. They were some of the most valuable specimens he collected in the East." (van Wyhe and Kjærgaard, "Going the whole orang," 59) As Chris Herzfeld writes in her history of primatology, "It must be remembered that Wallace was above all a hunter and collector, and that his initial reaction upon seeing these animals was to get his gun and shoot. Observation came second." (Herzfeld, *Great Apes*, 170)

⁵⁶ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 31.

tree, supported in a fork in such a manner that it would evidently not fall.” With the help of some Dyak hunters, he manages to get it down.⁵⁷

All who are familiar with Wallace’s travels in the Malay Archipelago will probably remember the story of the baby ‘Mias’ he comes to adopt and tries to keep alive, developing a considerable affection for it. This episode resembles the passage from *Robinson Crusoe*, where Crusoe manages to shoot a goat only to realize it has a kid. Crusoe tries to keep the kid as a pet but fails to keep it alive, so finally puts it out of its misery and eats it. Wallace had read *Robinson Crusoe* as a boy (like John Clare) “over again and again with great pleasure.”⁵⁸ Whether he modeled the narrative of his time with the baby Orang in the *Malay Archipelago* after this passage in *Crusoe* I cannot say, but it was somewhere in his consciousness. Wallace does not, so far as I know, eat his baby Orang (upon its death he preserves it as a specimen), but he procures it under uncannily similar circumstances, and does fail to keep it alive any longer than three months, seemingly because he can find no nutrition that would substitute for its mother’s milk. Here are the circumstances:

Only four days after-wards [after the killing of the previous orang with five shots] some Dyaks saw another Mias near the same place, and came to tell me. We found it to be a rather large one, very high up on a tall tree. At the second shot it fell rolling over, but almost immediately got up again and began to climb. At a third shot it fell dead. This was also a full-grown female, and while preparing to carry it home, we found a young one face downwards in the bog. This little creature was only about a foot long, and had evidently been hanging to its mother when she first fell. Luckily it did not appear to have been wounded, and after we had cleaned the mud out of its mouth it began to cry out, and seemed quite strong and active. While carrying it home it got its hands in my beard, and grasped so tightly that I had great difficulty in getting free, for the fingers are habitually bent inwards at the last joint so as to form complete hooks.⁵⁹

Quite literally, this animal lays hold of him. He observes how closely it resembles a human baby, and many see this as an investigation into the shared ancestry of humans and apes. But its claims on him

⁵⁷ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 31-2.

⁵⁸ Wallace, *My Life*, vol. I, 74. He also had fond memories of his father reading out “Defoe’s wonderful ‘History of the Great Plague,’” which we now usually know by the title *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 32.

arise as much from its peculiarity. He is called to attention by the way it differs from human babies, namely in the extraordinary “tenacity of its grasp,” to which his beard often bore witness (human babies certainly can be grabby, but he is impressed with a superlative grasp for which he is unprepared, with which he is unfamiliar in the realm of human experience). Presumably for want of a proper Orang upbringing, this tenacity “soon diminished, and I was obliged to invent some means to give it exercise and strengthen its limbs. For this purpose I made a short ladder of three or four rounds, on which I put it to hang for a quarter of an hour at a time”—not an arrangement that would be practical for a human infant. When it dies, he reports, “I much regretted the loss of my little pet, which I had at one time looked forward to bringing up to years of maturity, and taking home to England.”⁶⁰

It is perhaps tempting to read too much into the episode of Wallace and his “little pet” (whom, as van Wyhe and Kjærgaard note, he never named⁶¹). It was admittedly opportunistic, motivated as much by scientific curiosity about orangutan behavior as by sympathy for the orphaned infant. But again he resembles Crusoe, in registering an emergent tenderness for the baby animal, a tenderness he is powerless to make good on. Ultimately Crusoe can only kill the kid to prevent further suffering, since he is unable to care for it. Crusoe gives a longer narrative version of this event, which details how it “grieved [him] heartily,” and later in journal form recounts laconically: “I went out into the island with my gun to seek for some food, and discovered the country, when I killed a she-goat, and her kid followed me home, which I afterwards killed also, because it would not feed.”⁶² The condensation into journal form elides the emotion, giving only the facts.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago* 35.

⁶¹ van Wyhe and Kjærgaard, “Going the whole orang,” 59.

⁶² Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 56 & 65.

Wallace does not omit his affection (which perhaps does not quite become love) from the account, nor his “regret” (if not quite grief). It becomes evident that care is more difficult than killing, even with an animal that puts up a fight. “For several months it had afforded me daily amusement by its curious ways and the inimitably ludicrous expression of its little countenance.”⁶³ Even after its death he marveled at a resilience of which he had not been aware until examining the little one’s skeleton: “in doing so [I] found that when it fell from the tree it must have broken an arm and a leg, which had, however, united so rapidly that I had only noticed the hard swellings on the limbs where the irregular junction of the bones had taken place.”⁶⁴

These traces of healing do not exactly haunt Wallace, since he is not of a haunted disposition, but they do momentarily disarm him, since like Crusoe he finds himself at last powerless to keep the animal alive: “It lost all appetite for its food, and, after lingering for a week a most pitiable object, died, after being in my possession nearly three months.”⁶⁵ I find it nearly impossible to separate his feeling for the struggle for life in these creatures from his keenness to take their lives. Both forces are at play when he hunts them. In fact, immediately following his account of the baby Orang’s death and the discovery of the injuries it had sustained, he gives a gripping dramatic narrative of hunting an adult male, whom he wants very much as a specimen, since thus far he had only acquired juveniles and females. The difficulty of bringing this formidable beast down, even after it has been killed, has to do with the resistance not only of the ape, but of the forest that literally holds him up. “As a last resource we all began pulling at the creepers, which shook the tree

⁶³ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 35.

⁶⁴ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 36.

⁶⁵ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 35.

very much, and, after a few minutes, when we had almost given up hopes, down he came with a crash and a thud like the fall of a giant.”⁶⁶

He is disarmed and yet not disarmed, and a modern reader (my reader) might wonder whether in this case, since he goes on killing the magnificent Orangs, his flashes of disarmed attention really “count.” Surely we would prefer him to have learned some manners from his encounters, to have come to spare the lives on which we (my readers and I) might feel he ought to have learned he had no claim. It is disappointing to find that he seems ultimately unmoved, untransformed by the disarming Orang presence he manages to conjure in his writing, and it is little consolation to point out that he was ‘doing his job’ as a naturalist, earning his bread, for he seemed to do it without ambivalence. In hindsight, considering the endangerment of all three currently recognized species of the *Pongo* genus (two of the three qualify as “critically endangered”), to read these vivid Orang hunts is particularly excruciating.⁶⁷ But the illuminations of hindsight can be blinding, and it is exactly here at this painful juncture that I find one of the most potent examples of how Wallace’s writing could register the fierce independence of another life, in excess of his designs upon it. He was somehow capable of doing justice to that life in writing, while in his actions he had apparently no qualms about doing violence to it. This moral literary effect also has a history, through the genre of hunting narratives. Thus it is that the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym of Karen Blixen) and the American Ernest Hemingway could write of killing animals—for sport—in such a way that a reader with no experience of hunting (or bull-fighting, as the case may be), while revolting in her heart against the gratuitous violence, cannot flatly discount the writer, who evinces a startling, unaccountable love for the hunted animal (and in Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*, love for a complex cultural practice of animal sacrifice). Especially when it comes to endangered

⁶⁶ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 37.

⁶⁷ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/orangutan>

charismatic animals, and their charisma is intrinsic to the hunter's infatuation with them, the cost of such violence comes to seem less and less tolerable, less and less reconcilable with love. It is hard now not to feel a rising panic, reading Dinesen's lion hunt in *Shadows on the Grass*, as it is in reading Wallace's Orang hunts in *The Malay Archipelago*.⁶⁸

Adapting Lucy Alford's claim for poetic attention, in Wallace's narration of his attention to orangutans we may find "the *necessary but insufficient grounds for ethical response*."⁶⁹ Perhaps nowhere is its insufficiency more evident, but insufficient on contemporary terms, which can only be inadequate.⁷⁰ In the following passage, from an article published in 1863, the year after Wallace's return to England from the Malay Archipelago, we have an indication of Wallace's awareness of the threat of extinction especially to life forms studied and collected on colonial expeditions, and he makes an argument that will be familiar to current advocates of DNA barcoding:

[The naturalist] looks on every species of animal and plant now living as the individual letters which go to make up one of the volumes of the earth's history ; and, as a few lost letters may make a sentence unintelligible, so the extinction of the numerous forms of life which the progress of cultivation invariably entails will necessarily render obscure this invaluable record of the past. It is, therefore, an important object, which governments and scientific institutions should immediately take steps to secure, that in all tropical countries colonised by Europeans the most perfect collections possible in every branch of natural history should

⁶⁸ See especially Dinesen, *Out of Africa; and, Shadows on the Grass*, 405-412. Hers is neither a conversion narrative like those Mark Payne discusses (see note 70), nor is it unquestioning like Wallace's—by turns she romanticizes ("it may be said that hunting is ever a love affair") and harrows (of the elephant, "The manifestation of the glory of God was turned into an object of exploitation. Is it to be wondered at that he cannot forgive us?"—"he" being, I think, the elephant rather than God). She describes in general a slow change, a slow loss of appetite for the hunt, "But lion-hunting was irresistible to me; I shot my last lion a short time before I left Africa." (410) *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass* are also products of a very different time, a different moment of ecological awareness (the latter came out just a year before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*) and of colonial reckoning than Wallace's *Malay Archipelago*.

⁶⁹ Alford, *Poetics of Attention*, 277. (italics in the original)

⁷⁰ A sub-genre of the hunting narrative, in which the hunter lowers his gun in face-to-face encounter with the hunted, includes the episode of the black jaguar in Wallace's *Narrative of Travels*, and has its legendary example in Teddy Roosevelt's encounter with a Louisiana Black Bear. The myth of Roosevelt's compassion in that instance (a myth I was taught, in grade school in rural Oregon, as history) led of course to the invention of an iconic toy, the "Teddy bear." See account in Canfield, 264-5. Mark Payne writes of hunting narratives where the hunter has a sudden awakening to his prey as "conversion narratives," attending to Aldo Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain" and Hemingway's "An African Story," which he then connects to J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* as continuous with this tradition of attempting to write "the strange bondage of the eyes." (Payne, "The Hunter Becomes the Haunted," *The Animal Part*, 3-8)

be made and deposited in national museums, where they may be available for study and interpretation.⁷¹

He follows this up with a final paragraph presaging the moral indictment that future generations will be likely to pass upon the present if the wanton destruction continues unchecked.⁷² Here and in the passage with which I opened this chapter, of 17 years later, while Wallace laments the fact of extinction he stops short of suggesting that these forms of life should be protected for their own sake. It is in the writing of his living attention to life, even as he hunts it, rather than in his formulations of policy and theory, that he registers such a claim of life in excess of human knowledge. As Sandra Knapp writes,

From a twenty-first-century conservation biology perspective it is difficult to reconcile the images of a man who shot and killed eighteen orang-utans (the nineteenth he shot got away), with that of a man who advocated the establishment of botanical reserves in the tropics [...] Alfred Russel Wallace did all of these things, and his relationship with nature and the environment is both typically Victorian and astonishingly modern.⁷³

I would only add that in reconciling these two “images” of Wallace, which Knapp does in her assessment that he would be “completely in sympathy with the modern view of conservation as tightly linked with sustainable development and improvement of the human condition,” there is still a haunting remainder to be found in his writings of attentive encounter with individual living things. The contradiction I register (and do not attempt to reconcile) is not between Wallace the hunter and

⁷¹ Wallace, “On the Physical Geography of the Malay Archipelago,” 234.

⁷² Note the resemblance between Wallace’s argument here and that of Paul Hebert, so-called “father of DNA barcoding” quoted in an article on DNA barcoding in “disappearing ecosystems,” down to the book-of-life metaphor (which has its own long history) and the invocation of future judgment to be passed on present carelessness: “It’s a million centuries between every mass extinction event and we’re living in the century that brings the next one. [...] We’re talking about the irrevocable loss of knowledge on the largest scale ever experienced by humanity—driven by humanity. Because every one of those genomes and every one of those species: that’s a book of life, and it’s about 10 times bigger than the longest book ever written by any human. So I think history will indict us severely for allowing this erosion of knowledge on an absolutely unprecedented scale.” (Greenfield, “Counting the Species”) In both instances the scientist deplores the “erosion of knowledge,” implicitly esteeming the record of life more highly than life itself. Perhaps this has to do with the dream of imperishability for the record, as set against the inherent perishability of every individual organism, and eventually, every species.

⁷³ Knapp, “Wallace, Conservation, and Sustainable Development,” 201.

Wallace the proto-conservationist, but between Wallace the anthropocentric naturalist, and Wallace the disarmed observer of other life.⁷⁴

Barely Recognizable Forms of Life, and the Evidence of Accumulation

Wallace for the most part wrote about his attention to charismatic and beautiful forms of life—orangutans, birds, butterflies. His insight into their independence from human life came for instance through his experience of how difficult it really is to care for a baby Orang, and as we will see later, how remotely from human civilization the Bird of Paradise lived and thrived in all of its beauty. Darwin on the other hand found his attention most vigorous when he trained it on forms of life generally considered low, simple, primitive. When he writes about them, he almost invariably yields an awareness of the under-appreciated level at which they are alive. Thus the work on barnacles and corals is responsive to debates in the not so distant past about whether to class them as plants or animals; the work on plants tends to explore the possibility of their sentience; and the work on earthworms brings its subjects into focus both as significant geological and environmental agents, and as beings possessed of a capacity for attention, “the presence of a mind.”

Darwin’s friend and supporter Charles Kingsley, in his pre-*Origin* book, *Glaucus; or, the Wonders of the Shore*, expresses this awakening to overlooked forms of life as one of the greatest

⁷⁴ There are numerous other discussions of Wallace’s contribution to ecology and conservation biology. Knapp is the only one I have found to clarify Wallace’s anthropocentrism. See for instance Clark and York (“The Restoration of Nature”), Lomolino (“Wallace at the Foundations of Biogeography”), and Costa (“Historical and Ecological Biogeography”). Lomolino makes a case for Wallace’s contribution to a growing awareness of what we now call the Anthropocene, and how the “holistic” approach of his biogeography, which sees life as inseparable from its distribution over the earth, made anthropogenic environmental disturbance and devastation thinkable. Clark and York contextualize the 1878 essay where Wallace proposed an ambitious restoration of Epping Forest and “contributed to a philosophy of ecological restoration by raising the issue of how we are to address anthropogenic environmental problems.” (Clark and York, 231) The other side of this, which I have been trying to emphasize, is the capacity to recognize human-caused losses of non-human life independently of how these losses diminish human well-being; to recognize other forms of life as for themselves. The main thrust of Wallace’s thinking tended away from such non-anthropocentric recognition. Yet I am suggesting, in keeping with many accounts of Wallace as a man of unresolved contradictions, that his oeuvre includes numerous instances recognizing other lives in excess of any human context.

ethical potentials of engagement in the practice of natural history. Referring to the notions of a certain Professor Harvey, that “the simpler animals represent, as in a glass, the scattered organs of the higher races,” he considers that, as aesthetically pleasing and flattering as such a neat part-to-whole vision might be, the simplest forms are as complete, as alive (in my words), as the most complex—and that there is no reason to assume a linear progression in nature from lowest to highest. Reflecting on the implication of the popular names, ‘sca’d man’s head,’ and ‘mermaid’s head’ of the sea urchin, *Amphidotus cordatus*, he maintains:

One cannot say [...] that in him we have the first type of the human skull; for the resemblance, quaint as it is, is only sensuous and accidental, (in the logical use of that term,) and not homological, *i.e.* a lower manifestation of the same idea. Yet how is one tempted to say, that this was Nature’s first and lowest attempt at that use of the hollow globes of mineral for protecting soft fleshy parts, which she afterwards developed to such perfection in the skulls of vertebrate animals. But even that conceit, pretty as it sounds, will not hold good; for though Radiates similar to these were among the earliest tenants of the abyss, yet as early as their time, perhaps even before them, had been conceived and actualized, in the sharks, and in Mr. Hugh Miller’s pets the old red sandstone fishes, that very true vertebrate skull and brain, of which this is a mere mockery. Here the whole animal, with his extraordinary feeding mill, (for neither teeth nor jaws is a fit word for it,) is enclosed within an ever-growing limestone castle [...] without arms or legs, eyes or ears, and yet capable, in spite of his perpetual imprisonment, of walking, feeding, and breeding, doubt it not, merrily enough.⁷⁵

The religious value of humility stands out as a guiding principle for Kingsley, a value cultivated in natural history, and particularly in absorbed attention to less routinely exalted forms of life. But the idea that we cannot afford to indulge in a “pretty conceit” because it does not hold up under scrutiny also reflects an epistemological virtue. Kingsley advocates empirical observation, turning outward, rather than internal speculation or even rational calculation, as an antidote to the human mind (and in this case, aesthetic sensibility) fabricating its own version of the natural order. For one as devout as Kingsley such proud imposition would constitute a grave sin. In his colloquial way, he also advocates an assumption of the basic completeness and self-sufficiency of other forms of life.

⁷⁵ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 95-6.

Unlike either Darwin or Wallace, his writing is didactic; he takes the reader as if by the hand on a kind of guided walk, and gives a lesson in the wisdom that the practice of even amateur natural history can foster. The anthropomorphic “merriness” he ascribes to the *Amphidotus cordatus* in fact works against the kind of anthropomorphism that would obscure the difference between humans and the described animal.⁷⁶ It reinforces the fact that this animal does *not* experience its condition in the way a human being would, but manages to carry out all that is necessary for its life under a set of constraints that a human would find untenable, and experience as “imprisonment.” Thus does focused attention to other living things, when it sustains an openness to their otherness, rarely result in pity.⁷⁷ Like Darwin’s “happiness” (if a bit more playful), Kingsley’s “merrily” allows for excess, more than meets the human eye, in the sea urchin. For Kingsley, when human beings are “brought face to face with the creatures of another world,” they acquire the sense that “nature [is] independent of them, not merely they of her.”⁷⁸

This didacticism does not mean that his lessons are always straightforward. There is the force of an unsettled conflict, a moral not immediately available, in his narrative of predation, in which a “black, shiny, knotted lump among the gravel” comes to life. “It lies motionless, trailing itself among the gravel [...] it may be a strip of dead seaweed [...] or even a tarred string. So thinks

⁷⁶ As Lorraine Daston and Greg Mittman write, anthropomorphism “is the word used to describe the belief that animals are essentially like humans.” (Daston and Mittman, *Thinking with Animals*, 2) In this case, “essentially” would extend to the fact of being physically suited to life as the animal that one is, and experiencing a desire to continue in such a life, whether *homo sapiens* or *amphidotus cordatus*. So while the term of temper or mood, “merrily,” is typically associated with humans, here it is used in an extended sense, a sense that must expand beyond humans to retain its meaning. It is, as Lorraine Daston has reminded me, anthropomorphic without being anthropocentric. If we cannot ever completely escape the ways anthropomorphism creeps into our thinking, since it is bound up with our empathic capacity, we might still examine our anthropomorphisms in a way that allows us to feel what we don’t know about the lives of other animals, not as an emptiness or a blank, but as a dense and full “unknown quantity,” in the richest colloquial sense of that phrase.

⁷⁷ As D.H. Lawrence wrote,

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.

A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough

without ever having felt sorry for itself. (Lawrence, “Self-Pity,” *Complete Works*, Poems I, 467)

⁷⁸ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 25-6.

the little fish who plays over and over it, till he touches at last what is too surely a head.” The question of whether the unidentified worm is alive is settled only when it takes another life. He tells the story in mock-epic, or mock-gothic terms, to dramatize that not only does life take forms we do not expect, but has hidden ferocity: “Once safe down, the black murderer slowly contracts again into a knotted heap, and lies, like a boa with a stag inside him, motionless and blest.”⁷⁹ In characteristic fashion, Kingsley asks with us before coming to the drama of the passage above, “Is it alive? It hangs helpless and motionless, a mere velvet string across the hand.”⁸⁰ This is the baldest form of the question, and I see it on a continuum with Darwin’s much later work on earthworms. But it also exists on a continuum with the question Darwin seems to be asking of the Fuegians, namely, are they human? Both questions—*is it alive?* and *is it human?*—carry the force of comparison to the observer’s self, who is both. But whereas the test of aliveness seems the least discriminating, the test of humanity requires the observer to claim the other as one of his own. For Darwin as we have seen, attention to the aliveness of radically other humans could prove more fraught than attention to the aliveness of living things that bear no resemblance to humans other than the fact of being alive.⁸¹

In *Glaucus*, Kingsley owns that, “There are animals, like monkeys and crabs, which seem made to be laughed at; by those at least who possess that most indefinable of faculties, the sense of the ridiculous.”⁸² What is normal to a creature is presumably not ridiculous to itself, yet the human urge to laugh can be irrepressible. The human attention to such creatures poses a problem for natural theology, since “we shrink (whether rightly or wrongly, we can hardly tell) from attributing a

⁷⁹ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 106.

⁸⁰ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 105.

⁸¹ Of course I do not mean to suggest Darwin had difficulty identifying the Fuegians as alive. I mean to focus on the difference in the nature of his attention in these two cases.

⁸² Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 102.

sense of the ludicrous to the Creator of these forms.” He settles on the temporary solution that we ought to “observe a stoic ‘epoché,’ waiting for more light, and yet confessing that our own laughter is uncontrollable, and therefore we hope not unworthy of us, at many a strange creature and strange doing which we meet, from the highest ape to the lowest polype. [sic]”⁸³ It may be that Kingsley can go no further than to acknowledge this, and urge humans to trust to the moral compass that guides them, but not to impose it upon other forms of life—that what might be wrong or ludicrous for us is not wrong or ludicrous for other creatures. It is a way of knowing oneself without presuming to know the other.

Darwin’s pre-*Origin* works on coral reefs and barnacles express an idea he would return to throughout his theoretical and empirical work, namely that small living things, though often working at a pace or in an element invisible to human observation, produce results that reveal the power, work and movement of which those small living things are capable. The work and movement themselves are not available to human perception on its own, but the results they produce must lead humans to recognize the aliveness of what they can’t directly see in its process of living. To attend to such creatures requires an awareness of the limitations of one’s own faculties.⁸⁴ Evolution by natural selection as a gradualist process is the very type of this truth, and in the *Origin* Darwin works to build his case for how species can result in such marvelous and pronounced distinctness and variety from the accumulation and preservation of small variations, any one of which would not seem marvelous in itself. But before the grandeur of that theory, in the introduction to his book making a major (and lasting) intervention in the study of coral reefs, he expressed the fascination of these living formations. He at once acknowledges their current and justified reputation, and begins to erode its

⁸³ Kingsley, *Glaucus*, 103.

⁸⁴ Which again makes Darwin’s attention to these creatures not always at odds with his attention to the Fuegians—recall his recognition that though he struggles to see it, he cannot deny them their “share of happiness” sufficient “to render life worth having.”

sufficiency. He demonstrates how attention to a thing which doesn't move before the eyes nonetheless reveals a process, in the unmanifest connection between the coral itself and the structure it forms:

The lagoon-islands have received much the most attention; and it is not surprising, for every one must be struck with astonishment, when he first beholds one of these vast rings of coral-rock, often many leagues in diameter, here and there surmounted by a low verdant island with dazzling white shores, bathed on the outside by the foaming breakers of the ocean, and on the inside surrounding a calm expanse of water, which, from reflection, is of a bright but pale green colour. The naturalist will feel this astonishment the more deeply after having examined the soft and almost gelatinous bodies of these apparently insignificant creatures, and when he knows that the solid reef increases only on the outer edge, which day and night is lashed by the breakers of an ocean never at rest.⁸⁵

These “apparently insignificant creatures” require the naturalist to adjust his attention to what is *not apparent* about them. This means adjusting to another time scale (which requires the assistance of the imagination), but also to another way of being alive than the observer's way. One might read such a statement and assume that these creatures become significant only when they accumulate, only by virtue of their power of accumulation. But Darwin's attention—and writing of his attention—works against this single trajectory from small to large. He acknowledges the apparent insignificance, equally acknowledges its mistakenness on the basis of what *is* apparent, and then re-directs our attention *back* to the non-apparent “level of aliveness” (to use Scarry's phrase once more) in the underestimated “soft and almost gelatinous body.”

The book on coral reefs is extraordinary in part for the way it describes the constraints that check the growth of these formations—a necessary consideration if one is to come to understand their living nature (for it is characteristic of living things to face resistance, to struggle); part of his ambition is to show “how severe a struggle is in progress on these low coral-formations between the

⁸⁵ Darwin, *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, 1.

two nicely balanced powers of land and water.”⁸⁶ As a whole the book has more geological than zoological ambitions.⁸⁷ But his descriptions of “struggle” recall the living basis of the formations he observes and accounts for. In a particularly striking instance of this, he writes, “[...] as the space becomes shallower, their growth will, also, be checked by the impurities of the water, and probably by the small amount of food brought by the enfeebled currents, in proportion to *the surface of living reefs studded with innumerable craving mouths.*”⁸⁸ (emphasis mine) Hunger is perhaps the most constant reminder of the struggle for life. Darwin throws into doubt an implicit assumption that these formations simply grow up or appear effortlessly, planting the seed for the idea of the struggle for existence that will become so crucial a principle for his theory of evolution by natural selection.

The deposition, moreover, of sediment, checks the growth of coral reefs, so that these two agencies cannot act together with full effect in filling it up. [...] The reefs also, it must be remembered, cannot possibly rise above the level of the lowest spring-tide, so that the final conversion of the lagoon into land must be due to the accumulation of sediment; and in the midst of the clear water of the ocean, and with no surrounding high land, this process must be exceedingly slow.⁸⁹

He describes a process of continual discouragement, of growth in spite of counter-forces. In his book *Darwin the Writer* George Levine argues for a reconsideration of the “comic” dimension of Darwin. He eschews the idea that the tragic implications of Darwin’s theory have their origins in Darwin’s writing. He cites not only the re-enchantment that Darwin offers as compensation for the loss of a natural theological worldview; but also the attention lavished upon the small.⁹⁰ It was Darwin’s writing that did the work of re-enchantment, where the theory on its own, or in other terms, could not. The triumph of coral formations in spite of the forces against them—the

⁸⁶ Darwin, *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, 18.

⁸⁷ For a lengthy and thorough study of Darwin’s work on coral reefs that situates the work in context of Darwin’s development as an observer and as a theorizer, see Alistair Sponsel’s *Darwin’s Evolving Identity* (2018).

⁸⁸ Darwin, *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, 101.

⁸⁹ Darwin, *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, 19.

⁹⁰ In this, Levine’s argument about Darwin’s comic dimension has something in common with Erich Auerbach’s argument about the development of realism in *Mimesis*, in the sense that “lower” forms of life (in Auerbach’s case, lower classes of humanity) are embraced as eminently worthy of attention.

reconsideration of what must be overcome in order for these formations to “have existence”— could offer further support for such a claim. After all the struggle for existence, as Darwin suggests in his reflections upon the Fuegians, implies a desire to exist, a “sufficient happiness.”

Worms at Attention

There are at least two places in Darwin’s writings where he attends to the faculty of attention at work in the objects of his attention.

On board the Beagle he observes gossamer spiders of the *Linyphiidae* family:

They formed an irregular net work amongst the ropes: Could run easily on water: Lifted up their front legs in attitude of attention. Seemed to have an inexhaustible stock of web: With their Maxillae protruded, drank eagerly water⁹¹

What interests me here is his attribution of a faculty of attention, or attentiveness, to an animal very distant from himself in evolutionary terms. The attribution is impressionistic, an “attitude” associated with a position (the lifted front legs). But even as a figurative notation, it exists in continuity with his later work on “expression” in humans and other animals.⁹² Darwin was ready to grant the ‘lowliest’ creatures a capacity acutely developed in himself, even a faculty he would consider his own primary claim to genius. While he claims to have “no great quickness of apprehension or wit which is so remarkable in some clever men,” he owns that, “On the favourable side of the balance, I think that I am superior to the common run of men in noticing things which easily escape attention, and in observing them carefully.”⁹³ This remark may be taken as yet another instance of his famous modesty, but it also inflects that modesty. Taken alongside his detection and assessment of attention in other forms of life, this statement in the autobiography suggests not that

⁹¹ Quoted in Keynes, *Fossils, Finches and Fuegians*, 115. Can be found in notes of November 1832, Monte Video in *Charles Darwin’s Zoology Notes and Specimen Lists from H.M.S. Beagle*, 108.

⁹² See *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

⁹³ Darwin, *Autobiography*, 114.

he valued his gifts scantily, but that he valued most highly in himself a capacity he saw evidence of in even the most diminutive forms of life.

Here is the moment of meta-reflection in the worm book, his final book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits*, which relies on a subtle interpretation of earthworms' varied responses to light, as evidence of a capacity for absorbed attention, thus "the presence of a mind":

When a worm is suddenly illuminated and dashes like a rabbit into its burrow—to use the expression employed by a friend—we are at first led to look at the action as a reflex one. The irritation of the cerebral ganglia appears to cause certain muscles to contract in an inevitable manner, independently of the will or consciousness of the animal, as if it were an automaton. But the different effect which a light produced on different occasions, and especially the fact that a worm when in any way employed and in the intervals of such employment, whatever set of muscles and ganglia may then have been brought into play, is often regardless of light, are opposed to the view of the sudden withdrawal being a simple reflex action.⁹⁴

And here he gathers his forces for the really bold claim—

With the higher animals, when close attention to some object leads to the disregard of the impressions which other objects must be producing on them, we attribute this to their attention being then absorbed; and attention implies the presence of a mind. Every sportsman knows that he can approach animals whilst they are grazing, fighting or courting, much more easily than at other times. The state, also, of the nervous system of the higher animals differs much at different times, for instance, a horse is much more readily startled at one time than at another. The comparison here implied between the actions of one of the higher animals and of one so low in the scale as an earthworm, may appear far-fetched; for we thus attribute to the worm attention and some mental power, nevertheless I can see no reason to doubt the justice of the comparison.⁹⁵

There is a counter-intuitive side to this claim. Absorption, Darwin suggests, is evidence of "attention and some mental power." One might have thought the opposite, given the consequences of absorption he implies. A creature so absorbed in a task (however central to its life), as not to perceive an approaching danger, will be at risk. Would it not show a greater mental capacity to be

⁹⁴ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 28.

⁹⁵ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 28-9.

able to keep one eye on the exit while going about one's business? Invoking the hunter's prey, Darwin acknowledges this risk in the capacity of absorption, even as he uses it to distinguish these prey animals as "higher." To be absorbed in the act of attention is to be disarmed.

Nor was this the first time Darwin noted the confluence of absorptive attention and exposure to risk. In *The Descent of Man*, attention is singled out as at once the kernel of *Homo sapiens'* extraordinary intellectual capacity, and a capacity that is general to animal life. In the same moment, he tracks the continuity between the way this faculty sustains the life that exercises it, and the way it renders that life vulnerable: "Hardly any faculty is more important for the intellectual progress of man than the power of attention. Animals clearly manifest this power, as when a cat watches a hole and prepares to spring on its prey. Wild animals sometimes become so absorbed when thus engaged, that they may be easily approached."⁹⁶ The cat depends on the prey animal's absorbed attention to its own life in order to sneak up on it, allowing the human observer in turn to sneak up on the cat (and who knows what might be able to sneak up on the human observer while she is "thus engaged").

Perhaps there is no reconciling the duality of absorptive attention as a sign of intelligence and absorption as a mark of vulnerability. For Darwin himself there is a play between attention as an act, deeply committed and carefully orchestrated so that he would miss nothing, so that he would gather complete and experimentally controlled intelligence of his objects; and attention as receptivity, open to surprise, tending to grant an interiority to the object that ultimately allows it to retain a certain privacy from him. His favorite objects of attention tended to be relatively easy to keep track of, not fleet of foot, liable to fly away or turn on him—barnacles, earthworms, plants. Yet it is in these easily watched, and easily overlooked, forms of life that he registers elusive depths. They

⁹⁶ Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 44.

are often opaque to us not because there is nothing to see, but because their way of being alive is so difficult for us to recognize as being as complete as our own.

In this book Darwin repeatedly corrects the underestimation of earthworms: a possible symptom—one gleans from repetition, and the half-playful suggestion that archaeologists ought to be grateful to earthworms—of an overestimation of man.⁹⁷ As Adam Phillips remarks in his book on Darwin and Freud, *Darwin's Worms*, “In his characteristically modest way Darwin is shuffling the traditional hierarchies; not cutting men down to size, like an arrogant deity, but trying to get them the right size.”⁹⁸ Darwin defends the worms from the accusations of insignificance to which he finds they have implicitly and thoughtlessly been subjected (nestling it into a defense of his own work against the attacks of a stingy skeptic):

In the year 1869, Mr. Fish rejected my conclusions with respect to the part which worms have played in the formation of vegetable mould, merely on account of their assumed incapacity to do so much work. He remarks that ‘considering their weakness and their size, the work they are represented to have accomplished is stupendous’. Here we have an instance of that inability to sum up the effects of a continually recurrent cause, which has often retarded the progress of science, as formerly in the case of geology, and more recently in that of the principle of evolution.⁹⁹

As in the *Origin*, his own method of argumentation recreates the process he describes in nature. Over and over in the *Origin* he works to overcome the weaknesses of the imagination to grasp the scale and gradualism he posits, by recreating it in miniature for the reader. In *The Formation of Vegetable Mould*, he catches his critic in just such a failure of imagination. That the small could “do so much work,” that so little could be responsible for so much—is a sticking point for the insufficiently imaginative reader. Imagination, and the labor of writing that elaborates it, extend the attention beyond the immediately sensible, and can dwell indefinitely where direct observation cannot, as

⁹⁷ “Archaeologists are probably not aware how much they owe to worms for the preservation of many ancient objects.” (Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 92)

⁹⁸ Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, 50.

⁹⁹ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 21.

when Darwin entertains the possibility of a higher intelligence in the earthworm; and as when he must set aside his disgust with the Fuegians.

As in the work on coral reefs at the opposite end of his career, Darwin attends to “formations” that give evidence of life, and once again illuminates the sense in which a group of “soft” and “apparently insignificant creatures” are fully alive. He draws them into the sphere of his reader’s attention. It is particularly in his observation of their deliberate actions that he brings them to life:

I have watched worms during the act of ejection, and when the earth was in a very liquid state it was ejected in little spurts, and by a slow peristaltic movement when not so liquid. It is not cast indifferently on any side, but with some care, first on one and then on the other side; the tail being used almost like a trowel.¹⁰⁰

There are numerous other similes in the book that liken earthworms to people, in order to bring into focus the deliberate aspect of a behavior or being described, or otherwise to sustain the reader’s attention upon a form of life they are predisposed to overlook. Here the worm takes the form of a gardener and mason by synecdoche, a part of itself becoming a specialized human tool. But the more urgent insight of this passage comes in the first part of the sentence, a gentle but firm correction to the assumption that worms are automata. He presents the worms as rudimentary artists or craftsmen—their work performed “not indifferently” but “with some care.” The anthropomorphism is not primarily figurative here, but integral to his argument. The earthworms possess intelligence in their capacity for a form of careful labor.

Sometimes the actions of the worms have a more matter-of-fact status in the text, as when, “On the third morning twenty-five burrows were counted; and by suddenly lifting up the little cakes of earth, four worms were seen in the act of quickly retreating.”¹⁰¹ Even in a simple notation like this

¹⁰⁰ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 65.

¹⁰¹ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 95.

one, the emphasis rests on the moment of animation, the worms “seen in the act,” dramatized by the fact that they are witnessed just before they slip out of sight. The “act of retreating” registers acutely for the observer, since he experiences this as the worm’s sensitive response to his own action. Unsurprisingly, the part of the book where Darwin treats the sensory faculties of earthworms is particularly dense with reminders of their vitality. Consider the following experiment Darwin describes to ascertain whether the worms are light-sensitive, despite the fact that they are, as he acknowledges, “destitute of eyes.” Conflicting accounts in the literature, in particular the statements of Werner Hoffmeister,

led me to watch on many successive nights worms kept in pots, which were protected from currents of air by means of glass plates. [...] When they were illuminated by a candle, or even by a bright paraffin lamp, they were not usually affected at first. Nor were they when the light was alternately admitted and shut off. Sometimes, however, they behaved very differently, for as soon as the light fell on them, they withdrew into their burrows with almost instantaneous rapidity. This occurred perhaps once out of a dozen times. When they did not withdraw instantly, they often raised the anterior tapering ends of their bodies from the ground, as if their attention was aroused or as if surprise was felt; or they moved their bodies from side to side as if feeling for some object.¹⁰²

The (obligatory) “as if” allows always for the possibility that the affect or motive ascribed to the worms (attention, surprise, feeling for an object) will be understood figuratively. Yet it does not foreclose the possibility that the interpretation is closer to literal truth than we might have thought possible—“as if” in this sense conjectural rather than metaphorical, softening the claim to slip it in under the radar of our prejudices. A moment in the dialogue on “The Cleverness of Animals” in Plutarch’s *Moralia* obliquely speaks to Darwin’s position. In the words of Autobulus,

As for those who foolishly affirm that animals do not feel pleasure or anger or fear or make preparations or remember, but that the bee “as it were” remembers and the swallow “as it were” prepares her nest and the lion “as it were” grows angry and the deer “as it were” is frightened—I don’t know what they will do about those who say that beasts do not see or hear but “as it were” hear and see; that they have no cry but “as it were”; nor do they live at

¹⁰² Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 27.

all but “as it were.” For these last statements (or so I believe) are no more contrary to plain evidence than those that they have made.¹⁰³

Darwin never directly challenges those who would flatly deny the possibility of worm intelligence. Rather, his “as if their attention was aroused or as if surprise was felt” asserts how the actions of these animals strike him intuitively. His is not the safe, conservative “as if” with which both Plutarch and modern critics of behaviorism find fault. Where Plutarch’s dialogue suggests an absurdity in the position of the Stoics who refuse to use any of the same verbs for humans and other animals, Darwin’s “as if” allows him to venture “higher” capacities in an organism widely considered lowly, the humble earthworm, capacities he knows his readers would likely deny. At minimum, the formulation grants that the external evidence might manifest an internal state, however unknowable.

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In the book there are figures engraved from photographs of some of the more dramatic “tower-like” structures the worms’ castings can form.¹⁰⁵ One might look at these structures the way one looks at coral reefs, and wonder that they are not-man made, as Darwin quotes François Pyrard de Laval from 1605, “C’est une merueille de voir chacun de ces atollons, enuirronné d’un grand banc de pierre tout autour, n’y ayant point d’artifice humain.”¹⁰⁶ His argument with Mr. Fish over the

¹⁰³ Plutarch, “Cleverness of Animals,” (961) E-F, *Moralia XII*, 334-5. Thanks to Mark Payne for drawing my attention to this passage, and to the longer classical tradition of “as if” in the rhetoric of comparison between humans and animals. The problem of how to articulate such comparisons extends to the present day in the science of animal psychology. The shape of the “inhibition” against using equivalent language, as Donald Griffin put it in his 1992 *Animal Minds*, with behaviorism as his primary target, bears a remarkable resemblance in modern and ancient critiques. In both cases the advocate of granting animals intelligence commensurate with human intelligence appeals to its intuitive likelihood, and cites the unnatural or counter-intuitive stance that deniers of animal intelligence force us to adopt. In Griffin’s words, “outside of narrow scientific circles [the behaviorist argument] is no more convincing than that of the solipsist philosopher who insists that he is the only conscious person in the universe.” (Griffin, *Animal Minds*, 23; also quoted in Introduction)

¹⁰⁴ This imaginative extension of fullness bears analogy to John Clare’s ascription of feelings and even dreams to other forms of life, his penchant for the adverb “inly,” which does not presume to know the content of that fullness, but attends to and makes room for it nonetheless.

¹⁰⁵ See figures 3 and 4, pages 68 and 69 of *The Formation of Vegetable Mould*.

¹⁰⁶ Darwin, *Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs*, 2. [It is a marvel to see each of these atolls, surrounded by a great stone bank all around, having no human artifice at all.]

power of the very small to “do so much work” is partly based on the principle that much of life on earth goes on quite literally beneath our notice, and partly calculated to disarm humans of the special claim to building impressive and significant structures.

To be grateful to worms for their unacknowledged role in our lives, as Adam Phillips perceives, ought not to imply that they have been working for our benefit. Reading Darwin on worms leads him to conclude that “The world is not designed for our benefit and yet it can be, in its own way, contingently hospitable. It is not a miracle that worms are as they are, and do what they do; it is rather, Darwin intimates, our accidental good fortune.”¹⁰⁷ The recognition of the worm’s existence-for-itself is a partial relinquishment on the part of the observer—however much he may understand about the worm through (in Elizabeth Bishop’s phrase) his “endless heroic observations,” there is also an “intimation” that there is a part of the worm that will not be known because in excess of what can be known, which belongs to itself.

Two Birds in the Hand, Exposed

Wallace engages in a reflection similar to Kingsley’s about the independence of other living things from human beings. But his tenor is more melancholy, and leads him to glimpse the bird in its simultaneous vulnerability to and independence from human life. The irony that the bird’s independent life becomes real to him, though the bird in his hands is actually dead, gives an unspoken, possibly unintended edge to his melancholy. From a thrill of emotion not unlike Kingsley’s, Wallace veers towards the realization that he has no value to the other he contemplates and values.

¹⁰⁷ Phillips, *Darwin’s Worms*, 57.

I knew how few Europeans had ever beheld the perfect little organism I now gazed upon, and how very imperfectly it was still known in Europe. The emotions excited in the mind of a naturalist, who has long desired to see the actual thing which he has hitherto known only by description, drawing, or badly-preserved external covering—especially when that thing is of surpassing rarity and beauty—require the poetic faculty fully to express them.

The passage unfolds slowly and in detail, both in tracking Wallace's feeling and in describing the bird in his hand. He reflects, upon gazing at a King Bird of Paradise specimen in his hands ("a small bird, a little less than a thrush"),

I thought of the long ages of the past, during which the successive generations of this little creature had run their course—year by year being born, and living and dying amid these dark and gloomy woods, with no intelligent eye to gaze upon their loveliness; to all appearance such a wanton waste of beauty. [...] This consideration must surely tell us that all living things were *not* made for man. Many of them have no relation to him. The cycle of their existence has gone on independently of his, and is disturbed or broken by every advance in man's intellectual development; and their happiness and enjoyments, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death, would seem to be immediately related to their own well-being and perpetuation alone, limited only by the equal well-being and perpetuation of the numberless organisms with which each is more or less intimately connected.¹⁰⁸

This passage is often quoted, selectively or in full.¹⁰⁹ In congruence with Phillips's reading of Darwin, Wallace suggests that the beauty we appreciate in the Bird of Paradise is our accidental good fortune—it is not for us, but we are susceptible to it. This is almost an inversion of Darwin's revelations with earthworms. For the birds are charismatic, and that is what makes them hard for us to see clearly, to see past our own enchantment with them. The worms on the other hand are unprepossessing, and that is what makes them hard for us to take notice of at all, to see past our lack of feeling for them. To study the connection between Wallace's attention to the bird itself, and the reflections it leads him to make, it is worth including the minutely detailed description that comes before it. As we will follow its dramatic unfolding closely, once more I quote at length:

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 339-40. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁹ It has even made a television appearance, quoted by Sir David Attenborough in the BBC series, *The Life of Birds*.

The first two or three days of our stay here [the Aru Islands mainland interior] were very wet, and I obtained but few insects or birds, but at length, when I was beginning to despair, my boy Baderoon returned one day with a specimen which repaid me for months of delay and expectation. It was a small bird, a little less than a thrush. The greater part of its plumage was of an intense cinnabar red, with a gloss as of spun glass. On the head the feathers became short and velvety, and shaded into rich orange. Beneath, from the breast downwards, was pure white, with the softness and gloss of silk, and across the breast a band of deep metallic green separated this colour from the red of the throat. Above each eye was a round spot of the same metallic green; the bill was yellow, and the feet and legs were of a fine cobalt blue, strikingly contrasting with all the other parts of the body. Merely in arrangement of colours and texture of plumage this little bird was a gem of the first water; yet these comprised only half of its strange beauty. Springing from each side of the breast, and ordinarily lying concealed under the wings, were little tufts of greyish feathers about two inches long, and each terminated by a broad band of intense emerald green. These plumes can be raised at the will of the bird, and spread out into a pair of elegant fans when the wings are elevated. But this is not the only ornament. The two middle feathers of the tail are in the form of slender wires about five inches long, and which diverge in a beautiful double curve. About half an inch of the end of this wire is webbed on the outer side only, and coloured of a fine metallic green, and being curled spirally inwards form a pair of elegant glittering buttons, hanging five inches below the body, and the same distance apart. These two ornaments, the breast fans and the spiral tipped tail wires, are altogether unique, not occurring on any other species of the eight thousand different birds that are known to exist upon the earth; and, combined with the most exquisite beauty of plumage, render this one of the most perfectly lovely of the many lovely productions of nature. My transports of admiration and delight quite amused my Aru hosts, who saw nothing more in the “Burong raja” than we do in the robin or the goldfinch.”¹¹⁰

There are so many things to notice in this passage, where Wallace notices so many things. Starting with its general structure, it dramatizes the superlative status of this bird, first by setting it up as the more-than-compensation for initial disappointment in the natural historical prospects of the place. He opens his physical description with a deceptive diminutive (“It was a small bird, a little less than a thrush.”), poising its varied colors and textures to dazzle all the more, as he draws them out in all their richness from the small form he has prepared us with. His next descriptive movement is to adjust and expand. Once he has filled the small form with its colors and elaborated its surfaces, he notes, “Merely in arrangement of colours and texture of plumage this little bird was a gem of the first water; yet these comprised only half of its strange beauty.”

¹¹⁰ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 338-9.

Out of that half he begins to elaborate—the dynamic verb of process allowing the form to expand in our mind’s eye—“Springing from each side of the breast [...]” In this part of the description he also extends beyond the moment of observation, beyond the specimen, to include what only a live bird could reveal: “These plumes can be raised at the will of the bird, and spread out into a pair of elegant fans when the wings are elevated.” And lest we think these startling plumes exhaust the other “half of its strange beauty,” he divides and expands yet again: “But this is not the only ornament.” Moving from the breast to the tail, he follows the “slender wires about five inches long, [...] which diverge in a beautiful double curve. About half an inch of the end of this wire is webbed on the outer side only, and coloured of a fine metallic green, and being curled spirally inwards form a pair of elegant glittering buttons, hanging five inches below the body, and the same distance apart.” He gives dimensions in order to establish proportions. He does not give dimensions of the body except by the earlier relative statement of size, “a little less than a thrush.” The body bears comparison to a familiar creature, but not the ornaments that extend outward from it (the breast feathers “about two inches long,” the wiry tail feathers five). Once again the verbs make the description dynamic (despite the deadness of the specimen)—the wires “diverge.” The passive construction, “being curled spirally inwards,” has the effect of doubling back, mimicking the shape described, before these curls at the ends of the wires take their place in the action of the sentence. In full, “About half an inch of the end of this wire is webbed on the outer side only, and coloured of a fine metallic green, and being curled spirally inwards form a pair of elegant glittering buttons, hanging five inches below the body, and the same distance apart.” The eye follows this half an inch as it turns its color, is curled inward, and finally “forms” the image, “a pair of elegant glittering buttons,” of which he is careful to specify the symmetry, “the same distance apart.”

Wallace immerses us in the way his eye moves over the form of the bird, the way he registers the particulars of its beauty. In a characteristic movement of thought he will record an observation from his own fully inhabited perspective, and then turn on himself. His powers of attention yield a description that *proves* his refined appreciation of aesthetic form. Especially in the moment where he slips into the language of appraisal, the bird's color and texture earning him the epithet, "gem of the first water," he articulates its beauty as though it did indeed exist for him to admire. He himself could claim to be proof that "[civilized man] alone is fitted to appreciate and enjoy" the "wonderful structure and beauty" of such a bird. Yet he proceeds to draw the opposite conclusion. Since these birds have evolved and flourished entirely independent from human beings, and indeed suffer from contact with them, "this consideration must surely tell us that all living things were *not* made for man."¹¹¹ His "to all appearance" matches Darwin's "such reflections must at first seize on the mind" when he writes of the Fuegians—both take part in the rhetoric of dismantling erroneous first impressions. As he tells it, the bird disarms him of a thought (the thought about the dependence of nature's beauty on human appreciation), and even of his melancholy, leaving him vulnerable to the no-longer-vulnerable creature before him.

Elsewhere in *The Malay Archipelago* Wallace describes the native hunters' technique for catching the Bird of Paradise off guard, in a set of observations that echo Darwin's sense of dual absorption and vulnerability in the earthworm. It is by these means that Wallace would end up with many of his valuable specimens. He describes first, in his chapter on residence in the Aru Islands,

¹¹¹ It is curious that recent scientists keen to dismantle claims of human exceptionalism should remain silent about this haunting moment in Wallace's writing. He is fairly blamed for suppressing the importance of sexual selection, specifically of sexual ornament, in Darwinian theory, and for failing to accept that natural selection could account for human intelligence. Yet in this passage he provides nascent, at least philosophical, support for a claim that ornithologist Richard Prum has advanced recently, namely that certain animals, especially birds, may evolve to be beautiful *to each other*. (See Prum's 2017 book, *The Evolution of Beauty*.)

the display habits of these birds, placing the facts of behavior into perspective beside the collected specimens:

[What] I valued almost as much as the birds themselves, was the knowledge of their habits, which I was daily obtaining both from the accounts of my hunters, and from the conversation of the natives. The birds had now commenced what the people here call their “sácaleli,” or dancing-parties, in certain trees in the forest, which are not fruit trees as I at first imagined, but which have an immense head of spreading branches and large but scattered leaves, giving a clear space for the birds to play and exhibit their plumes. On one of these trees a dozen or twenty full-plumaged male birds assemble together, raise up their wings, stretch out their necks, and elevate their exquisite plumes, keeping them in continual vibration. Between whiles they fly across from branch to branch in great excitement, so that the whole tree is filled with waving plumes in every variety of attitude and motion.¹¹²

The knowledge he reports at second hand, yet it was important to him to gather as precise an idea of the event as possible, with numbers of birds, the nature of the space in which they display, the mechanics of their movements and the order in which they occur. Later in the text, when he covers each of the Birds of Paradise in greater detail, Wallace offers an illustration of what Darwin alludes to when he remarks that “Every sportsman knows that he can approach animals whilst they are grazing, fighting or courting, much more easily than at other times.”¹¹³ Wallace writes of how, “This habit [of display] enables the natives to obtain specimens with comparative ease,” and describes the natives’ technique in detail commensurate with his description of the birds’ display:

As soon as they find that the birds have fixed upon a tree on which to assemble, they build a little shelter of palm leaves in a convenient place among the branches, and the hunter ensconces himself in it before daylight, armed with his bow and a number of arrows terminating in a round knob. A boy waits at the foot of the tree, and when the birds come at sunrise, and a sufficient number have assembled, and have begun to dance, the hunter shoots with his blunt arrow so strongly as to stun the bird, which drops down, and is secured and killed by the boy without its plumage being injured by a drop of blood. The rest take no notice, and fall one after another till some of them take the alarm.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 354.

¹¹³ Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 422.

Wallace places the efficiency of the hunting method, described in detail, in textual conversation with the wonderful fact of the display. The marvel of the native hunter's skill, his ability to kill without bloodying (which of course has economic advantages) must be considered next to the absorption of the birds in the activity that provides the hunter with his opportunity. Farther down the page from the description of the display, Wallace writes that the Bird of Paradise, "when seen in this attitude," that is the attitude of excitement that forms part of the display, "must be ranked as one of the most beautiful and most wonderful of living things." If they are most beautiful when absorbed in their display, which is a moment of great significance to their lives, they are also most beautiful when most vulnerable. Where Darwin registers the capacity for attention, the "presence of a mind," as an organism's existence-for-itself, beauty (of all things) is what leads Wallace to a parallel insight. Wallace has acknowledged the beauty of the Bird of Paradise as indifferent to human enjoyment, and acknowledged equally how "their happiness and enjoyments, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death" exist with or without human awareness of them.

In a precursor to the famous Bird-of-Paradise passage from *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace describes his encounter with his first Cock-of-the-Rock in the *Narrative of Travels on the Amazon*. Both passages feature Wallace with a still-warm dead bird in his hands. This passage also features an instance of failed capture, the observer growing keener and the bird dearer in this deferment:

I could not have imagined that what at a distance appeared so insignificant, could have presented such a gigantic and rugged scene. All the time we kept a sharp look-out, but saw no birds. At length, however, an old Indian caught hold of my arm, and whispering gently, "Gallo!" pointed into a dense thicket. After looking intently a little while, I caught a glimpse of the magnificent bird sitting amidst the gloom, shining out like a mass of brilliant flame. I took a step to get clear of it, and raised my gun, when it took alarm and flew off before I had time to fire. We followed, and soon it was again pointed out to me. This time I had better luck, fired with a steady aim, and brought it down. The Indians rushed forward, but it had fallen into a deep gully between steep rocks, and a considerable circuit had to be made to get

it. In a few minutes, however, it was brought to me, and I was lost in admiration of the dazzling brilliancy of its soft downy feathers. Not a spot of blood was visible, not a feather was ruffled, and the soft, warm, flexible body set off the fresh swelling plumage in a manner which no stuffed specimen can approach.¹¹⁵

Wallace creates suspense in this account first by including the period of time in which they saw no birds, then by including the missed attempt to shoot the bird, then further by including the delay while the Indians went to fetch the bird out of the “deep gully.” He might have skipped straight to the moment when he had the bird in his hands. Narrative interest and convention will partly account for why he does not. But the failed capture also belongs to a kind of observation Wallace regularly includes as much out of a certain regard for the creatures he has pursued, as to create suspense for the reader. Through these passages he contends with the loss of life, at the same time as he registers his role in bringing it about.

His first sight of the creature, as a “magnificent bird sitting amidst the gloom, shining out like a mass of brilliant flame,” corresponds with his first description of the dolphins from his lifeboat in the Atlantic. His failure to capture in the first place even seems to follow from his bedazzlement when he beholds the living bird. He doesn’t explicitly say so, but to the extent that wonder is absorptive, he is momentarily stunned, momentarily disarmed, giving the bird the chance to “take alarm.” Wallace’s second sight of the bird (this time in the hand) leads him to a subtly different description: “I was lost in admiration of the dazzling brilliancy of its soft downy feathers. Not a spot of blood was visible, not a feather was ruffled, and the soft, warm, flexible body set off the fresh swelling plumage in a manner which no stuffed specimen can approach.” He focuses still on its vividness—we’ve moved from the “mass of brilliant flame” when the bird lived, to “dazzling brilliancy” when newly dead—but the poignancy of the second observation arises from its transience. It is as close as he has come to holding the living bird in his hands. Its spotlessness

¹¹⁵ Wallace, *Narrative of Travels*, 152.

speaks to its value as an unmarred specimen, but in Wallace's hands it doubles as an illusion that the bird is not yet dead. The warmth has not gone out of it. He casts a glance ahead at its future as a "stuffed specimen," which will only ever approximate, however skillfully, the living form. By contrast, the vitality, the 'lifelikeness' of the bird in this moment of observation comes from the bird itself, whose "fresh swelling plumage" still has the quality of a living thing, exceeding itself. One might say he tries to preserve the bird in prose as it won't be preserved as a specimen, but what he preserves is also the transience of that vital quality, which won't be extended.¹¹⁶

"Admiration" signals absorption for Wallace—he was "never tired of admiring" the living dolphins, and "lost in admiration" of the cock-of-the-rock's brilliant feathers. Admiration stands in delicate tension with more knowledge-seeking attitudes of observation, as Wallace's meditations on the bird-of-paradise stand in tension with his own activities in the Malay Archipelago. Admiration now has a chiefly evaluative connotation, as "regard for someone or something considered praiseworthy or excellent; esteem, approbation; appreciation." Certainly Wallace's admiration contains the approbation of beauty to register this meaning. But a usage now rare though not obsolete, and still current for Wallace, is pre-critical: "the action or an act of wondering or marvelling; wonder, astonishment, surprise."¹¹⁷ He engages these two senses of admiration when he refers to the Bird-of-Paradise in one moment as a "gem of the first water," and later reflects upon its separateness, in the possibility that it exists in its beauty not for his appraisal, but for itself alone, "limited only by the equal well-being and perpetuation of the numberless organisms with which each

¹¹⁶ To hold a bird in one's hand is a peculiarly thrilling experience. Especially in these instances where it is so freshly dead, or when it is stunned and one is moving it to relative safety. The warmth of so unexpectedly light a body goes straight to one's heart.

¹¹⁷ OED online, March 2021, s.v. "admiration," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/2566?redirectedFrom=admiration>. Definitions one and two, respectively.

is more or less intimately connected.” The idiomatic expression of being “lost in admiration” signals something in excess of what can be appraised.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to draw a path through the writings of these two famous naturalists, identifying as landmarks those moments where they narrate how they have been arrested, disarmed by the living (and recently dead) objects of their attention. In two such distinct styles of writing, they manage to reveal different possibilities of becoming responsive to the life they labor to account for. The measure of this responsiveness is not, as it would be for today’s naturalists, the extent of their commitment and the power of their insight to protect life as far as possible from (further) harm. The measure is their capacity to register in other lives other centers to the world, containing other sources of significance, and other sources of “happiness” than our own. The task of dethroning humankind from a position of exceptionality and centrality could not do without the theory of evolution by natural selection that Darwin and Wallace have made available to our thinking. Nor, I suggest, could this task of decentering do without the capacity to be disarmed in the act of attention, and to tell the story of the disarming encounter.

In studying their different relations to and uses of memory, Cannon Schmitt points out the radical differences between Darwin’s and Wallace’s autobiographies. Darwin’s is “sparse and piecemeal,” while Wallace’s “two thick volumes [...] cover an immense amount of ground.”¹¹⁸ These comparative masses of autobiography correspond to the place each typically allowed the self to occupy in their work of observation; but wherever they usually located themselves, the excess that eluded collection or comparison became available to the attention when they found themselves

¹¹⁸ Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human*, 62.

disarmed and decentered. Wallace, disarmed of his specimens and notebooks, of the fruits of labor, adrift and bereft, thirsty and sun-blistered, literally lays himself down, dwells in an unaccountable state of apathy, a serene oceanic attention. Darwin, disarmed of his characteristic calm and reserve when a reflection, a self-image, rushes into his mind, attends to the shock and after-shock of the Fuegians as the bare fact of them exceeds his impression. Darwin could lose himself in the happy observation of earthworms and corals and orchids—the capacity for self-forgetting was great in him. His penchant for self-effacement, for quieting the self in the act of observation, allowed him to detect a fullness of life, a completeness and a depth in organisms that often go uncredited. Writing, about which he felt some ambivalence but also felt as necessary, made him responsive to that fullness of life. Wallace by contrast is everywhere present, physically and emotionally involved in the narrative of observation. (Incidentally, some of Darwin’s relative lack of physical presence in his writing makes sense when one considers how much he suffered in his body—absorption in his work, especially in observation, was often the only thing that gave him any relief from his ill health.¹¹⁹) Wallace becomes accountable in dramatizing his encounters with other forms of life. Charismatic himself, he finds himself face to face with other charismatic lives, sometimes taking those lives and sometimes not—and in the writing we find his account of what he knew would not be contained in any specimen. Both naturalists were wary of “wasting” attention on observation untethered by thought, which would isolate the object from the world. Yet each also found a necessity in the excesses of life the world presented to their attention, which could never be redundant.

¹¹⁹ As detailed by Janet Browne. See for instance chapter 7 of the second volume of her magisterial biography, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*, “Invalid,” 231-74.

Chapter Three: Restless Attention

(Francis Ponge and Philippe Jaccottet)

The relation between the act of attention and the act of writing is a structuring principle for the dissertation. I turn now to the 20th-21st century Francophone poets Francis Ponge (1899-1988) and Philippe Jaccottet (1925-2021).¹ For Ponge and Jaccottet, I place the emphasis on the recovery or salvaging of poetic writing from a state of disgrace—a state in which it betrays the world observed. Their awareness of how language, especially poetic language, could betray, gives them each a distinct self-consciousness. A considerable space of the chapter must therefore be concerned with how they narrate their anguish over the problem of writing. Fearful of betraying the objects of their attention, they enact a radical form of fidelity that can never separate the act of writing from that of attention, and vice versa. The objects of their attention are also different in character from those of any of the other observers in the dissertation. Ponge developed a radical poetic method in response to a feeling for other kinds of being than his own. His objects are famously, stubbornly motley and eccentric. They are a mixture of living and nonliving, and his subjecting them all alike to a poetic ‘treatment,’ rather than effacing their particularity, brings it vividly to the fore. His approach to writing is also to attend performatively to the words as he uses them, punning, etymologizing, playing; he considers the words to be as full of otherness as are every one of the objects. Jaccottet is by contrast suspicious of the over-valuation of language, and he strives accordingly to render it light, almost weightless. Both undertake ostensibly impossible feats: Ponge to write in such a way that things without language can be heard, to use language against itself; Jaccottet to write transparently, to attend to what is distant and invisible in the world. His writing would not make visible what is

¹ Jaccottet passed away between revisions of this chapter, on February 24th at the age of 95 in Grignan, France. https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2021/02/25/le-poete-et-critique-litteraire-philippe-jaccottet-est-mort_6071180_3382.html.

invisible, but render only what makes him aware of a barely perceptible presence. His objects are primarily vegetal and avian, and his stance toward them is almost motionless. His persona of “l’ignorant,” the ignorant one, persists throughout his career; he rejects the relation of knowledge towards the natural world in exchange for a relation of unknowing attention. For him, attention, which is an earthly and time-bound act, is at odds with knowledge-seeking.

Reading these poets together gives us an alternative to the field-naturalist ethos I have upheld in every other one of these observers. Ponge did not need to spend much time around the objects of his attention in order to render them, to attend to them in writing. Jaccottet did need to be present to his objects, but never more than fleetingly, and never in a spirit of scientific curiosity. They suggest a way of being human in, and in relation to, the natural world, through the distinct way of being human that is poetic writing.

Each of these two poets contends with the thought, even the fear, that it would be best not to write, better to be silent. Shame at being human inflects each of their writings in different ways. Written *poiesis* becomes a way of negotiating the constraints of human being, in relation to other kinds of being; the constraints of individual experience, in relation to all that is part of the world and yet *not* part of the poet’s experience. Both write from the edge of poetic vocation—sometimes unable or unwilling to dignify their work by calling it poetry, suspicious of the way poetry can tempt a turning away from external reality. For each, attention to the natural world coincides with a continual reexamination of what they can and must do with words. Much of their writing takes an unfinished form, not destined for eventual completion but indefinitely open to the separate existence of the object. Ponge suggests this explicitly with a late work of “esquisses, ébauches ou brouillons” entitled *Pratiques d’écriture, ou, l’inachèvement perpétuel*.² Statements of method abound in his

² [sketches, rough drafts or foul copies] [*Writing practices, or, perpetual incompleteness*]

writings, and it becomes clear, the more one reads of him, that these are never the last word on what he is doing with words. Rather he works out, in the midst of writing objects, how he should approach the task at hand. For Jaccottet, the form of incompleteness is not marked by a performance of drafting, nor by so explicit a narration of method (there are few whose running commentary is quite so extensive as Ponge's). Jaccottet has composed many lyric poems with discernible beginnings and endings. Yet what he gathers from the objects of his attention is limited by the distance at which they keep themselves. He registers their existence partially, and resists filling in what is not given to him. Where Ponge would speak for, 'stand up' for his objects, Jaccottet tries to register their silence, their faint rustling, or their song by recording the impressions they make upon him in a particularly still and receptive state.

Both poets have recourse to prose, to very different effects, as a way of meeting crises of language that threaten to obscure to them the other forms of existence to which they turn their attention.³ This chapter examines the way each of these poets reconciles himself to the poetic language he finds possible.

Ponge and Jaccottet, Resisting Silence

For Ponge, it is a matter of scouring and scrubbing the French language (like Elizabeth Bishop he was a great lover of dictionaries). But he would also learn something of the capacities of language *from* the unspeaking objects of his attention. He looks at language as something external to himself, something which doesn't belong to him, a dense thing that is part of human existence, but

³ As Rosanna Warren reminds me, these individual struggles with a crisis of language (think Mallarmé's *Crise de vers*) cannot be divorced from the French cultural, especially pedagogical context for a philosophically-based suspicion of language, which creates a need for poets to justify their vocation. Let it suffice for now to acknowledge this fact, and to defer a more robust consideration of its implications for a future iteration of this chapter.

too often taken for granted, betrayed.⁴ In Ponge's view, a writer must labor to be worthy of language. Other forms of existence in the world, especially (but not exclusively) the natural world, when Ponge 'takes their side,' can teach him ways of inhabiting his life with language in a way more worthy of the human animal that he is. For instance, in an interview, he is at pains to emphasize

combien les mots, les formules verbales, me semblaient une réalité concrète, comportant toute l'évidence et l'épaisseur des choses du monde extérieur. [...] je m'en approche et je m'en éloigne à la fois, en considérant que le langage, les mots sont aussi un monde extérieur, et que je suis sensible, si vous voulez, à la réalité, à l'évidence, à l'épaisseur de ce monde verbal, au moins autant qu'à celui du monde physique.⁵

It isn't that he fetishizes language as something to revel in for its own sake, but he considers that language is indispensable to him as a human kind of being.⁶ Any relation he can hope to reveal as possible, between his kind of being and others in the world, will have to be forged with language.

Ponge lives out his negotiation of this proportion (of language to 'mute' object of attention) before our eyes. Like Samuel Beckett, whose writing towards silence increases rather than diminishes his loquacity, Ponge senses that the only way to get closer to his object is through language, that he

⁴ It is worth mentioning here the biographical fact that Ponge struggled to express himself orally, especially as a young man. In the words of Ian Higgins, "In 1918 [when Ponge was 18 or 19], a curious and important thing happened. The erstwhile outstanding essay-writer and enthusiastic student of philosophy was incapable of putting two words together in the oral component of his *licence*, and so failed. The same thing occurred the following year, in the examination leading to entry to the *École normale supérieure*. This inhibition sprang from the fear that his expression would be imperfect, and that there would be no time to correct it. Ponge has often explained his subsequent persistence and development as a writer in terms of reaction against the sloppiness of the spoken word, a compensation for 'les bêtises et les maladroites de ma parole.'" (Higgins, 4. The quote is from an interview in *Les Lettres françaises*, 1 December 1945, p.4.)

⁵ *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers*, Onzième entretien, 163. [how much words, verbal formulae, seemed to me a concrete reality, admitting of all the evidence and thickness of things in the external world [...] I approach and I distance myself from them at once, considering that language, words, are also an external world, and that I am sensitive, if you will, to the reality, to the evidence, to the thickness of the verbal world, at least as much as I am to that of the physical world.] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own.

⁶ I have broken up the term "human being" into "human kind of being" just because it is so easy to read over without reading "human" as a qualifier, emphasizing that it is one among many possible kinds of being—a distinction that I believe is of the essence in reading Ponge, who tries to get the human ways of being to register those other ways of being.

cannot go around it.⁷ (And like Beckett, his expression of this condition is frequently comic—against the odds, the speaking self is not melancholy, tormented, brooding, but lively, sprightly, puckish.)

In part he is resisting a temptation he sympathizes with but also detaches himself from, a temptation to give up on language, to abandon it in the dawning awareness that it is hopelessly inadequate to its task. One of his *Proèmes* is called “Des raisons d’écrire.” The title itself takes the challenge of a crisis of language head-on. He raises the questions, to which he is vigorously prepared to respond: “Pourquoi, tout bien considéré, un homme de telle sorte doit-il parler? Pourquoi les meilleurs, quoi qu’on en dise, ne sont pas ceux qui ont décidé de se taire?”⁸ He has given the basis for these questions with an account of the human condition in language, and of the reminders of human wretchedness that afflicts “us” (those who have decided to become or stay “poets,” as a way of coping with finding themselves human, of managing their humanity): “ce à quoi notre nature d’homme nous force à prendre part.”⁹

Beginning with a litany of shames, he gives an emphatic account of all that would lead us to hang our heads,

Honteux de l’arrangement tel qu’il est des choses, honteux de tous ces grossiers camions qui passent *en nous*, de ces usines, manufactures, magasins, théâtres, monuments publics qui constituent *bien plus* que le décor de notre vie, honteux de cette agitation sordide des hommes non seulement *autour* de nous,¹⁰

⁷ For instance, in Beckett’s *The Unnamable*: “It’s of me now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step towards silence and the end of madness [...]” (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 324) & soon thereafter, “This is the kind of language I can almost understand, these the kind of clear and simple notions on which it is possible for me to build. I need no other spiritual nourishment. A turnip, I know roughly what a turnip is like, a carrot too, particularly the Flakkee and the Colmar Red. I seem to grasp at certain moments the nuance that divides bad from worse.” (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 329)

⁸ Ponge, “Des raisons d’écrire,” *Proèmes*, 163. [Why, all things considered, should such a man speak? Why are the best, whatever we say of them, not those who have decided to shut up?]

⁹ Ponge, “Des raisons d’écrire,” *Proèmes*, 163. [that in which our human nature forces us to take part]

¹⁰ Ponge, “Des raisons d’écrire,” *Proèmes*, 162. [Ashamed of the arrangement of things, such as it is, ashamed of all these rude trucks that circulate *in us*, of these factories, mills, stores, theaters, public monuments that constitute *much more* than the decoration of our life, ashamed of this sordid agitation of men, not just *around us*,]

The shame he describes is elemental—he stresses, never shying away from the amplifying aid of italics, that all of this cause for shame is *in us*, not only *around* us. He takes a robust position that we cannot get off by thinking it is only other humans who have made this mess, or that there is some inner sanctum of human being in which we could take refuge, untouched by these causes for shame. No, he insists, the rude trucks and the factories and the stores and the public monuments, and the sordid agitation, they are internal to us. He continues, “nous avons observé que la Nature autrement puissante que les hommes fait dix fois moins de bruit, et que la nature *dans l’homme*, je veux dire la raison, n’en fait pas du tout.”¹¹ The term of “nature” appears to slide, from the noisy components of “notre nature d’homme” to “la nature *dans l’homme*,” namely reason, which apparently makes no noise at all. There is an obvious way of reading the latter as a critique of humanity for pretending that reason is its distinguishing feature, while in fact reason is drowned out by all of the noisier, just as distinguishing features of our nature. The sentence also says, however, that the form nature takes in us *is* reason, and like the rest of nature, it makes no noise. To be more exact, the rest of nature makes ten times less noise than us, while the nature that is really in us makes even less than that, which is no noise at all—so while the nature in us could make us the quietest beings of all, we are in fact the noisiest. But if noisiness is inseparable from us, inside of us, if it is our “nature d’homme” to be noisy, how can we reconcile our noisy nature (which appears to define our species) from the larger nature we also partake of, the form silent nature takes in us? Ponge’s solution for relating to other kinds of being in nature has to do with inhabiting the contradiction between our noisiness and our silence, which is one way of defining written language.

Je ne parle qu’à ceux qui se taisent [...]
 Qu’il faut à chaque instant *se secouer de la suie des paroles* et que *le silence est aussi dangereux*
dans cet ordre de valeurs que possible.

¹¹ Ponge, “Des raisons d’écrire,” *Proèmes*, 162. [we have observed that Nature, otherwise powerful as men, makes ten times less noise, and that the nature *in man*, by which I mean reason, makes none at all.]

*Une seule issue: parler contre les paroles. Les entraîner avec soi dans la honte où elles nous conduisent de telle sorte qu'elles s'y défigurent. Il n'y a point d'autre raison d'écrire.*¹²

In the *proem* called “Rhétorique,” in the same way that he grasps but does not indulge the temptation to keep silent, he identifies a danger in the order of values for “ceux qui se suicident par dégoût, parce qu'ils trouvent que ‘les autres’ ont trop de part en eux-mêmes”¹³ The guarding of the self from otherness is the danger, the protection of self-identity, which isolates, closes in, shuts off the current between different kinds of being that gives meaning to co-existence. “Tout le secret du bonheur du contemplateur est dans son refus de considérer *comme un mal* l’envahissement de sa personnalité par les choses.”¹⁴

Ponge has left more programmatic statements behind than most readers and critics can know what to do with. As maxims, they tend to partake of a shared authoritative tone; they declare, yet are never self-evident in their application. There is frequently a political dimension to these statements—political in the sense that they consider the implications of placing oneself apart from and above the rest.¹⁵ They assess the costs of non-participation, of self-exemption; but there is “une seule issue,” a single way out, and it is *through*. The *proem* called “Ad Litem,” a term with primarily legal applications, about representing persons incapable of representing themselves, ends thus: “Et puis donc, aussi bien, qu’il est de nature de l’homme d’élever la voix au milieu de la foule des choses

¹² Ponge, “Des raisons d’écrire,” *Proèmes*, 163-4. [I speak only to those who hold their tongues [...]. That one must at every instant *shake the soot of words from oneself, and that silence is as dangerous as can be in this order of values.* / *Only one way out: to speak against the words. To drag them along with oneself in the shame where they lead us in such a way that they deface themselves. There is no other reason to write.*] Italics in the original.

¹³ Ponge, “Rhétorique,” *Proèmes*, 157. [those who commit suicide out of disgust, because they consider that “others” have too much a share in themselves.] Italics in the original.

¹⁴ Ponge, “Introduction au galet,” *Proèmes*, 175. [The entire secret of happiness for the one who contemplates is in his refusal to consider *as an evil* the invasion of his personality by things.] Italics in the original.

¹⁵ In 2016, Joshua Corey and Jean-Luc Garneau translated *Le parti pris des choses* as *Partisan of Things*—a bold decision, but possibly overstating by disambiguating the political dimension of the title.

silencieuses, qu'il le fasse du moins parfois à leur propos..."¹⁶ "Ad litem" appears to emerge from the same impulse as the title of *Le parti pris des choses*, and suggests even more explicitly a kind of advocacy. Yet it proceeds to trouble the idea that we can know unambiguously how to advocate—how do we know what a thing 'wants,' what it 'needs' of us? It is impossible to confirm or deny that the 'interests' of the voiceless have indeed been expressed. How do we circumvent the problem of not being able to ask? He writes frankly of a "grave perplexité" into which the observer of nature is inevitably plunged, faced with

... Une apparence de calme, de sérénité, d'équilibre dans l'ensemble de la création, une perfection dans l'organisation de chaque créature qui peut laisser supposer comme conséquence sa béatitude; mais un désordre inouï dans la distribution sur la surface du globe des espèces et des essences, d'incessants sacrifices, une mutilation du possible, qui laissent aussi bien supposer ressentis les malheurs de la guerre et de l'anarchie¹⁷

The problem of representing the 'case' of each such creature is not lost on him, "mal renseignés comme nous le sommes par leurs expressions sur le coefficient de joie ou de malheur qui affecte [leur] vie."¹⁸ At the same time as Ponge focuses on the 'muteness' of non-humans, he brings into focus a human muteness in the face of those others with whom we cannot communicate. He wishes to use terms that the things themselves would recognize, and yet such terms don't exist, for as he concedes, "ce ne sont pas les choses qui parlent entre elles mais les hommes entre eux qui parlent des choses et l'on ne peut aucunement sortir de l'homme."¹⁹ There is something contradictory about

¹⁶ Ponge, "Ad Litem," *Proèmes*, 171. [And besides, indeed, since it is the nature of man to raise his voice in the middle of a crowd of silent things, he might as well do so at least sometimes on their behalf...]

¹⁷ Ponge, "Ad Litem," *Proèmes*, 171. [An appearance of calm, of serenity, of equilibrium in the general effect of nature, a perfection in the organization of each creature which could lead us to suppose its beatitude accordingly; but an extraordinary disorder in the distribution of species and essences over the surface of the globe, incessant sacrifices, a mutilation of the possible, which leads us to suppose just as well that the woes of war and anarchy are felt]

¹⁸ Ponge, "Ad Litem," *Proèmes*, 169. [poorly informed as we are by their expressions about the coefficient of joy or woe that touches their life]

¹⁹ Ponge, "Raisons de vivre heureux," *Proèmes*, 167. [It is not things that speak among themselves but humans who speak among themselves about things, and one cannot in the least escape the human.]

the task he sets for himself, insofar as the objects remain locked up in themselves, and humans remain human, and it is from that contradiction that he derives energy.

This fact about language, that it is for humans a vital means of expression and yet it is full of “others” (other humans who have used the language before, but also the field of possible referents, made fertile by difference and inconsistency of usage), has a double edge for Ponge. Frequent use can cause words and phrases to become stale, hackneyed. We come to take them for granted. The individual voice has less and less part in articulating them. Ponge also exposes the bad faith of those who despair of language because of this “dégout,” who try to keep others out of themselves. The problem is not that so many others have used the language before it comes to one, but rather that so many have used it as though it belonged to them personally, as though they could bend it to themselves, without concern for the sensitive, fragile threads that connect it to external realities. Or they have used language without recognizing that it *is* an external reality.

Thus he continually reasserts a hierarchy of the object of attention over the object made of words he presents to us on the object’s behalf:

L’objet est toujours plus important, plus intéressant, plus capable (plein de droits): il n’a aucun devoir vis-à-vis de moi, c’est moi qui ai tous les devoirs à son égard.²⁰

The place of poetic making in this fulfillment of his obligations toward the object is furthermore always provisional. This is similar to what Max Weber says about science as a vocation, except that it has less to do with the certainty of becoming obsolete when future discoveries are made, than with deference to the object itself at every turn. A scientist’s work becomes obsolete when other scientists prove her theories inadequate, or propose theories of greater explanatory power. For Ponge it is rather that the poetic object, the object of the poet’s making, must never presume to replace the

²⁰ Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 10. [The object is always more important, more interesting, more capable (replete with claims): it has no obligation toward me, it is I who have all the obligations in its regard.]

object of poetic attention, towards which the poem is turned with all of its being. “Ce que les lignes précédentes ne disent pas assez: *en conséquence*, ne jamais m’arrêter à la forme *poétique*,” which reinforces the commitment with which he begins the piece:

Que rien désormais ne me fasse revenir de ma détermination: ne sacrifier jamais l’objet de mon étude à la mise en valeur de quelque trouvaille verbale que j’aurai faite à son propos, ni à l’arrangement en poème de plusieurs de ces trouvailles.²¹

That he makes the commitment so formally, so emphatically, suggests there is always a risk, a temptation. It also has a mnemonic function—it is not a lesson learnt once and for all, but requires a continual “return” to the object, which acknowledges that there is built into the act of writing a departure from the object. “En revenir toujours à l’objet lui-même, à ce qu’il y a de brut, de *différent* : différent en particulier de ce que j’ai déjà (à ce moment) écrit de lui.”²² When it comes to his current object, the editors of the *Pléiade* note that the title of the piece, “Berges de la Loire,” “dès le premier paragraphe s’impose une lecture allégorique, l’écriture se produisant en marge (sur les berges) de son objet.”²³ The metapoetic impulse in Ponge leads readers again and again to observe how the objects of his attention serve as figures of writing. This tendency is undeniable but it is also funny, because he sees the object as a figure of writing even as he continually places it before and above his own writing. I propose that we put it this way: he takes writing lessons from the objects of his attention. It can come to seem circular—once again, “Des raisons d’écrire”: “*parler contre les paroles. Les entraîner avec soi dans la honte où elles nous conduisent de telle sorte qu’elles s’y défigurent. Il n’y a point d’autre raison*

²¹ Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 10 & 9. [What the preceding lines do not say enough: *as a consequence*, I must never leave off at *poetic* form] & [May nothing henceforth make me turn back from my determination: never to sacrifice the object of my study to the valuation of some verbal discovery that I have made on its behalf, nor to the arrangement into a poem of several such discoveries.]

²² Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 9. [Always to come back to the object itself, to what about it is raw, *différent*: different in particular from what I have already (up to this moment) written about it.]

²³ *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*, vol. I of II, 1024, introductory notes to “Berges de la Loire.” [from the first paragraph an allegorical reading is evident, of the writing being produced on the margin (on the banks) of its object.]

d'écrire."²⁴ If there is no other reason to write than to speak against the words, and yet the object is always more interesting and more important than what can be written, perhaps it is attending to the object that allows one to perform the feat of speaking against words. "Parler contre les paroles" might mean something like going against the grain, using words in ways they are not 'used to' being used, but it also has (like *Le Parti pris* and "Ad Litem") a political sense, of speaking out against words, or with a twist, of using words against themselves. The most refreshingly concrete moment in "Berges de la Loire," the one that engages with the river in name and in substance, shows something of the way the object of attention teaches Ponge what he is doing as a writer: "Ainsi, écrivant *sur* la Loire, d'un endroit des berges de ce fleuve, devrais-je y replonger sans cesse mon regard, mon esprit. Chaque fois qu'il aura *séché* sur une expression, le replonger dans l'eau du fleuve."²⁵ One way of reading Ponge on so many objects is to see the objects as allegories of writing, in which case we might think he was forever casting about for new conduits of self-reference; but another way, which seems to me more faithful and generative, is to see how the objects suggest to Ponge a way of writing "à leur propos." The river contains in itself a suggestion of the "way out"—in the midst of this text in every other way explicitly about a poetic method, the water washes over the words, giving the terms on which it will be written about. What happens when something is plunged back into water is a rinsing as well as an immersion, a baptism, and it is the river that allows Ponge to say in the end: "Peu m'importe après cela que l'on veuille nommer poème ce qui va en résulter. Quant à moi, le moindre soupçon de ronron poétique m'avertit seulement que je rentre

²⁴ Ponge, "Des raisons d'écrire," *Proêmes*, 163-4. [to speak against the words. To drag them along with oneself in the shame where they lead us in such a way that they deface themselves. There is no other reason to write.]

²⁵ Ponge, "Berges de la Loire," *La Rage de l'expression*, 9-10. [Thus, writing *on* the Loire, from a place on the banks of this river, I should ceaselessly plunge my gaze, my mind into it. Each time it will have *dried* upon an expression, plunge it back into the water of the river.] Once again, as Rosanna Warren teaches me, the slang senses of *sécher* are of the essence here: skipping class, and most acutely in the context of Ponge's biography (see note 4), being unable to answer a question in class. In this sense, the river also contains in itself an inexhaustible renewal, a starting-over, a solution for Ponge's own failures of expression.

dans le manège, et provoque mon coup de reins pour en sortir.”²⁶ The mischief he gets up to with words is disciplined through attention to the object, which humbles him, and to which he must refuse nothing.

*

Ponge’s poetics of attention reckon fully with the thickness, “l’épaisseur du monde verbal,” and his labor of attention is always simultaneously an apprenticeship in speaking his language with all of his being. Philippe Jaccottet, by contrast, lives and writes with a desire to render language transparent, weightless. What often comes across as a suspicion of language—and especially lyrical language—can usually be traced back to a profound self-doubt, a suspicion of the way that a writer’s deceived and conceited self asserts itself in language. He seems always at risk, and makes us feel it as a risk, of chasing away the fragile presence of a world outside himself, which he is at pains to find the words adequate to attend to.

Silence might well be the perfectly irreproachable attitude of attention. But it is not possible to express perfect silence, nor perfect attention. The moment the poet begins, he is spoiling the perfection of silence. The resistance to perfection in the work of these poets is in part an acknowledgment of this fundamental condition of their medium. Jaccottet goes as far as possible to give language to a condition approaching silence. In *Observations et autres notes anciennes*, he writes,

On peut alors se jeter dans toutes sortes d’activités forcenées, de même qu’un invité, dans une soirée, s’agite et se dépense pour se persuader qu’il s’amuse. Mais si l’on attendait en ne parlant pas, il semble qu’une espèce d’ordre pourrait se faire, un mouvement ascendant, même très imperceptible, se substituer à la chute. Ainsi, dans une tranquillité tremblante, dans le silence ou plus exactement dans un espace où les bruits s’éloignent et

²⁶ Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La Rage de l’expression*, 11. [It matters little after that whether what results is deemed a poem. As for me, the slightest suspicion of poetic purring just warns me that I am getting back on the merry-go-round, and rouses me to thrust myself out.]

s'étagent, comme lorsqu'on sort d'une ville et atteint les premières forêts, dans cet espace pareil à une maison, quelque chose pourrait se passer peut-être, s'entrouvrir, s'éclairer.²⁷

This space that is not exactly silent corresponds to the attitude of attention that is possible for the poet in the world. The “trembling quiet” belongs both to the observer (the extent to which it is possible to quiet the describing self) and to what he tries to describe—the quieter he makes himself, the quieter parts of the world he is able to register.

The problem is to find the least intrusive way to translate attention into language. To the question that bothered Mallarmé (and Plato's *Cratylus*), of whether words have any necessary relation to the things they signify, Jaccottet entertains a relative rather than an absolute answer:

Y aurait-il des choses qui habitent les mots
plus volontiers, et qui s'accordent avec eux
—ces moments de bonheur qu'on retrouve dans les poèmes
avec bonheur, une lumière qui franchit les mots
comme en les effaçant—et d'autres choses
qui se cabrent contre eux, les altèrent, qui les détruisent²⁸

If we answer this question in the affirmative, we might also assume those things that consent to description are the writer's proper subjects. That the others, those unwilling to inhabit language, must be passed over in silence.²⁹ Yet this is just what one does not find confirmed in Jaccottet's work. One finds instead an unerring affinity for the things least at home in words. Nor does he

²⁷ Jaccottet, *Observations*, 33. [One could then throw oneself into all kinds of frantic activities, just as a guest, at a soiree, bestirs and spends himself to be persuaded that he enjoys himself. But if one waited without speaking, it seems a kind of order could be formed, an ascending movement, even quite imperceptible, to supersede the fall. Thus, in a trembling quiet, in the silence or more exactly, in a space where the sounds digress and rise gradually, as when one leaves a city and reaches the first forests, in that space akin to a house, something might be able to happen, to open a little, to lighten.]

²⁸ Jaccottet, “Parler” section 4, lines 1-6, *Chants d'en bas*, 47.

[Could there be things that inhabit words
more willingly, and agree with them
—those happy moments one finds in poems
happily, a light that clears the words
as though effacing them—and other things
that rebel against them, alter them, destroy them]

²⁹ The crisis in Jaccottet's poetics at this point bears comparison to the philosophical utterance of Ludwig Wittgenstein, that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” (This is the seventh basic proposition made in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. C.K. Ogden transl, p. 189, London: Routledge, 1922)

attempt, as another writer might, to get these things to submit to language, to give up their defenses; to neologize, to conduct radical experiments, to hunt them down by stealth and disarm them. Rather he articulates his own attention to these things that rebel against words (*se cabrer* can also mean to take fright or to rear up, as a horse—which would give them the aspect of wild or skittish animals). He turns the language towards the experience and intelligence (what is gathered) of attention. Instead of trying to “capture” these rebellious objects in language, he accepts their resistance and records his encounters with it—whatever of themselves these objects are “willing” to have described, he describes, while giving a specific and sensuous impression of what could not be described and yet exists.

Whatever balance he weighs between the values of poetry and those of prose at any given moment, Jaccottet remains circumspect in both forms as to the value we ought to place on language itself. The first poem of the “Parler” sequence (from which we have just seen a sample) begins with the following verse paragraph:

Parler est facile, et tracer des mots sur la page,
en règle générale, est risquer peu de chose :
un ouvrage de dentellière, calfeutré,
paisible (on a pu même demander
à la bougie une clarté plus douce, plus trompeuse),
tous les mots sont écrits de la même encre,
“fleur” et “peur” par exemple sont presque pareils,
et j’aurai beau répéter “sang” du haut en bas
de la page, elle n’en sera pas tachée,
ni moi blessé.³⁰

³⁰ Jaccottet, “Parler” section 1, lines 1-10, *Chants d’en bas*, 41.

[To speak is easy, and to trace words on the page,
as a general rule, is to risk little :
a lace-maker’s work, cushy,
peaceful (one could even demand
of the candle a softer, more deceptive light),
all words are written in the same ink,
“flower” and “fear” for example are almost alike,
in vain would I repeat “blood” from top to bottom
of the page, it would not be stained,

Here Jaccottet posits a hierarchy between the given and the made—the impotence of ink in the face of the realities it would condense and render equivalent, reducing all to the same (cheap) currency. Attention on the other hand registers difference—the unlikeness of flower and fear. It also registers a kind of inextricability that the equivalence of words is ever at risk of denying—blood issues from wounds suffered by living things, and its substance stains almost any absorbent surface. Language itself is an indifferent instrument—there is nothing intrinsic to stop it from invoking things, which exist in the world, aridly, inattentively, as though their existence were a matter of indifference. Prose is as vulnerable as poetry to this indifference, if not more so, because it has a virtually unlimited budget, whereas even free verse suggests the virtue of economizing. The economy of poetry might make it possible to distinguish values, to suggest relations among words that take into account the relations among the things they invoke. But for Jaccottet this economy can also tempt an overvaluation of the words themselves; it is just as possible to construct an imaginary or false set of relations as a true one, in poetry’s art of arrangement. (And here he would fall in line with Ponge, who wrote in “Berges de la Loire,” “Ne jamais essayer d’*arranger les choses*. Les choses et les poèmes sont inconciliables.”³¹)

Parler alors semble mensonge, ou pire: lâche
 insulte à la douleur, et gaspillage
 du peu de temps et forces qui nous reste.³²

The severity of this assessment is lightened somewhat by the main verb: *sembler* is not yet *être*. It leaves room for a possibility beyond seeming. Like Ponge, he comes right up to the brink of

nor I wounded.]

³¹ Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 10. [Never try to *arrange things*. Things and poems are irreconcilable.] Italics in the original.

³² Jaccottet, “Parler” section 1, lines 23-5, *Chants d’en bas*, 42.

[To speak then seems a lie, or worse: cowardly
 affront to pain, and waste
 of what little time and force we have left.]

renouncing his art: would it not be better to remain silent, since the things that most command our attention are not those “willing” to inhabit our words? It would seem so. But it is only to break down the confidence, the self-importance of the medium, which after all, being human, he cannot do without. Both poets, vigilant of their language, are also on the alert against what they present as an insidious perfectionism, which would try to replace the objects of attention with the objects made of language (because more perfectible, seemingly more within the poet’s control); to arrest the change that is endemic to worldly objects. Thus a parenthetical lyric stands between the “Parler” sequence and the “Autre chants” of the *Chants d’en bas*, italicized as though whispered, or hissed:

*(Je t’arracherais bien la langue, quelquefois,
sentencieux phraseur. Mais regarde-toi donc
dans le miroir brandi par les sorcières: bouche
d’or, source longtemps si fière de tes sonores
prodiges, tu n’es déjà plus qu’égout baveux.)*³³

There is a kind of maintenance to keep up, if one is to work in language; a curbing of the pride that would try to do more than justice to the world. And yet it is an admonishment delivered in weary affection, the *quelquefois* holding the reins as does *sembler* in the earlier passage. A lyric sequence like this one seems to act astringently for Jaccottet, as a way of clearing ground—it does not prescribe abstinence from language, but re-establishes a sense of proportion.

Jaccottet and the tonic of haiku (invisible birds)

Jaccottet found himself unable to write poems for four years, in the late 1950s, between *L’ignorant: poèmes 1952-1956* and *Airs: poèmes 1961-1964*. It was the discovery of R.H. Blyth’s haiku translations

³³ Jaccottet, *Chants d’en bas*, 53.

*[(Sometimes I could just tear out your tongue,
sententious phrase-maker. But come, look at yourself
in the mirror brandished by conjurers: mouth
of gold, fount for long so proud of your sonorous
prodiges, even now you are no more than a slobbering drain.)]* Italics in the original.

that gave him some relief—oddly enough, since by all accounts English is not a language he knows well.³⁴ Then after the volume *Airs* (published in 1967), made possible by the engagement with haiku, another melancholy about writing sets in (though not an inability to compose lyrics). The subsequent *Leçons* (1969), *Chants d'en bas* (1974) and *À la lumière d'hiver* (1977) have a renewed gravity—almost as though the lift of *Airs* had just naturally settled, drifted down, the lightness they enjoyed inherently ephemeral (the later collections are also touched by actual loss, of his father-in-law and his mother). The enthusiasm of his 1960 essay about Blyth's haiku anthology is plain. It may be that the very linguistic remove from which he approached the poems allowed him to trust them more unreservedly. He hints at an extra-linguistic dimension, or a sense in which the words are just the haiku seen from one angle: “la qualité singulière de cette poésie ne peut s'expliquer que par un *état* singulier, auquel le poète accède par une série de dépouillements dont la concision de son vers n'est que la manifestation verbale.”³⁵ And the words he uses to describe this singular quality generally have to do with what's left out rather than any measurable content: “Pauvreté, discrétion, effacement sinon abolition de la personne, humour (qui n'est pas frivolité, mais refus de la lourdeur)” and “Un sens prodigieux du vide, comme du blanc dans le dessin; et une véritable divination dans le choix des deux ou trois ‘signes’ indispensables et dans l'établissement de leurs rapports.”³⁶ These may be intuitive enough Western impressions of haiku as a genre, so often striking for its immediately perceptible differences from the European lyric tradition. But it is also significant while trying to understand how Jaccottet manages to give an account of his attention.

³⁴ As Peter Low puts it, “Jaccottet read at two removes, since English is not his second language or even his fourth. Thus his handful of haiku in French are translations of translations, and may well displease experts in Japanese, all the more so in that Blyth was his only source.” (Low, “Jaccottet and the masters,” 215)

³⁵ Jaccottet, “L'Orient limpide,” 907. [the singular quality of this poetry can only be explained by a singular *state*, which the poet reaches by a series of strippings-down, of which the concision of his line is only the verbal manifestation.]

³⁶ Jaccottet, “L'Orient limpide,” 907 & 906. [Poverty, discretion, effacement if not [abolition/abolishment] of the person, humor (which is not frivolity, but refusal of heaviness)] & [A prodigious sense of the void, like white in drawing; and an actual divination in the choice of the two or three indispensable “signs” and in the establishment of their relations.]

I suspect he would sympathize with Darwin's ambivalence about writing. His own has different sources, for Darwin preferred observation to writing expressly as parts of a naturalist's vocation, while Jaccottet's vocation is irrevocably bound up with writing at every turn. This is often presented by Jaccottet as a particularly modern (French) problem; the struggle is to find the will to write in a disenchanted world, and it is connected to a state of cumbersome self-consciousness. Nor does writing in prose rather than verse quite solve the problem, for though it relinquishes the ambition of perfectible form, Jaccottet's lyrical-discursive prose is indelibly written, and aware of the ideal it has given up in turning away from distilled lyric. As Denise Rochat puts it, "Il arrive toutefois que la prose devienne l'envers stérile de la transparence, la conscience coupable du poème."³⁷

His deep affinity for Hölderlin makes it more than a casual observation that the Greek gods "ont eu pour lui une telle réalité qu'il est le seul des poètes de son temps à avoir pu les nommer et les invoquer sans paraître mentir," that

il arrive à [lui] de les sentir tout proches, mais c'est entre de longues périodes vides, ternes ou sombres; alors se forme en lui l'idée que la Grèce, c'était le temps où cette proximité des dieux était constante; et non comme une menace, mais comme la lumière égale du jour, comme une fête³⁸

To write poems would be a matter of indifference, perhaps, if it did not matter whether the things "named" and "invoked" in the poems had an independent reality for the poet, and if the poet were not at the mercy of their appearance. Thus Jaccottet remarks that for Hölderlin, certain scenes from

³⁷ Rochat, "Cahier de verdure," 33. [It happens all the same that the prose becomes the sterile inverse of transparency, the poem's guilty conscience.]

³⁸ Jaccottet, *Paysages*, "Si simples sont lest images, si saintes..." 145 & 148. [had for him such a reality that he is the only poet of his time to have been able to name and invoke them without seeming to lie] & [it happens that he senses them utterly near, but between long periods of dull, dismal emptiness; thus the idea comes to him that [ancient] Greece was when this proximity to the gods was constant; and not as a menace, but like the even light of day, like a festival] See for instance the opening lines of section VII, Bread and Wine, in Christopher Middleton's translation: "Surely, friend, we have come too late. The gods are alive,/ Yes, but yonder, up there, in another world overhead./ There they are endlessly active and seem not greatly to care/ If we are living or not, such is their lenience."

the bible “prennent à ses yeux [...] la même intensité que les apparences naturelles.”³⁹ For Jaccottet it is “les apparences naturelles” themselves that have to be willing to “habiter les mots [...] volontiers” if he is to invoke them, which also means that he has to have been present to those things willing to inhabit words, in a certain “*état singulier*.” His distrust of “images,” cited in every account of his turn to haiku as a “poésie sans images” is not then a suspicion of language that refers to appearances, but rather of language that constructs unreal appearances borrowing the veneer of reality; and equally of language that tries to *replace* physical reality by presuming to name it exhaustively.⁴⁰ It is all so subject to contingency, and often he laments an inadequacy in the presence that he is able to bring to the world, the inadequacy of his attention, but returns to that attitude he praises especially in the last poems of Hölderlin as “pudeur devant le monde.”⁴¹

It is painful, for Jaccottet, to reckon with the diminished possibilities of poetry, even within his own personal history (there was something available to youthful insouciance that ponderous age no longer trusts). In *Un calme feu* (2007), writing of Palmyra, where he travelled in 2004:

Je n’ai vu que ce que j’ai vu, en presque ignorant, en oublieux de presque tout, vieil homme qui ne s’exalte plus guère, entré qu’il est dans la saison froide; mais qui, néanmoins, a vu là quelque chose, et qu’il lui importe d’essayer de dire. (Il y a longtemps, peut-être aurais-je su le dire d’un seul poème sans poids, mais j’en ai perdu le secret ou la clef—que ne vous tendra plus main.)⁴²

The possibility of poetry depends upon a disposition that cannot be forced, or asked for. The sin, if there is one, is to write poetry when it is not possible, to write it in bad faith. He writes of something

³⁹ Jaccottet, *Paysages*, “Si simples sont lest images, si saintes...,” 151. [acquire in his eyes [...] the same intensity as natural appearances]

⁴⁰ See Stout, “Reorienting Lyric,” 78; Rochat, “Airs,” 811; and for an account of Jaccottet’s confession that he has not been able to “renoncer aux images,” Onimus, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 81.

⁴¹ Jaccottet, *Paysages*, “Si simples sont lest images, si saintes...,” 156. [modesty before the world]

⁴² Jaccottet, *Un calme feu*, 49. [I saw only what I saw, almost ignorantly, forgetful of almost everything, an old man who hardly enthuses any longer, entered as he has into the cold season; but who, nevertheless, saw something there, which it matters to him to say. (Long ago, perhaps I would have known how to say it in a single weightless poem, but I have lost the secret or the key—which no hand will ever hold out to you again.)]

that precedes the haiku, that makes them conceivable, “l’état à partir duquel cette poésie, comble de limpidité, devient concevable.”⁴³

il pourrait n’être pas inutile de méditer sur le sens de leur réussite, sur la leçon morale qu’elles nous proposent (encore une fois, si légèrement), leçon dont une poésie neuf fois sur dix aussi prétentieuse que relâchée aurait le plus pressant besoin.⁴⁴

There is a barely concealed disgust in Jaccottet’s assessment, disgust with the poetry then “conceivable” around him—to the point that he suggests, to put it in English idiom, that it needs to be taught a lesson.

Denise Rochat suggests that the restrained punctuation of *Airs*, especially the absence of periods (not typical of Jaccottet’s earlier work), effaces the boundary between the lines of poetry and the surrounding white space.⁴⁵ Given Jaccottet’s general “méfiance” of beautiful language, its propensity to dazzle with false images, it seems fitting that he would seek to disarm language of its habitual ways of guarding itself, or rather the writer’s habitual ways of guarding his language, from the “environment” in the broadest sense. I am not sure whether removing a period has this power, to let the world rush in on the poem, to make it vulnerable. It depends on what kind of power one grants the period in the first place. Incidentally, the absence of punctuation in John Clare’s manuscripts has been read in similar ways (though in his case, this was inseparable from his lack of much formal education—whereas Jaccottet’s persona of “l’ignorant” is just that, a persona). This lifting of boundaries has a corollary in the kind of expression Jaccottet finds available, possible, “conceivable.” There is something in the “song,” “le chant,” for Jaccottet, likewise impossible to force. Says Rochat, “L’identification fréquente de la voix poétique avec celle de l’oiseau dit bien

⁴³ Jaccottet, “L’Orient limpide,” 907. [the state out of which this poetry, which is the height of limpidity, becomes conceivable.]

⁴⁴ Jaccottet, “L’Orient limpide,” 908. [It might not be useless to meditate on the meaning of their success, on the moral lesson they propose to us (once again, so lightly), a lesson of which a poetry nine times out of ten as pretentious as it is slack, would have the most pressing need.]

⁴⁵ Rochat, “Airs,” 813.

toute la fascination qu'un tel chant, à la fois limpide, immédiat et hors langage exerce sur Jaccottet."⁴⁶ She continues, "la voix, au comble de l'épure et de l'effacement, se rapproche du regard."⁴⁷ In a footnote, she cites from *Airs*: "Qu'est-ce donc que le chant? / Rien qu'une sorte de regard"⁴⁸ Yet this also relates back to an earlier question in this collection, "Qu'est-ce que le regard?"⁴⁹ on its own line, answered:

Un dard plus aigu que la langue
la course d'un excès à l'autre
du plus profond au plus lointain
du plus sombre au plus pur

un rapace

[A dart sharper than the tongue
the race from one excess to another
from the deepest to the farthest
from the darkest to the most pure

a raptor]⁵⁰

The connection between song and gaze is circular—no way of being in relation to the world turns out to be perfectly innocent, and the search for a gaze and a song that would be transparent, limpid, can only keep moving. Rochat points out the persistent attraction of birdsong for Jaccottet. In this once again he approaches Clare, but unlike Clare he is not a naturalist, not even incipiently (as we will see shortly, he has little care for identifying species), and would not directly transcribe birdsongs. A literalism like Clare's does not seem to be one of his resources.⁵¹ For Clare there was something

⁴⁶ Rochat, "Airs," 813. [The frequent identification of the poetic voice with that of the bird speaks to all the fascination that such a song, at once limpid, immediate and outside of language, exercises upon Jaccottet]

⁴⁷ Rochat, "Airs," 813. [the voice, at the height of purifying and effacement, approaches the gaze]

⁴⁸ Jaccottet, *Airs*, 80. [What then is the song? / Nothing but a kind of gaze]

⁴⁹ [What is the gaze?]

⁵⁰ Jaccottet, *Airs*, 30. Exceptionally, the translation is in the body of the text to preserve the form.

⁵¹ I suspect he would admire Clare's work, for similar reasons that draw him to haiku, for its "limpidity"—as far as I know, only one book of Clare's work exists in French translation, *Les poèmes et proses de la folie de John Clare*, by Pierre

less mediate about the process of responding to the natural world with human language—no theory of natural correspondence between words and things, but no worry about the incongruence either. For Jaccottet, working with language is a labor of unburdening.

The appeal of haiku for Jaccottet was no doubt also its enigmatic character, its “limpidity” not incompatible with obscurity. He is drawn to forms of expression that accommodate both, that can be perceived directly, and yet that seem to resist explanation. As haiku scholars, recently Hiroaki Sato, make clear, the tradition of haiku is certainly not independent of commentary or context—on the contrary, it is a deeply rule-bound and context-dependent form.⁵² Jaccottet seems to know this, and yet there is something in the formal effect of the haiku—across the mediated form in which he receives it—that signals an alternative to him. A possibility for lyric attention not clouded by vain image-making, which he distrusted. Its very impersonality appeals to him. He notices

Quelques mots forts communs, pour la plupart d’ailleurs fixés par une tradition (de sorte qu’on aurait affaire à une poésie presque anonyme, si des personnalités aussi diverses que celles de Bashô, de Buson, d’Issa et de Shiki, pour ne citer que les plus grands noms, ne lui avaient donné chacune sa couleur singulière)⁵³

The limitations on individual expression built into certain words, which Jaccottet rather embraces than feels as stifling, resemble Ponge’s diagnosis of the condition that leads so many who might be poets to choose silence, or suicide, instead. Ponge paraphrases the response of those who turn away in disgust, at his suggestion that they become poets: “mais c’est là surtout, c’est là encore que je sens

Leyris, the great literary translator of English into French. If Jaccottet has read it, I can find no record. Jaccottet admires Hölderlin above all, another figure marked by both limpidity and madness.

⁵² See *On Haiku* (2018), especially the first three essays, in which he sorts out some of the Western impressions and misperceptions of haiku, the attraction it holds especially for 20th-century American writers, and in “Haiku and Zen: Association and Disassociation,” the way this poetic form can but does not necessarily possess the same values as zen.

⁵³ Jaccottet, “L’orient limpide,” 906. [a few very common words, for the most part, moreover, fixed by a tradition (such that we might be dealing with an almost anonymous poetry, if such personalities as diverse as Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki, only to cite the most eminent names, had not each given [the tradition] his singular color)]

les autres en moi-même, lorsque je cherche à m'exprimer je n'y parviens pas. Les paroles sont toutes faites et s'expriment: elles ne m'expriment point. Là encore j'étouffe."⁵⁴

For Jaccottet, the personal detachment from words he detected in haiku was instead a liberation, a re-opening of poetic possibility. At a later moment in his career, he would find in Basho's *Narrow Road to the Interior* (in French translation by René Sieffert) a confirmation of his own sensibility, which he felt shaken, even stifled, in the face of the political fervor of admired contemporaries. He is looking back to his own notebooks of August 1968, where he had "jeté quelques notes sur les événements de mai" (widespread student-led revolts and labor strikes throughout France), in particular his reaction to pieces published by three poets he admired, "écrivains plutôt secrets et que je n'avais jamais vu s'engager dans un débat politique, saluent l'événement avec une égale ferveur [...] Ces pages, sur le moment, m'ont ébranlé; je devais être vaguement honteux de moi, qui n'aurais pas été porté par cette vague d'espoir fiévreux."⁵⁵ However one judges the sincerity of his political conscience, his reaction is, I believe, bound up with his sense of expressive limits. He is shaken by the fact that voices he knew to be circumspect, "secret" (like his own), pitched themselves in a register beyond the limits they had previously recognized.

Jaccottet finds meaning in the fact that from his re-reading of these pieces, and his reactions to them at the time, he turns to Basho, and something lifts: "je m'étais dit aussitôt, sans plus réfléchir, que cette sente étroite était la seule que j'eusse envie de suivre sans me contraindre, la seule

⁵⁴ Ponge, "Rhétorique," *Proèmes*, 157. [but it is there especially, already there that I sense others in myself; when I seek to express myself I do not succeed. The words are ready-made and express themselves: they do not express me at all. There again I am stifled.]

⁵⁵ Jaccottet, *La seconde saison*, 135-6. [rather private writers, whom I had never seen engaged in a political debate, greeted the event with equal fervor [...] These pages, at the time, unsettled me; I should have been vaguely ashamed of myself, who would not have been carried away by this wave of feverish hope] The writers in question are René-Louis Des Forêts, André Du Bouchet, and Jacques Dupin. The pieces were published in the 6th issue of the journal called *L'Éphémère*.

où je n’aurais pas bronché.”⁵⁶ As it was for Ponge, it is important for Jaccottet to find a way with language, a way of following the poetic vocation, that could cope with its tendency to turn away from the world observed: Jaccottet’s “sente étroite” [narrow path] runs parallel to Ponge’s “une seule issue” [single way out]. In the French translation Jaccottet read, that “Sente Étroite” was “du Bout-du-Monde.” In English, it has been rendered as “The Narrow Road” : “to the Interior,” “to Oku,” “to the Deep North,” “to a Far Province,” and even as “Back Roads to Far Towns.” The “ends-of-the-earth (or edge-of-the-world, or back-of-the-world) path,” might convey the French translator Sieffert’s sense of the title. All of the possibilities contain a hint of somewhere not broadly and easily accessible, not somewhere you get to by rote. The “interior” (as in the final line of Bishop’s “Arrival at Santos”: “we are driving to the interior”) has a geographic resonance at the same time as it makes us think of a turn inward.⁵⁷ And indeed Jaccottet seems to turn most inward, when he is most concerned with what is beyond him, opening himself to a place and all that lives in it. He confines himself to an inner response to the natural world without recourse to the knowledge that might be had from books, for instance, or other people, about the phenomena and forms of existence he attends to. It is the way *out* rather than the way *in* that concerns Ponge, who makes abundant use of external resources (like dictionaries). Each poet has a sense that there is no escape from being human and born into language. But whereas Ponge takes the bushwacker and proceeds straight through the thickest part, Jaccottet is on the lookout for a path more “secret,” for quietly going the long way around. I can imagine him with Basho asking for directions to Kurobane from “a man cutting grass” : “Courteous, he thought awhile, then said, “Too many intersecting roads. It’s easy to get lost. Best to take that old horse as far as he’ll go. He knows the road. When he stops, get

⁵⁶ Jaccottet, *La seconde saison*, 136. [I said to myself at once, without reflecting further, that this narrow road was the only one I wanted to follow without constraining myself, the only one where I would not have faltered.]

⁵⁷ Bishop, “Arrival at Santos,” line 40, *PPL*, 72.

off, and he'll come back alone.”⁵⁸ The way forward is too complicated to explain and yet there is a clarity about the response—not an answer to the question for knowledge (not a map drawn or directions written out), but a way of traveling all the same, a way of following the road while leaving it still unknown.

I am disposed to agree with Peter Low, who acknowledges that haiku could certainly not have made an impression on Jaccottet equal to such poets as Hölderlin, but suggests “only that Blyth’s anthology affected him more than any single work he encountered after he was young—and he is nothing if not a reader of books. It could do so only by being so different from his familiar traditions.”⁵⁹ I would only add the specifically liberating nature of haiku’s impression on Jaccottet: “L’absolue merveille de cette prose, de cette poésie,” he writes of Basho’s travelogues (which were both), “est qu’elle ne cesse de tisser autour de nous des réseaux dont les liens, toujours légers, semblent nous offrir la seule liberté authentique.”⁶⁰ Ever in search of a freedom in writing that would not compromise the freedom of the written-about, he seeks simultaneously the particular constraints, a kind of narrowness, which could yet remain open to the world observed. For as he writes in an introduction to his own slim selection of haiku he has adapted from other translations, on the distinctive nature of the haiku’s “façon légère de toucher aux choses”: “Il faut viser d’autant plus juste que sont peu nombreux les éléments du poème, en peser le poids sur des balances d’autant plus sensibles qu’ils sont légers.”⁶¹ Lightness, weightlessness, transparency are the values he finds

⁵⁸ Also, “Walked a few miles from Tōkyū’s home to the town of Hiwada in the foothills of Mount Asaka. Marshlands glistened outside of town. Almost midsummer, iris-picking time. I asked about blossoming *katsumi*, but no one knew where they grew. I searched all day, muttering “*Katsumi, katsumi*,” until the sun set over the mountains.” (Basho, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, 7, 11)

⁵⁹ Low, “Jaccottet and the masters,” 223.

⁶⁰ Jaccottet, *La seconde saison*, 137. [The absolute marvel of this prose, of this poetry, is that it never ceases weaving around us these webs whose connections seem to offer, ever so lightly, the only authentic freedom.]

⁶¹ Jaccottet, *Haïku*, 4th page of introduction (unnumbered pages). [their light way of touching upon things] [One must aim that much more truly, the less numerous are the elements of the poem, weighing them on balances so much the more sensitive the lighter they are.]

confirmed in haiku, and charged with new possibility; the sensitivity of balances is just about all he can hope to heighten in himself.

The poem from *Airs* that brings the “regard” into an equivalence with “un rapace,” a bird of prey (“Un dard plus aigu que la langue...”) also situates the “langue” (tongue, language) as a mediation, duller than the dart of seeing, but necessary to forge the equivalence. Somehow we get to the raptor, across the charged blank space, not by explanation but in a mimesis of the dart of the gaze that follows the bird in its dizzying stoop. All at once the word is there. The “chant,” the song, would then be the kind of utterance that works like a gaze, without stopping or slowing to make the grammatical, logical or rhetorical connection. And as the raptor shows him a kind of immediacy that bypasses language, songbirds suggested a way of singing that was also (in Rochat’s words) “hors langage” (outside of language). Birdsong and haiku, then, each opened up for him an alternative way of moving forward in the medium that was his, despite his recurring distrust of it.

And so he writes a piece called “Oiseaux invisibles” in the prose collection, *Paysages avec figures absentes* (1970, 1976),

Chaque fois que je me retrouve au-dessus de ces longues étendues couvertes de buissons et d’air (couvertes de buissons comme autant de peignes pour l’air) et qui s’achèvent très loin en vapeurs bleues, qui s’achèvent en crêtes de vagues, en écume (comme si l’idée de la mer me faisait signe au plus loin de sa main diaphane, et qui tremble), je perçois, à ce moment de l’année, invisibles, plus hauts, suspendus, ces buissons de cris d’oiseaux, ces points plus ou moins éloignés d’effervescence sonore. Je ne sais quelles espèces d’oiseaux chantent là, s’il y en a plusieurs, ou plus vraisemblablement une seule : peu importe. Je sais que je voudrais, à ce propos, faire entendre quelque chose (ce qu’il incombe à la poésie de faire entendre, même aujourd’hui), et que cela ne va pas sans mal.⁶²

⁶² Jaccottet, *Paysages*, 73. [Each time I find myself above these long expanses covered with thickets and with air (covered with thickets like so many combs for the air), and which end very far off in blue mists, which end in crests of waves, in foam (as though the idea of the sea beckoned me further with its diaphanous hand, which trembles), I perceive, at this time of year— invisible, higher up, suspended—these thickets of bird cries, these more or less distant points of sonorous effervescence. I do not know which kinds of birds sing there, if there are multiple, or more probably just one: it matters little. I know that I would like to make something understood in this matter (which it is incumbent on poetry to make heard, even today), and that it won’t be easy.]

After developing, over the course of a page, a complex description of this ephemeral “thing” he wants describe, “une chose invisible (en pleine lumière, alors qu’il ne semble pas que rien puisse la cacher, sinon justement la lumière, peut-être aveuglante)” [an invisible thing (in broad daylight, though it doesn’t seem as though anything could hide it, if not indeed the light, perhaps blinding)]—after an image slowly materializing, slowly mounting in its expressive force, which arrives at a comparison: “comme une série de fenêtres ouvertes l’une après l’autre sur le matin dans la grande maison de famille...” [like a series of windows opened one after the other onto the morning in the big family house...], he breaks off at the ellipse, as though carried away, and starts afresh in the next paragraph, “Or, ce n’est pas du tout cela.” [Well, that is not it at all.] This inclusion of his own failed attempt to express might resemble Ponge’s kind of fidelity, including all of the stages of poetic making in the finished work.⁶³ Yet Ponge tends to accrete, to build up, to form hard strata, or as he figures it in the laboriously, densely layered “Carnet du bois des pins” [Notebook of the pine woods], to include the “Formation d’un abcès poétique” [formation of a poetic abscess]. Jaccottet, by contrast, in keeping with his poetics of weightlessness, shrugs off the excessive language that has accrued. He includes the imperfect as much for the sake of letting go of it, as in the interest of fidelity—the notebook a way of attending to the very process of letting go the fruits of his own labor, of freeing himself up.⁶⁴

Unlike with John Clare or Elizabeth Bishop, the descriptive challenge here, what it is that gives Jaccottet so much trouble (and what he writes is always in part an account of the trouble it gives him), is not linked to the naturalist’s need of correct identification, of knowing the names, and

⁶³ For instance: most of the pieces in *La rage de l’expression* (1976) have this structure, especially “Le Carnet du bois des pins,” as does *La table* (1991) (a bit tediously, to my taste), *Le savon* (1967) (which has more spriteliness), and *Nioque de l’avant-printemps* (1983).

⁶⁴ Low goes so far as to suggest “that the *Haiku* made Jaccottet more willing to write [...] short notes; and may have influenced his decision, taken about 1959-62, to publish extracts from his notebooks, with little revision, to present them in their greatest immediacy. One recurrent theme of *La Semaison*, the fragility of natural beauty, shows very well Jaccottet’s affinity with the Japanese sensibility.” (Low, “Jaccottet and the masters,” 222)

distinguishing forms of life from one another. Where Clare was forthright about his impatience with ignorance of the natural world, especially in other poets (and especially when it came to birds), a certain kind of “ignorance” is just what Jaccottet seems to cultivate in himself. Indeed, one of his early collections announces this from its title, *L'ignorant*.⁶⁵ Especially in the context of Jaccottet’s ambivalence about poetic language, it is worth stressing how this persona of “l’ignorant” cuts against, or undercuts, his erudition. He was a great reader and prolific translator, especially from German (he directed the Pléaïde edition of Hölderlin, translated all of Musil and a good deal of Rilke) but also from Italian (Leopardi, Giuseppe Ungaretti), Russian (he learned Russian to read and translate Osip Mandelstam), and Greek (he translated *The Odyssey*). The expression ‘to wear one’s learning lightly’ springs to mind, and rarely does it seem quite so fitting as with Jaccottet, who was erudite, yet not falsely modest when he claimed not to know, who often seemed most interested in the things he did not consider objects of knowledge. As Rosanna Warren puts it, “translation occupies a vibratory median position between scribal reading and copying, at one pole, and original composition at the other. It reminds us that in reading and writing we are, in complex ways, not alone.”⁶⁶ In this sense, Jaccottet’s not needing to be the one who knows everything about the world to which he attends in his writing—whether attending to the natural world or to the words of others—resembles Ponge’s assertions about acknowledging the presence of others in the self while writing.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Translated sensibly by Derek Mahon as ‘Ignorance,’ it is more a persona than an abstract quality, perhaps ‘the ignorant one,’ which also shades into more pejorative or self-deprecating connotations (the dunce, the ignoramus...)

⁶⁶ Warren, Preface to *Fables of the Self*, xvii.

⁶⁷ As discussed earlier in the chapter (see note 11), Ponge criticizes those who want to commit suicide because they feel that “‘*les autres*’ ont trop de part en eux-mêmes.” I take his italics to be a critique of the way such people characterize and demonize the other (perhaps he also alludes to Sartre’s “L’enfer, c’est les Autres” in *Huis Clos*, 182). Elsewhere, he insists that happiness depends on not considering it an evil that the things one contemplates “invade” one’s personality. In that case it is things rather than people, but in both cases he is talking about the way writing (as well as contemplating, any outward-facing, outward-reaching orientation of a self in the world) requires letting other beings into the self. See notes 12 and 89.

The figure of the invisible bird existed in an earlier iteration in *Airs* (1967):

Tout un jour les humbles voix
d'invisibles oiseaux
l'heure frappé dans l'herbe sur une feuille d'or

le ciel à mesure plus grand⁶⁸

and even earlier, in *L'ignorant*, in a poem called “La voix,” which posits a bond of the unknowing listener to the unseen source of song:

Qui chante là quand toute voix se tait? Qui chante
avec cette voix sourde et pure un si beau chant?
Serait-ce hors de la ville, à Robinson, dans un
jardin couvert de neige? Ou est-ce là tout près,
quelqu'un qui ne se doutait pas qu'on l'écouterait?
Ne soyons pas impatient de le savoir
puisque le jour n'est pas autrement précédé
par l'invisible oiseau. Mais faisons seulement
silence. Une voix monte, et comme un vent de mars
aux bois vieillis porte leur force, elle nous vient
sans larmes, souriant plutôt devant la mort.
Qui chantait là quand notre lampe s'est éteinte?
Nul ne le sait. Mais seul peut entendre le coeur
qui ne cherche la possession ni la victoire.

[Who sings there when every voice is silent?
Who sings with that pure, deaf voice, such a lovely song?
Is it outside the city, to Robinson, in a snow-covered garden
or close at hand, someone not supposing to be heard?
Let us not be impatient to know, since
the day is not preceded else
by the invisible bird. But just let us be silent.
A voice rises, and as a March wind
quickens in the old wood, it comes to us
without tears, fairly smiling before death.
Who sings there when our lamp is put out?
No one knows. But only the heart seeking
neither possession nor victory can hear it.]⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Jaccottet, *Airs*, 46. [All day long the humble voices/ of invisible birds/ the hour struck in the grass on a gold leaf//the sky in greater proportion]

⁶⁹ Exceptionally, translation in the body of the text. Liberally adapted from Derek Mahon's rendering. Jaccottet, *Selected Poems*, 39. Among many differences, Mahon doesn't bring the troublesome “Robinson” into his translation—presumably it refers to a commune in the suburbs of Paris, Plessis-Robinson, but the allusion to *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson*

Jaccottet is a fierce protector of the invisible, a believer in leaving the fragile and ephemeral that exists in the world to its fragile and ephemeral existence, not seeking to enhance the resolution of the blurry picture, nor peer with binoculars at whoever might be the source of the song. There is a moral conviction at stake in this, a stubbornness, a fidelity. The final lines certainly make a moral pronouncement (against seeking possession or victory), but it is the poem's inner dialogue of questioning and non-answering, of an assertive not-knowing, that brings that “*état singulier*” into being, that “*état à partir duquel*” he would later suggest that haiku became conceivable. The emphasis on finding and inhabiting a “state” is subtly different from cultivating a robust subjectivity. While Jaccottet tends to limit himself to his own experience of the natural world, he would render that experience as receptive, as little overbearing as possible, by entering into a state in which a mode of transparent expression becomes “conceivable.”

Attending to the kinds of questions Jaccottet poses throughout his work allows us to focus on the kind of responses of and to the world he did and did not seek. In the words of Jean Onimus, “[...] la poésie de Jaccottet est-elle toute pleine de points d’interrogation, de ces questions à la fois frivoles et lourdes—que Breton appelait des ‘questions de granit’—celles que posent à la fois les enfants et les métaphysiciens et auxquelles il n’y a de réponse qu’*ailleurs*.”⁷⁰ Onimus gives as an

Crusoe also make the place and the name ambiguous (and the second part of the place-name apparently came from a cabaret, a “*guinguette*,” perched in a tree, inspired by the treehouses in *Swiss Family Robinson*, while the official website for the quartier associates the name with *Robinson Crusoe*: <https://www.plessis-robinson.com/fr/decouvrir-la-ville/histoire-du-plessis-robinson/le-plessis-robinson-au-fil-des-siecles/les-guinguettes-de-robinson.html>)—hence my hesitation over whether to translate the “à” as “in” (or at) a place or “to” a particular listener. The loneliness of *Crusoe* might make him a singularly receptive listener, and the thought of the remote island places the voice of this invisible bird at a certain imaginative remove...

⁷⁰ Onimus, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 43. [Jaccottet’s poetry is full of question marks, for questions at once frivolous and heavy—which Breton called “questions of granite”—those posed by children and metaphysicians alike and to which there is no response except *elsewhere*.] There is an exclamation in a similar vein at the end of Marianne Moore’s “Nevertheless”: “What sap/ went through that little thread/ to make the cherry red!” (Moore, *Complete Poems*, 126) The “what” is grammatically an interjection here, emphasizing how admirable or extraordinary such sap must be. The kind of question Jaccottet asks proceeds equally from a state of wonder, but it leaves out the evaluative dimension—a “why” is ambiguous, or indifferent, as to the praiseworthiness of its subject.

example these lines from a poem in *Airs*: “Violettes, pourquoi/ Si sombres, si parfumées?” [Violets, why/ so dark, so fragrant?], then comments “Question qu’on ne peut poser que si l’on aime, si l’on participe.”⁷¹ In the spirit (or the “state”) Jaccottet poses these questions, the literal answers would be tone-deaf. The “*ailleurs*” Onimus proposes as the only response to such questions is a displacement, removing the question to a sphere other than knowledge. So the poem can really assert that “No one knows,” as the prose-passage dismisses the importance of identifying the species, clearing away the inflections of the question that knowledge could meet or resolve. The “ignorant one” is the observer-poet who takes a position against ‘knowing’ what he perceives, because he would relate to it in a form other than knowledge, an ‘elsewhere’ form that knowledge would foreclose.

At the same time, there is a sensuous reality granted these objects of attention, which exists not just in a realm of pure form, which could be perceived in abstraction, but as a spontaneous source of wonder external to the observer, external to the poet, and surprising him. As Kevin Hart observes, “the sacred for [Jaccottet] is not an epiphany of something beyond the world but of what is immediate, innocent and ineffable within it.”⁷² Thus, “Jaccottet is right to note in *Paysages [avec figures absentes]* that the expression ‘negative theology’ is misused when applied to his writing. There is no affirmation of divine transcendence in his work.”⁷³ One way Jaccottet remains tied to the world is by attending to the invisible not as something metaphysical, which would be invisible because it has no physical manifestation—but invisible as a matter of personal limitation, of a constraint upon the senses that is embraced rather than corrected.

⁷¹ Onimus, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 43. [A question that can only be asked by one who loves, and participates.] Love and participation, like “why,” can take place pre-critically, before the question of whether the violet *ought* to be dark or perfumed, whether it is good for it to be thus, would occur to one.

⁷² Hart, “A voice answering a voice,” 179.

⁷³ Hart, “A voice answering a voice,” 181.

In a piece titled “Comment lire la poésie,” he ventures, “Je veux dire que si nous ne croyons pas au pouvoir *de ce qui est presque invisible*, nous pouvons aussi bien désespérer et juger la partie vaine, perdue d’avance.”⁷⁴ Like Elizabeth Bishop, he favors qualifying, diminishing adverbs that reserve absoluteness. That “presque” is almost the domain of poetry for Jaccottet; it asserts that the invisibility in question is of a prosaic kind, not magical but incomplete, contingent, and admitting of degree. Then he characterizes the way poems come to us in a way strikingly similar to those invisible birds: “Presque tous les poèmes, en effet, sont conçus comme une sorte de musique (mais une musique où la pensée et les images jouent le premier rôle), comme une sorte de parfum: quelque chose, en tout cas, qui s’élève dans l’air, dans le silence, objet fragile que l’on pourrait comparer à beaucoup de choses selon les poètes.”⁷⁵ He gives as an example the analogy of poetry to perfume, so vital for Baudelaire. The way of reading a poem, he suggests, must be more like inhaling perfume or hearing music than it is like other kinds of reading. But if his account of poetry, and his instructions for how to approach it, resemble his own approach to the invisible birds, it doesn’t follow that the birds are merely a cipher for poetry. The order is the other way around, and poetic utterance would be a way of taking a position in relation to “what is immediate, innocent and ineffable.” Because, at the same time as he disregards the kind of accuracy so important to Clare and Bishop, he shares with those poets a concern for fidelity to the world apart from him, at a distance from him, and a sense that to betray the world perceived is a grave fault. This sensibility raises the stakes of writing at the same time as it places the writing in a position subordinate to the natural world. I would suggest then that his instructions for reading poetry are as training for the way he would write, not quite in

⁷⁴ Jaccottet, *Tout n’est pas dit*, 20. [I mean to say that if we do not believe in the power of *what is almost invisible*, we might just as well despair and call it a futile endeavor, lost before it’s begun.] My emphasis.

⁷⁵ Jaccottet, *Tout n’est pas dit*, 21. [Almost all poems are in fact conceived as a kind of music (but a music where thought and images are primary), as a kind of perfume: something, in any case, which rises in the air, in the silence, a fragile object which, according to the poets, could be compared to many things.]

service of the phenomenal world (which as he knows must be indifferent to it), but not above it either. His “selon les poètes” has the effect of distancing himself from the title of poet once more, for he is circumspect about the efficacy of comparing this “objet fragile” with all of the things “the poets” might suggest. Paradoxically, writing and reading poetry in Jaccottet’s account would both be ways of reckoning with, and of respecting, what cannot be known or definitively compared.

In a book of travel writings, *Cristal et fumée* (1993), in a section titled “Entrevu en Égypte” [Glimpsed in Egypt], Jaccottet includes an anecdote of his early education, where he received from his mentor, the Francophone-Swiss poet Gustave Roud, a book about the Cairo Museum, which pleased him. He goes on to reflect on the word “Egypt,” that “Rien, plus tard, n’est venu approfondir ou préciser le sens que pouvaient avoir alors ce mot, et ce monde, dans mon esprit; c’est que je n’ai jamais été très enclin à approfondir quoi que se soit.”⁷⁶ Like John Clare his is a poetics of “glimpsing,” but Clare’s work bristles with details of creaturely company, specific and freely loved birds, mammals, flowers, trees, insects, fields, which he has been out, romping around among. Jaccottet’s position in relation to his objects of attention is by contrast withdrawn, even “shallow” (if it is possible to use that word without its pejorative baggage), dwelling at the surface and resting his gaze there, while registering the excess of the existence he cannot fully perceive.

The Pongian Method, the Choice of Objects, the Form of the World

The sheer joy of *Le parti pris des choses* in the refreshment and rejuvenation made possible by the contemplation of objects, is not vampiric—the subjective observer alive and autonomous, not preying upon objects, but delighting in their existence apart from the self. The emphasis on joy is in

⁷⁶ Jaccottet, *Cristal et fumée*, 62. [Nothing later came to deepen or specify the meaning this word, and this world, could have in my mind; this is because I’ve never been very inclined to deepen anything.]

part a resistance to the contemporary temptations to succumb to disgust and nihilism mentioned earlier, and in part an idea about what poetry is good for. Ponge begins the proem called “Raisons de vivre heureux,”

L'on devrait pouvoir à tous poèmes donner ce titre: Raisons de vivre heureux. Pour moi du moins, ceux que j'écris sont chacun comme la note que j'essaie de prendre, lorsque d'une méditation ou d'une contemplation jaillit en mon corps la fusée de quelques mots qui le rafraîchit et le décide à vivre quelques jours encore. [...] Voilà le mobile qui me fait saisir mon crayon. (Étant entendu qu'on ne désire sans doute conserver une *raison* que parce qu'elle est *pratique*, comme un nouvel outil sur notre établi). Et maintenant il me faut dire encore que ce que j'appelle une raison pourra sembler à d'autres une simple description ou relation, ou peinture désintéressée et inutile. Voici comment je me justifierai: Puisque la joie m'est venue par la contemplation, le retour de la joie peut bien m'être donné par la peinture. Ces retours de la joie, ces rafraîchissements à la mémoire des objets de sensations, voilà exactement ce que j'appelle raisons de vivre.⁷⁷

The connection between poetry and joy was certainly not Ponge's invention. For him, the most significant antecedent in making this connection might be Lucretius, who chose to convey his philosophy in poetry even though his great model Epicurus had not (indeed Epicurus was circumspect about poetry insofar as it smacked of decadence).⁷⁸ Ponge's sense of the *pratique*, the “outil sur notre établi,” resembles the Lucretian justification for poetry: “since this philosophy of ours often appears somewhat off-putting to those who have not experienced it, and most people recoil back from it, I have preferred to expound it to you in harmonious Pierian poetry and, so to

⁷⁷ Ponge, “Raisons de vivre heureux,” *Proèmes*, 166-7. [We should be able to give to all poems this title: Reasons to live happily. For me at least, those that I write are each like a note I try to take, while from a meditation or contemplation the rocket of a few words jets forth, which refresh it and induce it to live a few days longer. [...] This is the motive that makes me take up my pencil. (With the understanding that one wants to preserve a *reason* only because it is *practical*, like a new tool on our carpenter's bench.) And now I must say again that what I call a reason will perhaps seem to others simply a description or relation, or a useless and disinterested picture. This is how I justify myself: Since joy has come to me through contemplation, the return of joy can be given to me by the picture. These returns of joy, these refreshments of memory of objects and sensations, this is exactly what I call reasons to live.]

⁷⁸ Patrick Meadows, in his study on Ponge's connection to ancient atomism, focuses on Lucretius' and Epicurus' theory of matter as it resurfaces in Ponge's work. See *Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things*. In a similar vein, there is also a thorough study of Ponge's work (and that of Raymond Queneau) as belonging to a continuing tradition of “scientific poetry,” *Poetry and Cosmogony: Science in the Writing of Queneau and Ponge* by Chris Andrews. In departure from these studies, it is the strain of subdued optimism Ponge draws from these ancient poetic and scientific texts that most interests me—how he derives reasons to live (happily) from attention to matter.

speak, coat it with the sweet honey of the Muses.”⁷⁹ The “reason” that might seem to others as nothing more than a description bids us look again at the description, to see that it is enough, that it is sufficient, that it reveals how the object described “n’a aucun devoir vis-à-vis moi, c’est moi qui ai tous les devoirs à son égard.” According to Ponge, there is a way of writing his attention to the objects (a way he restlessly or provisionally calls a poem) that compels us to recognize their claims on us. And in compelling us to recognize, it also compels us not to “considérer *comme un mal* l’envahissement de la personnalité par les choses,” but on the contrary to consider it a good. According to Lucretius, those who attend to such poems, like children who swallow a cure of bitter wormwood from a honey-rimmed cup, will then be “victims of beguilement, but not of betrayal, since by this means they recover strength and health.”⁸⁰

Yet if the “reasons” for living happily are the proper subjects (or objects) of poems, it is not as simple as saying that the objects given as reasons by such poems are self-evidently and spontaneously joy-inducing. Elsewhere, he gives an admission that might seem to throw everything out of order. It comes in context of expressing a preference for La Fontaine (“la moindre fable”) and Rameau to Hegel and Schopenhauer:

Il semblerait dans le même sens que je dusse préférer encore (à La Fontaine, Rameau, Chardin, etc.) un caillou, un brin d’herbe, etc.
 Eh bien! oui et non! Et plutôt non! Pourquoi?
 Par amour-propre humain. Par fierté humaine, prométhéenne.
 J’aime mieux un objet, *fait de* l’homme (le poème, la création métalogue) qu’un objet sans mérite de la Nature.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 100-101.

⁸⁰ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 100.

⁸¹ Ponge, “Pages bis” section V, *Proèmes*, 194. [It would seem in the same way that I should still prefer (to La Fontaine, Rameau, Chardin, etc.) a pebble, a blade of grass, etc. / Well! Yes and no! And rather no! Why? / Out of human self-love. Out of human, promethean pride. / I like a *manmade* object (poem, metalogue creation) better than a worthless object of Nature]

There is a self-surprised energy in Ponge’s rebuttal of the line of thinking he tracks, which would lead to his preference for the natural over the man-made object: “Eh bien! oui et non! Et plutôt non!” As though the answer were not a foregone conclusion—it is as though he were looking back and forth between them to decide which he really prefers (and perhaps which gives him the most compelling “raison de vivre heureux”). Antonio Rodriguez remarks on this passage, “Si Ponge préfère la poésie à la philosophie, La Fontaine à Hegel, c’est certainement parce que [...] [la philosophie] ne recrée pas—avec la polysémie que Ponge accorde à ce terme—, mais poursuit les structurations logiques habituelles de la cohésion linéaire, des liaisons sans heurts, de la platitude formelle.”⁸² If he still prefers the poem to the pebble or the blade of grass, perhaps it has to do with the ‘non-linear’ activity, the ‘recreation’ it allows him, the particular form of engagement with those objects that he can only have poetically. For he circles back, makes another qualification suggesting he has not changed his position, only retrenched: “Mais il faut qu’il [l’objet, *fait de l’homme*] soit seulement descriptif (je veux dire sans intrusion de la terminologie scientifique ou philosophique.)”⁸³

What Ponge means by “descriptive,” if not quite the “merely descriptive” with which Bishop and Clare have been minimized, resembles their values in its recognition of a limit exerted by the object and embraced by the poet.

Si je les nomme raisons c’est que ce sont des retours de l’esprit aux choses. Notons d’ailleurs que ces raisons sont justes ou valables seulement si l’esprit retourne aux choses d’une manière acceptable par les choses: quand elles ne sont pas lésées, et pour ainsi dire qu’elles sont décrites de leur propre point de vue.

Mais ceci est un terme, ou une perfection, impossible. [...] ⁸⁴

⁸² Rodriguez, *Modernité et paradoxe lyrique*, 121. [If Ponge prefers poetry to philosophy, La Fontaine to Hegel, it is certainly because [philosophy] does not recreate—with all the polysemy that Ponge grants that term—, but pursues logical structures customary of linear cohesion, connections without collisions, formally flat.]

⁸³ Ponge, “Pages bis” section V, *Proèmes*, 194. [But it must be only descriptive (I mean without the intrusion of scientific or philosophical terminology.)]

⁸⁴ Ponge, “Raisons de vivre heureux,” *Proèmes*, 167. [If I call them reasons it is because they are the mind’s return to things. Let us note furthermore that these reasons are sound and valid only if the mind returns to things in a manner acceptable by things: when they are not harmed, and described, so to speak, from their own point of view. / But this term, or perfection, is an impossible one.]

It would seem that poetry is for Ponge essentially an act of description, where description means something more directly attentive to things than other discourses can be, something without the “intrusions” of scientific or philosophical terminology—by which I take him to mean the intrusions of terms that do not take the side of things, and that treat them in a manner they would find “unacceptable.” Yet this poetry, this descriptive ideal, is still something in addition to silent attention, something *done* with it. The “impossible perfection” Ponge envisions, in which things could hold court and grant (or refuse) their acceptance of descriptive offerings, always leads him back to the irreducible humanity of his undertaking. At bottom this recurring admission seems a recognition that if other forms of being “need” anything from humans, it is for humans to reckon with their existence directly, as a real alternative to human being; and that acknowledging this alternative, in turn, is what humans need in answer to the self-disgust that dogs them.

Sartre saw that in raising the status of objects, Ponge saw fit to lower that of man. As he figures it, Ponge turns the tables. Object crushes subject (a kind of reversal of the childhood game of rock-paper-scissors): “l’objet précède le sujet et l’écrase.” In reflecting on how the human subjects in “Le parti pris des choses,” the gymnast and the young mother, are turned into objects, he writes:

Voici que je ne distingue plus entre le gymnaste, cet *homme* que Ponge décrivait tout à l’heure, et le cageot et la cigarette qu’il décrit à présent. C’est qu’il abaisse l’un pendant qu’il élève les autres. Nous avons vu qu’il réduisait les *actes* de cet athlète à n’être plus que des *propriétés* d’une espèce. Mais inversement il prête à la chose inanimée des propriétés spécifiques. [...] Ce n’est point qu’on ait élevé—ou rabaissé—tous les êtres jusqu’à la pure forme de la vie, mais on a conçu pour chacun la même cohésion intime [...] Ce qui fait l’originalité ambiguë des choses du lapidaire de Ponge, c’est qu’elles ne sont précisément pas *animées*. Elles gardent leur inertie, leur morcellement, leur “stupéfaction,” cette tendance perpétuelle à s’effondrer que Leibniz nommait leur stupidité.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 312. [It is here that I can no longer distinguish between the gymnast, this *man* Ponge was just describing, and the crate and the cigarette he is describing presently. It is that he lowers one while he raises the others. We have seen that he reduced the *actions* of this athlete to no more than *properties* of a species. But inversely he lends to the inanimate thing specific properties. [...] It is not that all beings have been raised—or lowered—to the pure

This order of things, which evidently Ponge found necessary in approaching his task, ultimately strikes Sartre as untenable. His essay, in other respects very warm towards Ponge's work, finds fault with the poet's tendency to "traiter les hommes en mannequins."⁸⁶ He seems to find it at odds with the otherwise exhilarating sense that "les choses peuvent nous enseigner des manières d'être."⁸⁷ This uneasiness with man as an object, which Sartre finds most distasteful in Ponge's two pieces on human collectives—"R.C. Seine N^o" and "Le restaurant Lemeunier"—would come through very clearly in the abandoned, or rather unpursued, "Notes premières de 'l'Homme.'" Sartre also seems troubled by the contradiction noted, between Ponge's elevation of things over man, and his human pride. "Il n'a pas été fidèle à son propos: il est venu aux choses, non pas, comme il prétendait le faire, avec un étonnement naïf, mais avec un parti pris matérialiste."⁸⁸ He concedes that this predilection "s'agit moins chez lui d'un système philosophique préconçue que d'un choix originel de lui-même."⁸⁹ But this materialism, on Sartre's own glorious account, infects everything (and indeed his account of this materialism's 'downside' is so thrilling it is hard not to think Sartre himself partial to it):

Il paraît même, à première vue, aimer les fleurs, les bêtes et même les hommes. Et sans doute les aime-t-il. Beaucoup. Mais c'est à condition de les pétrifier. Il a la passion, le vice de la *chose* inanimée, matérielle. Du solide. Tout est solide chez lui: depuis sa phrase jusqu'aux assises profondes de son univers. S'il prête aux minéraux des conduites humaines, c'est afin de minéraliser les hommes. S'il emprunte des manières d'être aux choses, c'est afin de se minéraliser. Peut-être derrière son entreprise révolutionnaire est-il permis d'entrevoir un grand

form of life, but that the same intimate cohesion has been conceived for each [...] What makes for the ambiguous originality of the things of Ponge's lapidary, is that they are precisely not *animated*. They keep their inertia, their parcelling out, their "stupefaction," this perpetual tendency to give way, which Leibniz called their stupidity.]

⁸⁶ Sartre, "L'Homme et les choses," 318. [to treat men like dummies]

⁸⁷ Sartre, "L'Homme et les choses," 318. [things can teach us ways of being.]

⁸⁸ Sartre, "L'Homme et les choses," 318. [He was not faithful to his purpose: he came to things, not, as he claims, with a naive astonishment, but with a materialist prepossession.]

⁸⁹ Sartre, "L'Homme et les choses," 315. [With him this [materialist predilection] is less a preconceived philosophical system than an original choice of his own.]

rêve nécrologique: celui d'ensevelir tout ce qui vit, l'homme surtout, dans le suaire de la matière. Tout ce qui sort de ses mains est *chose*, y compris et surtout ses poèmes.⁹⁰

This vision of Ponge as a Midas whose touch “mineralizes” everything, makes everything into inert matter, makes a kind of qualified sense. The “necrological dream” that would bury things alive, especially man, in the shroud of matter, seems a thrilling nightmare, but as nightmare it belongs more to Sartre than to Ponge. For as Ponge will reiterate in slightly different forms: “Tout le secret du bonheur du contemplateur est dans son refus de considérer *comme un mal* l’envahissement de sa personnalité par les choses.”⁹¹ The invasion or occupation of the observing subject by its objects is an idiosyncratic version of objectivity.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the difference between Ponge and just about every other observer of nature in this dissertation: as full of intransigent concreteness and particularity as his poems on objects are, they tend not to require direct observation of particular individual objects. We do not get any sense of Ponge in the field, so to speak, observing a particular butterfly, patch of moss, snail, oyster. As Sartre observes, the objects Ponge chooses are not random, though they might seem so at first. Their selection arises from profoundly subjective principles—with the caveat that subjectivity for Ponge is always populated with objects.

[les choses] dont il parle sont élues; elles ont habité en lui de longues années, elles le peuplent, elles se tapissent le fond de sa mémoire, elles étaient présentes en lui bien avant qu’il n’eût ses ennuis avec la parole; bien avant qu’il n’eût pris le parti d’en écrire, elles le parfumaient déjà de leurs significations secrètes; et son effort actuel est beaucoup plus pour

⁹⁰ Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 316. [He would even seem, at first glance, to love flowers, beasts and even humans. And without a doubt he does love them. Very much. But it is on condition of petrifying them. He has the passion, the vice for the inanimate, material *thing*. For what is solid. All is solid with him: from his phrase down to the deep foundations of his universe. If he lends human conduct to minerals, it is in order to mineralize humans. If he borrows manners of being from things, it is in order to mineralize himself. Perhaps behind his revolutionary enterprise he is permitted to glimpse a great necrological dream: that of burying all that lives, especially man, in the shroud of material. All that leaves his hands is *thing*, including and especially his poems.]

⁹¹ Ponge, “Introduction au galet,” *Proèmes*, 175. [The entire secret of happiness for the one who contemplates is in his refusal to consider *as an evil* the invasion of his personality by things.]

pêcher au fond de lui-même ces monstres grouillants et fleuris et pour les *rendre* que pour fixer leurs qualités après des observations scrupuleuses.⁹²

Given that Ponge does not necessarily have the object before him when he writes, or even a recent encounter with it, one might expect high abstraction—a poem about the idea of each thing, rather than the thing itself. On the one hand, this is borne out by the pleasure of reading the poems, the smile that comes with recognition of an object of attention. “That is so *true* about snails!” one thrills in such a moment. The sensibility of the poems is not utterly private, but can awaken in a reader the sense that Ponge evokes the same object with which one is also familiar. The titles of each poem reflect, in one sense, species.

Yet that thrill of recognition would not come as a surprise, were each poem not also, in a sense, about an individual. About the individual without which any notion of species would collapse. Just as the potential for abstraction is inverted, so the subjectivity of his method is subverted. Ponge relies for each piece mostly on the object as he carries it around in his mind and sensory memory—but in his mind and memory it was always something other than himself.

The peculiar balance of abstraction and particularity corresponds to that of absence and presence—he conjures the presence of his objects with a particularity that belongs to every individual of a species. Sartre remarks, with mingled enjoyment and reproach, on the ‘bewitchment’ or ‘enchantment’ of the *choses* whose side Ponge takes—he finds them “ensorcelées.”⁹³ The same could be said for both the concepts Ponge introduces into the work and the concepts one might introduce to give an account of the work.

⁹² Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 278. [The things about which he speaks are elected; they have lived in him for many long years, they people him, they carpet the depths of his memory, they were present in him long before he acquired his trouble with words; long before he took the part of writing about them, they had already scented him with their secret significations; and his current effort is much more to fish out of the depths of himself these seething, blooming monsters and to *render* them, than to fix their qualities after scrupulous observations.]

⁹³ Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 304, 311.

If Ponge's titles in the *Parti pris des choses* could be considered species in one sense, they also have something in common with type specimens, individual specimens that stand for a species. And yet rather than this individuality standing in tension with the specimen's representation of the species, species are defined by the irreducible individuality of their members. Similarly, Ponge reflects on the *type* of object he finds himself called to speak for, in "La forme du monde." After enumerating the forms he does *not* seek to give the world, starting with the sphere, all of which have to do in one sense or another with arranging or bringing things into harmony in a system that would have no excess, he gives his alternative:

Mais plutôt, d'une façon tout arbitraire et tour à tour, la forme des choses les plus particulières, les plus asymétriques et de réputation contingentes (et non pas seulement la forme mais toutes les caractéristiques, les particularités de couleurs, de parfums), comme par exemple une branche de lilas, une crevette dans l'aquarium naturel des roches au bout du môle du Grau-du-Roi, une serviette-éponge dans ma salle de bains, un trou de serrure avec une clef dedans.⁹⁴

To give the world such forms effects a curious variation on Blake's "world in a grain of sand," for then each object becomes not just a world unto itself, but a reflection of the world's own contingency, assymetry, particularity. It is utterly particular, no more nor less than the world itself is utterly particular. To say that the lilac branch, the shrimp at the bottom of the pier of Grau-du-roi, the washcloth in some sense represents the world is also to say that each individual object contains the integrity of the entire world. He considers each thing as not less than the world.

Sartre is troubled by the arbitrariness, even capriciousness of the unit of world on which Ponge settles, the size of the "morceaux" he treats as wholes. "Mais je lui demande: cette unité qu'il

⁹⁴ Ponge, "La forme du monde," *Proèmes*, 116. [But rather, in a completely arbitrary fashion and by turns, the form of the most particular, the most asymmetrical things, with reputations for contingency (and not only the form but all the characteristics, the particularities of colors, of fragrances), as for example a lilac branch, a shrimp in the natural aquarium of the rocks at the bottom of the pier of the Grau-du-Roi, a terrycloth towel in my bathroom, a keyhole with a key inside of it.]

refuse au fumeur, pourquoi la donne-t-il à son fémur ou à son biceps?”⁹⁵ Similarly Jaccottet observes that for Ponge it seemed any object would do. Though he seems to know it is not quite so simple as this, he finds it useful as a way of understanding his divergence from Ponge—the difference in sensibility that opens onto a subtle but decisive difference of “le mouvement de l’esprit, l’orientation du regard.” He writes of a divergence: “[...] je ne puis pas ne pas constater que j’emploie ici, d’ailleurs sans trop y penser, la méthode pongienne pour aller dans le sens opposé à celui où il marchait, lui, d’un pas si sûr.” That sureness of step itself constitutes part of the difference, but upon reflection he locates the divergence even before the start: “Le point de départ, tout d’abord, est différent. En principe, Ponge peut et veut parler de n’importe quoi: galet, cageot, lessiveuse, pomme de terre—choses à partir desquelles élaborer et faire fonctionner une petite (ou grande) machine verbale [...]”⁹⁶ He senses that the “méthode pongienne” can produce a poem out of any object—that the object is in a sense fed into, used to fuel, the “machine verbale,” gets the Pongian treatment, and comes out the other side, still itself but transfigured. For Jaccottet there is an excess of mastery and of certitude in Ponge (that sureness of step, the “pas si sûr”): an audacity, perhaps a lack of delicacy with regard to the objects he takes up. Once again we come to where the “sente étroite,” which Jaccottet reclaims from Basho, diverges even as it runs parallel to the “seule issue” of Ponge.

Ponge attends to his objects as essentially individuals, but at the same time not as any individual in particular. In the first piece of *La rage de l’expression*, “Berges de la Loire,” he articulates what this essential individuality means for his poetic method: “En revenir toujours à l’objet lui-même, à ce qu’il y a de brut, de *différent*: différent en particulier de ce que j’ai déjà (à ce moment) écrit

⁹⁵ Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 291. [But I ask him: this unity he refuses to the smoker, why does he grant it to his femur or his biceps?]

⁹⁶ Jaccottet, *Ponge*, 36. [the movement of the mind, the orientation of the look.] [I cannot keep from stating that here, without much thinking about it, I am using the Pongian method to go the opposite way from the way he walked, with such a sure step.] [From the very beginning, the point of departure is different. In principle, Ponge can and means to speak about anything: pebble, crate, washer, potato—things from which to elaborate and get working a little [or great] verbal machine.]

de lui.”⁹⁷ Thus Ponge justifies his idiosyncratic choice of unpromising objects: “la richesse de propositions contenues dans le moindre objet est si grande, que je ne conçois pas encore la possibilité de rendre compte d’aucune autre chose que des plus simples.”⁹⁸ The “differential quality” of each object upon which he chose to train his attention amounts to a recognition of the inalienable excess (the “richness”) that belongs to everything and nothing in particular, and is perfectly useless.

What the mechanical reading of Ponge (in Jaccottet’s words, his “machine verbale”) misses is how indeterminately Ponge’s “machines” work. There is no question of reducing them to an algorithm. The relentlessness of his evolving method tacitly affirms that he never knows what it will turn up; if Ponge can in principle let “n’importe quoi” serve as his point of departure, it is not just anything that can be *just anything*, nor is it entirely a matter for Ponge to control. “Le moindre objet” is a kind of holy grail for Ponge, not in the sense that he would idolize such an object could he find it, but in the sense that he is ever in search of a way to be faithful to that leastness. The analogy of poem to machine breaks down insofar as Ponge’s language does not exist in a state neatly separate from the objects to which he attends. Rather he would try each time to get the object speaking by bringing it into contact with language, which requires a process altogether more irregular. His method is always dependent upon unknowns, and as Jacques Derrida points out, he always ‘shows up’ in and for the poems, rather than withdrawing himself. He is not a poet of impersonality. In Derrida’s experience,

Le drame qui agit et construit toute signature, c’est cette répétition insistante, inlassable, tendanciellement infinie de ce qui reste, chaque fois, irremplaçable. Il –lui, Ponge—il s’agit d’événements parce qu’il assiste à son nom et à son écriture, il est toujours là, derrière, vous expliquant ce qu’il fait en le faisant, mais sans vous l’expliquer ou vous le montrant, au

⁹⁷ *Repeated from page 9, note 19. Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 9. [Always to come back to the object itself, to what about it is raw, *different*: different in particular from what I have already (up to this moment) written about it.] Italics in original.

⁹⁸ Ponge, “Introduction au galet,” *Proèmes*, 175. [The richness of propositions contained in the least object is so great, that I cannot yet conceive the possibility of realizing any other than the simplest of things.]

moment même, de telle sorte que son simulacre d'explication ne vaille qu'à relancer un autre texte à expliquer sans aucune chance de vous laisser la maîtrise, mais ne vous cachant rien de son travail [...]⁹⁹

The “simulacre d'explication” is no chimera. It is Ponge writing out loud, reminding us that he is not in possession of a master plan, that what we are reading is taking place in a moment of real suspense—“sans aucune chance de vous laisser la maîtrise,” because that is how it has to be—how could he give his readers mastery when he has renounced it for himself? It can seem a form of penance, the way he lays open his drafts and sketches, and how increasingly his work was made only of these provisional stages, added together if not adding up—as he writes in his preface to *Proèmes*, he imagines a person standing in judgment over his work, whose esteem he craves. This person, he imagines, “avait surtout pensé que les textes de ce recueil [*Le Parti pris des Choses*] témoignaient d'une infallibilité un peu courte.”¹⁰⁰ Perhaps it is because the pieces in *Le Parti pris* are not accreted in the way later works would be, not exposing early drafts and failed formulations, that he makes this judgment indirectly through the anonymous “personne.” In his own estimation, there was something paltry about infallibility, aligned with Derrida's “maîtrise.” He seems to have felt he needed to risk something more in order to keep trying to get these mute objects to show up in language. In response to the reproach of mere infallibility, he writes, “Je lui montrai alors ces Proèmes : j'en ai plutôt honte, mais du moins devaient-ils, à mon sens, détruire cette impression (d'infaillibilité).”¹⁰¹ He resolves to expose “ce fatras,” this rubbish, again to his shame, “à ma honte” as the only way forward, the only way out.

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Signéponge*, 21 & 23. [In Richard Rand's translation en face, pp 20 & 22: The drama that activates and constructs every signature is this insistent, unwearying, potentially infinite repetition of something that remains, every time, irreplaceable. It—himself, Ponge—is involved in events because he witnesses his name and his writing, he is always there, behind, explaining to you what he is doing as he does it, but without explaining it or showing it to you, at the very same moment, in such a way that his simulacrum of an explanation is only valid if another text is cast forth for explanation, with no chance of allowing you mastery, but never hiding any of his work from you]

¹⁰⁰ Ponge, *Proèmes*, 105. [[*It seemed to me that this person*] above all had thought the texts in this collection evinced a bit of a scanty infallibility.] Italics in the original.

¹⁰¹ Ponge, *Proèmes*, 105. [*Thus I will show her these Proèmes : I am rather ashamed of them, but they should at least, in my opinion, destroy this impression (of infallibility).*] Italics in the original.

And yet, as Derrida emphasizes, Ponge never really makes a clean exit—every “explication” and every exit is already implicated in another beginning, another entry, another attempt.

Jaccottet Attending to the Vegetal

In September 1996, Jaccottet notes in a journal entry that he has been revisiting Rousseau’s *Rêveries*, “pour vérifier si j’avais raison de voir en ce livre la source lointaine et le modèle des miennes.” He is surprised to find that “Rousseau, à l’exception de la cinquième et justement fameuse rêverie où il décrit un moment d’accord avec le cosmos, y parle relativement peu de la nature, et beaucoup plus de psychologie, de morale ou, qui s’en étonnera? de lui-même.”¹⁰² The *Rêveries* might have struck him as a model partly for the structuring principle of the “promenade,” which allows for an interaction between the walker and the world, a walker at once meditative and outward-facing. His disappointment with both the abstraction and the inwardness of the work also suggests a confrontation with tendencies he, Philippe Jaccottet, also has but works against.

He hovers or vacillates between the insouciance and unselfconsciousness of an outward-facing, absorbed observer of the natural world, and the self-reproach and shame of one who turns back inward and finds a lack, an unworthiness of the world without. Kevin Hart remarks that “Jaccottet’s shame remains, since poetry does not always respect the hard, innocent reality of the natural world but masks it, distracts us from it; and this shame is articulated in an iconoclasm that he folds into his verse and prose.”¹⁰³ This is a gloss of what happens in *A travers un verger*, when Jaccottet writes his own version of a *promenade* past an almond orchard, feeling called upon by it, and

¹⁰² Jaccottet, *Carnets*, 55. [to confirm whether I was right to see in this book the distant source and model of my own (books)] & [Rousseau, with the exception of the fifth and justly famous reverie where he describes a moment of concord with the cosmos, speaks relatively little of nature, and much more of psychology, morality, and—who will be surprised?—of himself.]

¹⁰³ Hart, “A voice answering a voice,” 181.

counters himself: “mais je me suis arrêté, inquiet, honteux, moi plein de rêveries sur les fleurs, faux sage, douteux juge, piètre vivant.”¹⁰⁴ Hart writes of Jaccottet’s “iconoclasm,” since he is ever suspicious of the deceptive images poetry is capable of conjuring, with “a beauty that has detached itself from the world and that competes with it for our attention.”¹⁰⁵ But there is a part of the shame that seems connected to the magnet that draws his gaze back inward, which he recognizes in Rousseau, a living wretch also “plein de rêveries des fleurs.” Yet again, those very flowers (and not just the reveries of them) were also a way out of the wretched self for Rousseau, which Jaccottet acknowledges by saving the fifth promenade from dismissal. There, he might have found several points of resonance with his own work: first, the lifted and unburdened inward gaze, one of the passages he could characterize as “un moment d’accord avec le cosmos.”

[...] tant que cet état dure celui qui s’y trouve peut s’appeler heureux [...] Tel est l’état où je me suis trouvé souvent à l’île de Saint-Pierre dans mes rêveries solitaires, soit couché dans mon bateau que je laissais dériver au gré de l’eau, soit assis sur les rives du lac agité, soit ailleurs au bord d’une belle rivière ou d’un ruisseau murmurant sur le gravier.

De quoi jouit-on dans une pareille situation? De rien d’extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence, tant que cet état dure on se suffit à soi-même comme Dieu. Le sentiment de l’existence dépouillé de toute autre affection est par lui-même un sentiment précieux de contentement et de paix, qui suffirait seul pour rendre cette existence chère et douce à qui saurait écarter de soi toutes les impressions sensuelles et terrestres qui viennent sans cesse nous en distraire et en troubler ici-bas la douceur.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Jaccottet, *À Travers*, 28. [but I stopped myself, uneasy, ashamed, full of dreams about flowers, false sage, dubious judge, living wretch.] There is a comparison to be made, both here and in the self-disgust described by Ponge, with the self-loathing that haunts J.A. Baker in quest of his peregrines.

¹⁰⁵ Hart, “A voice answering a voice,” 185.

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau, Cinquième Promenade, *Réveries*, 129. [as long as this state endures he who finds himself in it can call himself happy [...] such is the state in which I found myself often at l’île de Saint-Pierre in my solitary reveries, either bedded in my boat which I left to follow the water’s will, or seated on the banks of the rippling lake, or else at the side of a beautiful river or a stream murmuring over the gravel.

What is there to enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to the self, nothing if not oneself and one’s own existence. As long as this state lasts one suffices to oneself like God. The feeling of existence, stripped of every other affection is by itself a precious feeling of contentment and peace, which would suffice on its own to render this existence dear and sweet to he who knows how to dispel from himself all of the sensual and terrestrial impressions that come ceaselessly to distract us and trouble the sweetness here below.]

Such a state would seem to strip down (*dépouiller*) one's existence so perfectly, that it can no longer be called self-absorption in the narcissistic sense. Even in the experience of godlikeness, it is just the aspect of self-sufficiency, of needing nothing further, that justifies the claim. It isn't self-regard he describes so much as a fullness of being.

Then there is the awakened love of plants, of 'herborizing' specifically as an alternative to, and means of healing from, the anguishes of reading and writing: "Un de mes plus grandes délices était surtout de laisser toujours mes livres bien encaissés et de n'avoir point d'écrivoire. [...] Au lieu de ces tristes paperasses et de toutes cette bouquinerie, j'emplissais ma chambre de fleurs et de foin"¹⁰⁷ Here Rousseau expresses the ambivalence about literary vocation with such poignant literalness—the cumbersome effects of intellectual labor deliciously replaced by those of unstrived-for beauty. For Jaccottet the longing to speak directly in flowers, transparently, persists. (The embodiment of such a poetics would be, once again, John Clare, who "found his poems in the fields.") And yet, perhaps it is the sheer gusto with which Rousseau approaches the vegetal that already leaves Jaccottet reserved in his affinity. Lovably keen, Rousseau announces, "On dit qu'un Allemand a fait un livre sur un zeste de citron, j'en aurais fait un sur chaque gramin des prés, sur chaque mousse des bois, sur chaque lichen qui tapisse les rochers; enfin je ne voulais pas laisser un poil d'herbe, pas un atome végétal qui ne fût amplement décrit."¹⁰⁸ For this avidity, this hunger, is anathema to Jaccottet's sense of distance. He is not a copious describer but rather a willowy one. Stillness, distance and lightness of touch are his characteristic descriptive qualities.

¹⁰⁷ Rousseau, *Cinquième Promenade, Réveries*, 122. [One of my greatest delights was always to leave my books well boxed up and to have no writing desk. [...] Instead of those sad scribbled pages and dusty old books, I would fill my bedroom with flowers and hay]

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, *Cinquième Promenade, Réveries*, 123. [They say a German made a book about a lemon zest; well I would have made one on every grama of the meadows, on every moss of the woods, on every lichen that carpets the rocks; finally I would not want to leave out one blade of grass, nor leave a vegetal atom not amply described.]

The seventh promenade, where Rousseau explores his preference for the study of plants over that of other natural objects, takes us further:

Les plantes semblent avoir été semées avec profusion sur la terre comme les étoiles dans le ciel, pour inviter l'homme par l'attrait du plaisir et la curiosité à l'étude de la nature; mais les astres sont placé loin de nous; il faut des connaissances préliminaire, des instruments, des machines, de bien longues échelles pour les atteindre et les rapprocher à notre portée. Les plantes y sont naturellement.¹⁰⁹

For Jaccottet, a tree or a flower or a blade of grass may as well be in the sky, for all he seems ready to claim knowledge of its mystery. Rousseau makes similar points about why studies of the mineral and animal kingdoms do not recommend themselves to him in his solitary reveries: “Le règne minéral n’a rien en soi d’aimable et d’attrayant ; ses richesses enfermées dans le sein de la terre semblent avoir été éloignées des regards des hommes pour ne pas tenter leur cupidité.”¹¹⁰ And “Comment observer, disséquer, étudier, connaître les oiseaux dans les airs, les poissons dans les eaux, les quadrupèdes plus légers que le vent, plus forts que l’homme et qui ne sont pas plus disposés à venir s’offrir à mes recherches que moi de courir après eux pour les y soumettre de force?”¹¹¹ Distance, in the sense of a space or a gap between himself and the object of his attention, is indispensable to Jaccottet’s sensibility. Rousseau’s verbs—observe, dissect, study, know—belong to the activities and passions of the naturalist, and only the first of those has a place in Jaccottet’s work. So while plants are within our reach, Jaccottet observes them at a certain distance as he does

¹⁰⁹ Rousseau, Septième Promenade, *Réveries*, 165. [Plants seem to have been scattered profusely over the earth like the stars in the sky, to invite man, through the attractions of pleasure and curiosity, to the study of nature; but the heavenly bodies are placed far away from us; one must have preliminary knowledge, instruments, machines, long ladders indeed to attain and bring them within our reach. Plants are there by nature.]

¹¹⁰ Rousseau, Septième Promenade, *Réveries*, 161. [The mineral realm in itself retains nothing lovable or attractive; its riches locked up in the bosom of the earth seem to have been put way from men’s eyes so as not to tempt their cupidity.]

¹¹¹ Rousseau, Septième Promenade, *Réveries*, 163. [How to observe, dissect, study, know the birds in the air, the fish in the water, the quadrupeds lighter than wind, stronger than man, which are no more disposed to offer themselves to my researches than I am to run after them in order to subdue them by force?]

the invisible birds (whose swiftness and elusiveness do not frustrate him, since he does not seek to dissect, to study, to know).¹¹²

In the *Cahier de verdure*, Jaccottet muses on the colors of flowers in a prairie, and the descriptive problem they pose for him.

J'avais donc rapidement identifié, dans ces fleurs, la bleue: la chicorée sauvage, et la jaune: le séneçon; quant à la blanche, une ombellifère, ma science était plus hésitante. [...] Nommer simplement ces trois noms en fin de poème, sans autre explication, je pouvais à la rigueur espérer que cela fit l'effet d'une formule magique par son absence même de sens; c'était une illusion. Je ne pouvais en rester à la botanique ou à la fausse magie. Et si je nommais au contraire que les couleurs, je faisais de la peinture sans les moyens de la peinture, et ne communiquais rien non plus de l'essentiel.¹¹³

To name the colors, as to name the plants, and to hope they will produce their own magic, that they will evoke the flowers he has seen in the prairie, Jaccottet denounces as a vain hope. I am particularly interested in how he reasons against the naming of colors detached from things.

In *Cahier de verdure*, he writes of a cherry tree across the field, from a distance, which could be covered but won't, not by him. The fruit-laden cherry tree he views "de l'autre côté d'un grand champ de blé."¹¹⁴ A wheat field, which at other times might be the object of his attention, here becomes an expanse separating him from the object of his attention. A stubborn literalist might protest that one way of seeing and thus describing an object of attention more completely, even for a poet, would be to get closer to it. Why not cross the field? Reading further one finds an answer, as he places his regard for this cherry tree in relief from what he would feel towards an erotic object, a

¹¹² Further on in that entry of the *Carnets* from September 1996, Jaccottet suggests a different literary ancestor in the less eminent figure of Maurice de Guérin, whose *Cahier vert* seems a probable antecedent for Jaccottet's *Cahier de verdure*. See Jaccottet, *Carnets*, 55.

¹¹³ Jaccottet, *Cahier de verdure*, 79. [Thus I rapidly identified, in these flowers, the blue one: wild endive, and the yellow one: groundsel; as for the white one, an umbellifer, my science was more hesitant [...] Simply naming these three names at the end of the poem, with no other explanation, I could hope would have the effect of a magic formula by its very absence of meaning; this was an illusion. I could stay neither with botany nor with false magic. And if on the other hand I named only the colors, I would be painting without the means of painting, nor would I communicate anything essential that way either.]

¹¹⁴ Jaccottet, *Cahier de verdure*, 11. [on the other side of a great wheat field]

beautiful person at such a distance: “pour ce cerisier je n’éprouvais nul désir de le rejoindre, de le conquérir, de le posséder; où plutôt: c’était fait, j’avais été rejoint, conquis, je n’avais absolument rien à attendre, à demander de plus; il s’agissait d’une autre espèce d’histoire, de rencontre, de parole.”¹¹⁵

Perhaps the distance from which he tends to attend is one reason color figures so frequently and carries such weight in his descriptions—one sees color more distinctly than form at a distance.

Unlike the distinctness of outline and feature, the intensity of color does not increase noticeably as one approaches an object.

Returning to the blue of the wild endive noted in the passage on the prairie flowers from the *Cabier de verdure*, we can see just how he manages this increase: “Ce bleu était comme du ciel;” he begins. A plain, conventional comparison. Then he expands: “et là, dans la prairie, c’était du ciel épars, qui aurait plu pendant la nuit, une rosée, des morceaux d’air dans l’herbe.”¹¹⁶ The color metamorphoses with his attention through language. From rain it becomes dew, from dew back to air, visiting moments in water’s cycle of evaporation and condensation. The color itself has not changed, nor the substance, but the medium, the state of matter in the description continues to shift. He offers one more iteration: “C’étaient de presque inapparents morceaux de ciel, disséminés au hasard.”¹¹⁷ The correspondence between the blue of the sky and the blue of the flowering *chicorée sauvage* does not have the same equivalence as it would, were it posited, for instance, in a nomenclature.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Jaccottet, *Cabier de verdure*, 12. [I felt no desire to overtake, to conquer, to possess this cherry tree; or rather: it was done, I had overtaken and conquered it, I had absolutely nothing more to await, to request; it was another sort of story, encounter, speech.]

¹¹⁶ Jaccottet, *Cabier de verdure*, 80. [This blue was like sky;] [and there, in the prairie, it was scattered sky, having rained down during the night, a dew, bits of air in the grass.]

¹¹⁷ Jaccottet, *Cabier de verdure*, 80. [They were almost unapparent pieces of sky, scattered at random.]

¹¹⁸ For a nomenclature within the orbit of this dissertation, via Darwin (who had it with him on the H.M.S. Beagle), see Patrick Symes’ rendition of *Werner’s Nomenclature of Colors*, which gives an exact correspondence from the natural world for each shade of color it names and reproduces (for instance, Lavender purple, color number 44, occurs in “*Light Parts of Spots on the under Wings of Peacock Butterfly*,” “*Dried Lavender Flowers*,” and “*Porcelain Jasper*”).

In fact the botanist, zoologist, or mineralogist making use of such a nomenclature might sensibly ask, “a sky under what conditions, at what time of day and in what season, etc...?” Jaccottet takes the precision of comparison in another direction—not what kind of sky would most closely approximate the blue of these flowers, but in what way do the flowers in their blueness resemble a blue sky?

The objective reducibility of colors, their finite divisibility on a spectrum, leads Jaccottet to reach beyond the usual means of parsing them. From the beginning of *La seconde semaison* in July 1980, he questions the adequacy of color, perhaps not as a phenomenon but as we designate it, to account for what he observes:

Soir. Champs de lavande, par endroits couleur d’ardoise. Une grande moissonneuse avance dans un nuage de poussière. Les champs de blé: ce n’est plus du jaune, pas encore de l’ocre. Ni de l’or. C’est autre chose qu’une couleur.¹¹⁹

The “plus” and “pas encore” (no longer, not yet) evoke the changefulness of the wheat fields’ color in time—thus at evening, where this entry begins, they may transition from yellow to ochre. But it also works as a claim of subtlety—on a spectrum, somewhere between these two colors. The wheat fields appear as something “other than a color”—to divide, to break further into component parts, would not get at this something other. The phenomenon he observes partakes of color in a broad sense, but he alights on color names without settling on (or settling for) them. For indeed it is something other than *une* couleur. The indefinite article restricts the sense to one—nameable—color, which would have stability or fixity on the spectrum. It isn’t that the color names—yellow, ochre, gold—are not precise enough to match the particular color of the wheat field at this moment of evening, but that they are not capacious enough.

¹¹⁹ Jaccottet, *Seconde semaison*, 11. [Evening. Lavender fields, slate-colored in places. A large reaper advances in a cloud of dust. The wheat fields: no longer yellow not yet ochre. Nor gold. It’s something other than a color.]

Both here and in the passage on the cherry tree from the *Cahier de verdure*, he explores what he can say, how far towards his object he can reach in language, and when he reaches a limit, marks it as “autre,” other. Here, “c’est *autre* chose qu’une couleur.” There, in trying to characterize his regard for the cherry tree: “il s’agissait d’une *autre* espèce d’histoire, de rencontre, de parole.” [my emphases] Terms of otherness occur to him as readily in the description of his own disposition towards an object as they do in the description of an object. Both in the describing self and in the described other, he attends to an existence, a process, a dwelling in excess of description. The “autre espèce” de “parole” seems to belong equally to him and to the cherry tree, as he has already begun to reflect upon the way the tree “speaks” differently when fruit-laden than flowering. His recourse to “autre” doubles as an extension of description when he reaches a linguistic limit, and an extension of self when he reaches a perceptual one.

In “A Cold Spring,” Elizabeth Bishop gives a description akin to Jaccottet’s of his wheat field:

Greenish-white dogwood infiltrated the wood,
each petal burned, apparently, by a cigarette-butt;
and the blurred redbud stood
beside it, motionless, but almost more
like movement than any placeable color.¹²⁰

Each poet marks the quality of movement in color—not only as a blush in a face or a chameleon or cuttlefish changes, where colors appear to move before our eyes. But what Bishop proposes with her “blurred” combined with “motionless”; and Jaccottet with his “plus” and “pas encore,” is the surplus that makes a color seem “other” when it partakes of a living thing.

A color word or words rise in the mind and fail to account for the object of attention. Rhetorically, each poet includes the insufficient terms—records the experiments in language to

¹²⁰ Bishop, “A Cold Spring,” lines 17-21, *PPL*, 43.

express their experience of the object of attention. But they also make an implicit claim that their experience tells them something about the object and not only about themselves. Put another way, their experience of the object tells them what they *don't* know how to say about it. Words of approximation, limited application and qualification abound in Jaccottet (*à peine, presque*) as they do in Bishop—in the passage above, “almost more like.” These are basic tools of language, here used as ways of marking the word closest to the thing, of being as precise as possible in language, but leaving room on either side of the word for the thing to exist beyond it.

In his *Remarks on Colour*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “When we’re asked “What do ‘red’, ‘blue’, ‘black’, ‘white’, mean?” we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours,—but that’s all we can do: our ability to explain their meaning goes no further.”¹²¹ Jaccottet seems sensitive to this intuition, insofar as he often describes the experience of coming up against the limits of the words for color to which he must have recourse. There is a sense of being at the point where language cannot be broken down any further. It is impossible to answer the question, “What do you mean by ‘red’?” without pointing to or giving reference to an object that appears red to you. The nomenclature is sensitive to this too, in recognizing the utility of concrete examples. But in urging its readers to learn to distinguish components of colors, it *would* ask us to break the language of colors down further, to ask, “What is this red made of?” In the languages I know at least, there are no other words below or behind or in support of color-words—except for intensifiers and other adverbs, which can only add to, not get inside of or open up the color-word.¹²² Another way of thinking about this descriptive problem, if it is a problem, is that colors do not have existence independently of things—no colors but in things. There is a connection to be made

¹²¹ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, 29e.

¹²² Not all descriptive words are like this. It wouldn’t be easy or unambiguous, but we could conceivably come up with ways of explaining what “hard,” “soft,” “thin,” “fat,” “rough,” “smooth,” “dull,” “shiny,” etc mean in other words.

between the words for colors and the words for forms of life. Jaccottet's acknowledged ignorance of species, as in the instance of the white flower in the prairie or the invisible birds, relates to his tentative namings of color. One might wonder that he hasn't bothered to find out, just as he doesn't cross the wheat field to look at the cherry tree more closely. His "science" is frequently "hesitant" by necessity, in the effort to account for the "something other" which so persistently presents itself to his attention.

In a notebook entry of March, 1998, he articulated a mature poetics of flowers:

Les fleurs: c'est comme si, avec le temps, je passais de fleurs encore relativement prestigieuses, pivoines, passe-roses, à d'autres de plus en plus humbles, fleurissant à ras de terre : tels ces liserons des champs dont il me semble savoir d'avance que je ne pourrai jamais les dire dans leur "vérité" cachée, qu'ils défient la poésie, et ainsi de suite. Ne sachant que trop ce qui va, quant à eux, se répéter selon un processus fatal.¹²³

The choice of the "humble" flower does not so much posit a hierarchy of possible flowers (which we might think, given that some are deemed more "prestigious"), as it allows Jaccottet to focus the expressive problem he faces every time he endeavors to write in attention to flowers. This passage resembles Ponge's admission, cited earlier, that "la richesse de propositions contenues dans le moindre objet est si grande, que je ne conçois pas encore la possibilité de rendre compte d'aucune autre chose que des plus simples."¹²⁴ Yet the mystery of vegetal existence is deceptive, as Jaccottet concedes; while it seems so much simpler to account for than animated existence, the very idea of a hierarchy from simplest to most complex unravels. It is not a matter of complexity on an evolutionary scale, but of mysteriousness at a far remove from human ways of being. "Les violettes:" Jaccottet writes, recalling that inimitable, unanswerable question from *Airs* ("Violettes, pourquoi/ Si

¹²³ Jaccottet, *Carnets*, 128. [Flowers: it is as though, with time, I passed from flowers that were still relatively prestigious, peonies, hollyhocks, to others increasingly humble, flowering at ground-level: like these bindweeds of the fields, which I seem to know in advance that I can never tell in their hidden "truthfulness," that they defy poetry, and so on. Knowing all too well as for them, what will repeat itself according to a fatal process.]

¹²⁴ *See note 96. *Proèmes*, 175. [The richness of propositions contained in the least object is so great, that I cannot yet conceive the possibility of realizing any other than the simplest of things.]

sombres, si parfumées?”), “la surprise, leur soudaineté, en déplaçant un tas de bois qui les dissimulait. De couleur pâle, avec un peu de blanc, très petites, groupées. [...] Saurai-je un jour leur rendre justice? Dans la lumière elle-même fragile de l’avant-printemps.”¹²⁵ The tendency to speak of and represent flowers as ornaments for human life is perhaps what leads Jaccottet further and further from those most “prestigious” from a florist’s perspective, towards those we would be least tempted to assimilate, to treat as extensions of our existence instead of existing apart. “Toute fleur qui s’ouvre, on dirait qu’elle m’ouvre les yeux. Dans l’inattention. Sans qu’il y ait aucun acte de volonté d’un côté ni de l’autre.”¹²⁶ The surprise, the suddenness, the opening of the eyes—deliberately severing the link between attention and will, in an expression itself displacing any direct agency (*sans qu’il y ait aucun acte de volonté*), Jaccottet stages a moment of perpetual opening-up when he becomes aware of a flower’s existence.

Ponge and Vegetal Ways of Being

Ponge came to plants from a different angle. Here is Jean Onimus once more, on the very different approaches of Ponge and Jaccottet in relating the act of writing to the object of attention:

La description demeure pour ainsi dire anonyme. Il y a ici une grande différence avec Ponge qui, lui, s’épuise à décrire, à ‘singer’ les choses avec des mots, à nous les donner à toucher, à respirer à savourer. Un tout autre réalisme! Celui de Jaccottet vise moins la chose même que l’inépuisable mystère de son surgissement dans le temps: chez Ponge la durée est presque inexistante: la crevette, l’abricot seront éternellement les mêmes. Capté par Jaccottet, le reflet de la lune sur un soc de charrue est (comme il arrive aussi chez Follain) unique, daté.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Jaccottet, *Carnets*, 126. [Violets: the surprise, their suddenness, in shifting a stack of wood that concealed them. Of a pale color, with a bit of white, very small, grouped. [...] Will I one day know how to do them justice? In the light, itself fragile, of early spring.]

¹²⁶ Jaccottet, *Et, néanmoins*, 77. [Each flower that opens, could be said to open my eyes. In inattention. Without there being any act of will either on one side or on the other.]

¹²⁷ Onimus, *Philippe Jaccottet*, 73. [[For Jaccottet] Description remains anonymous, so to speak. Here is a great difference from Ponge, who exhausts himself in description, in ‘miming’ things with words, in giving them to us to touch, to breathe in, to savor. An entirely other realism! That of Jaccottet aims less at the thing itself than at the inexhaustible mystery of its appearance in time: with Ponge, duration is almost nonexistent: the shrimp, the apricot will be eternally the same. Captured by Jaccottet, the moon’s reflection on a plough-share is (as happens also with Follain) unique, dated.]

The emphasis of “description” on this account is positivistic. Ponge is vividly copious, concerned with only the qualities that *can* be perceived and described, rather than the vivid ineffable that is Jaccottet’s own “raison d’écrire.” Yet Onimus’s second point about their divergence, equally apt, would also appear to lead in the opposite direction from copiousness. That Ponge is more concerned with ‘shrimpness’ and ‘apricotness’ than with any individual shrimp or apricot appearing before him in a fleeting moment, so that one poem per *kind* of thing might be enough if it is the right poem (and that is a contentious *if*), would suggest a tendency toward distillation. The source of Ponge’s expansiveness is less, I would say, exhaustive elaboration of a static object, than searching a kind of object in all its dimensions for the source of its particular way of being. This leads him to many retracings, reiterations and self-corrections, but it is more in the spirit of restless searching for the right configuration than, as in Jaccottet, the self-chastening whose aim is to inhabit a state, “l’état singulier” of the haiku poet, for instance, to be prepared to receive the fleeting appearances of individual things. Thus Ponge builds upon his own foundations, repeats and expands and hardly reproaches himself, while Jaccottet is ever bringing himself back to the beginning, to the position of “l’ignorant.”

As Sartre phrased the insight of Ponge, “les choses peuvent nous enseigner des manières d’être.”¹²⁸ To put it another way, for Ponge there is a way of being one’s species, of being human, that, paradoxically, can only be learned from other things, that somehow seem better at being what they are, at ‘being themselves,’ than humans are, at present. One of these things other species can teach humans is how to use language. For Ponge’s contention (in this he agrees with Jaccottet) is that humans so often use language carelessly, extravagantly, unfaithfully. There is a moral authority

¹²⁸ Sartre, “L’Homme et les choses,” 318. [Things can teach us manners of being.] As I explored in the Introduction, the suggestion that they can ‘teach us some manners’ is present here as well as that they can teach us alternative *ways* of being what we are.

for Ponge in other kinds, other *espèces*, which stay truer to themselves—they might teach us then to use human language more dignified of the animals that we are.

The kinds of objects that attracted Ponge are like those that attracted Darwin, in their diminutiveness. This is also a counterpoint to Rousseau, who says that were he to look at animals instead of plants, he would have only “pour ressource des escargots, des vers, des mouches”—an impoverishment, in his eyes. Yet it is the very ‘poverty’ of vegetal existence that captivates Ponge, for the same reason he is captivated by a mollusk, a shrimp, a pebble. “Faune et flore” begins, “La faune bouge, tandis que la flore se déploie à l’oeil.”¹²⁹ What does it mean for them that “Ils n’ont pas de voix”?¹³⁰ Another way of asking the question is, how do they manage without a voice? What at first appears an expression of dismay at the condition in which they find themselves grows into a discovery of wonder. Focusing on the constraints of vegetal existence at first makes clear to him what plants are unable to do, and then what these very constraints make possible.

Ils sont à peu de chose près paralytiques. Ils ne peuvent attirer l’attention que par leur poses. Ils n’ont pas l’air de connaître les douleurs de la non-justification. Mais ils ne pourraient en aucune façon échapper par la fuite à cette hantise, ou croire y échapper, dans la griserie de la vitesse. Il n’y a pas d’autre mouvement en eux que l’extension.¹³¹

The *ne...que...* twice allows him to define a limit, to narrow the field of vegetal options, while clearing the space for their exceptional capacity in the attractions and movements they are *not* denied: their “poses” and their “extension.” The maxim arrived at before the next section crystallizes the crux: “L’on ne peut sortir de l’arbre par des moyens d’arbre.”¹³² It is as much a statement about the tree’s destiny as it is about the possibility of writing in attention to the tree: the limit of the Pongian method is that

¹²⁹ Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 80. [Fauna move, while flora unfold themselves before the eyes.]

¹³⁰ Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 81. [they have no voice]

¹³¹ Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 81. [They are just about paralyzed. They can only attract attention by their poses. They do not seem to know the pangs of non-justification. But they could not in any way escape this obsession by fleeing, or believe they escape it, in the intoxication of speed. There is no other movement in them except extension.]

¹³² Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 81. [One cannot get out of the tree by arboreal means.]

it will always be confined to a human language (the French language at that); an analogy of the maxim is also true, that one cannot exit the human by human means.

There is something deeply admirable to Ponge about vegetal beings, but he has to come at it by way of a description that might at first glance seem unflattering, even pitying. For him, the habitual forms of admiration for plants will only lead us astray. In the same way that he bestows sainthood upon snails, but qualifies, “mais saints en quoi: en obéissant précisément à leur nature,” he would praise or elevate nothing in terms that belong to some other form of being (especially human being). (Yet, as he will always readily admit, human terms are the only terms he has.) So he comes to his own version of the “surprise” (in Jaccottet’s term) that can compel us to recognize vegetal existence:

Le temps des végétaux : ils semblent toujours figés, immobiles. On tourne le dos pendant quelques jours, une semaine, leur pose s’est encore précisée, leur membre multipliés. Leur identité ne fait pas de doute, mais leur forme s’est de mieux en mieux réalisée.¹³³

There is something admirable to Ponge about the “precision” with which a kind of being is developed, inhabited, and it is often about recognizing limits: for the snails in their shells, “Leur sécrétion même se produit de telle manière qu’elle se met en forme. Rien d’extérieur à eux, à leur nécessité, à leur besoin n’est leur oeuvre.”¹³⁴ For plants, “Chacun de leur gestes laisse non pas seulement une trace comme il en est de l’homme et des ses écrits, il laisse une présence, une naissance irrémédiable, *et non détachée d’eux*.”¹³⁵ He has traced out an alignment between writing and plant development (vegetal expression is written, he says, while animal expression is oral or gestural), but the outcome is not to elevate plants by their proximity to humans; it is to uncover in plants a

¹³³ Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 82. [Vegetal time: they seem always fixed, unmoving. We turn our backs for a few days, a week, their pose gathers precision, their limbs multiply. Their identity is not in doubt, but their form is better and better realized.]

¹³⁴ Ponge, “Escargots,” *Le parti pris*, 54. [Their secretion itself is produced in such a manner that it gets right in shape. Nothing external to them, to their necessity, to their need, is their work.]

¹³⁵ Ponge, “Faune et flore,” *Le parti pris*, 84. [Every one of their gestures leaves not only trace, as man does with his writings; it leaves a presence, an irretrievable birth, *and not detached from them*.] Italics in the original.

more perfect way of writing than the human way, since along with leaving a trace, it is continuous with their own form, their own way of being. For indeed, part of the problem with human expression (going back to Ponge's need to establish and reestablish "les raisons d'écrire") is its very detachability from the human form, the way it can be done without the human writer feeling its necessity, its consequences. Plants, on the other hand, "n'ont rien de caché pour eux-mêmes, ils ne peuvent garder aucune idée secrète, ils se déploient entièrement, honnêtement, sans restriction."¹³⁶ The possibility of lying can of course make dearer the writing that is truthful. But Ponge manages also to avoid the way of regarding other beings as human being minus something, by cleaving to the virtue of "precision," which is ideally not defined by anything more or less, but just what it is.

Attending to a Future World

Both Ponge and Jaccottet entertain visions of the world without themselves, curiously both of which invoke the Louvre as iconic museum, as it preserves whatever remains of the past through man-made objects. The objects that remain are not necessarily those that would have been most valuable to the people who used them, but they are valuable to their beholders because of their accidental survival. In a way the ancient artifacts in the Louvre are the perfect candidates for the kind of attention Ponge advocates towards man-made and inconspicuous objects. The museum invites the level of attention to everyday objects that Ponge would devote to the piece of soap.¹³⁷ Ponge's vision, which so disturbs Sartre, arises in context of his "Notes pour un coquillage":

¹³⁶ Ponge, "Faune et flore," *Le parti pris*, 82. [they have nothing to hide for themselves, they cannot keep a secret, they unfold entirely, honestly, without restriction.]

¹³⁷ The museum has quite different associations here than it does for Elizabeth Bishop's Crusoe at the end of "Crusoe in England." There the objects of use turn away from Crusoe, no longer essential for his survival, as they become candidates for a museum display. He asks, "How can anyone want such things?" There it is the musty, stifling character of the museum that operates—the sense in which the museum displays cultural objects divorced from the contexts that vivify them, especially the context of necessity.

O Louvre de lecture, qui pourra être habité, après la fin de la race peut-être par d'autres hôtes, quelques singes par exemple, ou quelque oiseau, ou quelque être supérieur, comme le crustacé se substitue au mollusque dans la tiare batarde.¹³⁸

It is his work he imagines as a shell built around or rather secreted from him, in which he takes Bach, Rameau, Malherbe, Horace, and Mallarmé as his guides. These he admires “parce que leur monument est fait de la véritable sécrétion commune du mollusque homme, de la chose la plus proportionnée et conditionnée à son corps, et cependant la plus différente de sa forme que l’on puisse concevoir: je veux dire la PAROLE.”¹³⁹ Yet he does not dream of future readers or even future poets inspired by his example. In a stroke, he makes a mockery of the conventional hope for immortality through art, hoping instead for a creature irreverent of his person to take up residence in the shell he leaves behind.

Jaccottet’s corresponding vision arises in the context of an account he gives, of his long-standing “curiosité pour” Mesopotamian civilization. This curiosity, nourished in the collections of the Louvre, he does not know exactly how to explain. He describes being moved by the objects, in particular a sheet of gold,

de la grandeur d’une page de carnet, couverte de signes cuneiformes commémorant la fondation, par Sargon II, du palais de Khorsabad; objet qui, comme à l’improviste, me toucha. Aussitôt après, comme l’eau contenue par une digue se précipite dès la moindre brèche ouverte, d’autres objets, plus étonnants, affluèrent [...] ¹⁴⁰

Jaccottet describes here an awakening to the expressivity of objects—in the figure of the water contained by a dike or a dam, precipitating at the slightest gap. He enumerates the astonishing

¹³⁸ Ponge, “Notes pour un coquillage,” *Le partis pris*, 77. [O Louvre of reading, which could be inhabited, after the end of the [human] race by other guests, by some monkeys for instance, or a bird of some kind, or some superior being, as the crustacean supersedes the mollusk in the miter-shell.]

¹³⁹ Ponge, “Notes pour un coquillage,” *Le partis pris*, 77. [because their monument is made of the veritable common secretion of the mollusk man, of the thing best proportioned and conditioned to his body, and yet as different from his form as one can imagine: by which I mean LANGUAGE.]

¹⁴⁰ Jaccottet, *Observations*, 26-7. [the size of a notebook page, covered with cuneiform signs commemorating the foundation, by Sargon II, of the Palace of Khorsabad; an object which touched me, as if all of a sudden. At once, as water contained by a dike precipitates from the slightest gap, other objects, more astonishing, rushed in...]

ancient objects that seem to “flow” from the first one. The experience described is one of opening oneself to what once were mute objects, allowing them to rush or flow into one~~self~~ (which resonates with Ponge’s poem in which he addresses the failure of certain men, who feel the presence of others or things in the self as something bad...). And this experience leads to a reflection on the source of his love for the objects:

J’aimais ces objets parce que je les sentais m’exalter. Et si j’essaie aujourd’hui de m’expliquer ce choc devant la page de carnet, je pense que j’avais peut-être alors dans la tête, dans un recoin de la tête, sans m’en douter, une phrase de la *Saison d’enfer* où Rimbaud fait allusion à des “*feuilles d’or*” (“*une jeunesse à écrire sur des feuilles d’or*”, je crois); ensuite, qu’elle me rappelait comment ces beaux travaux de l’homme, ces palais, ces temples, ces canaux, finalement s’effritent, s’enlisent et deviennent objets de voirie (et là où l’on nous montrait Babylone ruinée et livrée aux chacals, selon la parole de Jérémie, je voyais aussi bien le Louvre lui-même, et Paris à son tour fournissant des ruines aux archéologues futurs) [...]¹⁴¹

There is a path from the sensation of exaltation in objects salvaged from ruins, to the vision of the Louvre as itself a future ruin, a source of exaltation for the archaeologists of the future. Jaccottet cites two sources of “choc”: first, a resonance between a line of Rimbaud and the object before him; then an awareness that is more than intellectual or theoretical (a fact becoming real to him), about the ephemerality of material and making, of the inexorable passage of time. Like Ponge and Lucretius and Epicurus before him, Jaccottet finds in the evidence of impermanence a “raison de vivre heureux.” The other side of impermanence is that certain things *have* remained. The objects in the Mesopotamian collection of the Louvre by chance survived the ravages of time. When the museum itself, and Paris in its entirety, become literal things of the past, then whatever survives of

¹⁴¹ Jaccottet, *Observations*, 27. [I loved these objects because I felt them exalt me. And if I try today to explain to myself that shock in front of the notebook page, I think I might have had in mind, in the recesses of my mind, without thinking so, a phrase from the *Season in Hell* where Rimbaud alludes to “sheets of gold” (“youthful days to write on sheets of gold,” I think); then, that phrase would have reminded me how these beautiful works of man, these palaces, these temples, these canals, finally crumble, are submerged and become the things of sewers (and there where we see Babylon in ruins and given over to jackals, according to the words of Jeremiah, I saw as well the Louvre itself, and Paris in its turn furnishing ruins for future archaeologists)]

them will acquire (in some future presence) the kind of expressivity the “page de carnet” and its companions have in the presence of Jaccottet.

Conclusion

Ponge and Jaccottet grow restless with the very perfectibility of poetry. Ponge’s sense of the world’s form as not spherical but asymmetric, irregular, idiosyncratic, suggests that worldly attention cannot fill in what it does not concretely perceive (whatever is hidden from view will not complete a predictable shape). Jaccottet’s interest in the things that do not willingly inhabit language, as well as the things beyond his perception (as the invisible birds), suggests that worldly attention may yet mark the world’s vicissitudes—that the world includes things that cannot be grasped as well as things that can, and attention can follow where the will, language, even the senses, cannot.

As Ponge’s interest in man-made objects suggests, attention leads away from perfection; attending to the man-made object (and one such object might be a poem), one does not try to perfect it, but to behold it. Because perfection implies an exertion of control, an end, an exercise of the will over another thing or being, it is opposed to attention. In French as in English perfection can imply both freedom from flaws and completeness. Neither admits of excess. The perfecting imagination adds to or subtracts from the given to correct deficiencies and surpluses.

As much as Jaccottet works through his own tentative search for a language that will do justice to the objects of his attention, he does not justify his methods as Ponge does. Jaccottet’s own reservations about Ponge, his unwillingness to follow all the way has partly to do with the tone of “certainty” he finds in Ponge’s work, especially where Ponge is most explicit about his methods. There is a pride in Ponge Jaccottet cannot abide. Perhaps it is just that “amour-propre humain,” that “fierté humaine, prométhéenne” which leads Ponge to prefer “un objet, *fait de l’homme* (le poème, la

création métalogue) qu'un objet sans mérite de la Nature."¹⁴² There is courage in this avowal. Ponge does not indulge the suicidal or nihilistic tendencies though he recognizes the intolerable conditions that foster them. To prefer the stone to the poem or drawing of the stone would seem to him a kind of despair; a flight from one's human being into another kind of being.¹⁴³ But it is not just any man-made object Ponge prefers to the object of nature—it is the “purely descriptive” one—the object made through and made out of attention to the object of nature. The attention is transformed from receptivity into expression.

Expression on the face of it seems the reverse of attention—as in a conversation each party alternates between speaking and listening; if both parties try to do both at once, as when both begin a sentence at the same moment, or neither has anything left to say, the whole thing comes to a standstill. Yet expression as conceived by Ponge, on the side of the object of attention, suggests a kind of expression that never stops attending, that expresses attention itself. *This* peculiar kind of man-made object he prefers to natural object. Jaccottet on the other hand, his deep engagement with other texts and works of art notwithstanding, seems actually to prefer the “objet sans mérite de la nature” over the “objet, *fait de l'homme*,” undesperingly. The need to describe, to give expression to the objects of attention, is no less pressing for him, but the emphasis shifts. His modesty and tentativeness before the object stand in tension with the pride, the *amour-propre humain* of Ponge.

What Ponge dares in the *Parti pris des choses* is to establish an equivalence among disparate objects at the level of form and treatment, and a radical incomparability of each object at the level of

¹⁴² *As in note 79. Ponge, “Pages bis” section V, *Proèmes*, 194. [It would seem in the same way that I should still prefer (to La Fontaine, Rameau, Chardin, etc.) a pebble, a blade of grass, etc. / Well! Yes and no! And rather no! Why? / Out of human self-love. Out of human, promethean pride. / I like a *manmade* object (poem, metalogical creation) better than a worthless object of Nature] Italics in the original.

¹⁴³ Even Simone Weil's model of attention would not abide the flight of human being into the being of God—this would be a way out of our condition, and she is relentless in her insistence that we must learn to inhabit that condition, even to the point of suggesting atheism as a form of purification. See Weil, “Atheism as a Purification,” *Gravity and Grace*, 103-4. (In the French, “L'athéisme purificateur,” *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 188-90.)

expression. Each object is equally incomparable. While we may find some of his pieces more successful or interesting than others, there is no question that the pebble is equal in irreducible dignity to the shrimp and the fruit-crate. As the replicants in *Blade Runner*, or as Frankenstein's monster, are man-made but do not behave as man bids them, Ponge's man-made objects tend to swerve away from man's purpose. Never forgetting that it is an object of use, the piece of soap that is his object throughout *Le savon* he turns over again and again—a man-made object that yet does not behave exactly as man bids it. While the stories we have about the man-made taking on a life of its own tend to be cautionary (at least in principle), *Le savon*, like the pieces on man-made objects in the *Parti pris des choses*, is revelatory. It doesn't envision a future (the revolt of soap against humanity, for instance), but reveals how things already are, whether we notice them or not. And yet Ponge would maintain it matters a great deal for us, morally, that we do notice them. The man-made's existence in excess of man's purpose does not threaten or warn, as artificial intelligence does; but attention to the man-made for Ponge reveals the limits of man's control even over his own creations. This attention is not essentially different from the attention paid to objects in nature. In an "Appendice" to *Le savon*, he writes,

Nous en sommes venus à considérer ces objets comme des objets naturels, comme des objets que la nature nous doit, sans le moindre effort de notre part, sinon celui de les payer (peu cher). Et qui ne serait capable d'acheter, par exemple, un morceau de savon?¹⁴⁴

"Nature" in this sense is the given—what exists without our striving for it. We take these objects for granted, 'as though they grew on trees.' The awareness that someone has made the objects we

¹⁴⁴ Ponge, *Le savon*, 122. [We have come to consider these objects as natural, as objects nature owes to us, without the least effort on our part, apart from paying for them (cheaply). And who would not be able to buy, for example, a piece of soap?]

use is only part of the moral force of attention to them.¹⁴⁵ But the moral force seems to extend much further in the opposite direction—that our very attitude of attention towards the given, towards what actually grows on trees, matters fundamentally. The objects man makes for himself allow him to indulge the fantasy of absolute control, the fantasy of the will usurping the attention.¹⁴⁶ The thought that because we have made something, we can do as we like with it, is no more justifiable to him than the thought that because something is small and weak we can do what we like with it. Thus he writes in the “Pages bis” appended to the *Proèmes*, “il me semble que ceux qui forcent la créature à baisser la tête ne méritent de cette créature au moins que le mépris. Si faible soit-elle. Et d’autant plus qu’elle est plus faible.”¹⁴⁷ Even the smallest, weakest, most insignificant object must be able to hold its head up in his account of it. The will to subjugate he finds inexcusable, and this will is generally given free rein when humans use objects created specifically to do their bidding; thus he is as likely to take up a piece of soap or a fruit crate as a bit of meat or a snail. It is not that we should not use things, but that our worst impulse is to use inattentively, carelessly. That the inattentive use of a piece of soap is on a continuum with the inattentive use of a bit of meat, which is on a continuum with the inattentive use of another being like ourselves.

The revelations of attention, if not exactly anti-utilitarian, prevent the reduction of an object to its usefulness; even to its usefulness for the poet.

Ce sont des qualités nouvelles, inattendues, jusqu’alors inconnues, ignorées qui s’ajoutent aux connues [...] Ainsi, échappent-ils au symbole. Et le rapport change. Il ne s’agit plus d’un

¹⁴⁵ And Ponge does consider this aspect, as he suggests that “les véritables *fabricants* (et non simples contemplateurs) de ces objets-là sont les écrivains, les poètes.” *Le savon*, 125. [the actual *makers* (and not mere contemplators) of these objects are writers, poets.]

¹⁴⁶ Hans Anderson’s *The Fir Tree* comes closer still to the sensibility of Ponge. Except that he would not undertake to speak in the voice of the tree, as he would hold that it has no voice, but rather to use his voice to speak on its behalf.

¹⁴⁷ Ponge, “Pages bis” section III, *Proèmes*, 187. [it seems to me that those who force a creature to lower its head deserve no less than its contempt. However weak it may be. And all the more the weaker it is.]

rapport d'utilité ou de service d'homme à objet. Au lieu de servir à quelque chose, il s'agit d'une création et non plus d'une explication.¹⁴⁸

Explanation itself is revealed as a form of exploitation—to explain an object always puts it in other terms, assimilates it. To create in this sense appears connected to the qualities hitherto unknown about an object—they are “new”—they are in a sense “created” by the attention. Escaping from the symbolic is another form of escape from servitude. Like explanation, the symbol must reduce the object. As he wrote in another context, “Il n'est pas tragique pour moi de ne pas pouvoir expliquer (ou comprendre) le Monde.”¹⁴⁹ “Creation” is in some ways an unexpected alternative to explanation; but one way to think about it is that while explanation consumes and metabolizes, creation registers an excess. It is an excess that does justice to the excess of the object of attention, whereas explanation reduces it to the explicable.

On the surface, Jaccottet's movement among dissimilar objects resembles that of Ponge. He too includes disparate objects in the same text—observations of natural objects, dreams, reading notes, thoughts on works of art and pieces of music—yet what they all have in common is that they make up his impression of the world. Jaccottet's method, if it can be called a method, is impressionistic, because the impressions things make on him are all he seems willing to speak about. He does not in Ponge's sense try to take the “side” of things. He is deeply interested in things in themselves but his sensibility will not allow him to get any closer than he finds himself already; he does not try to get inside of things. Rather he would account for things indirectly, through the impression they make upon him. As far as it is possible to describe these impressions accurately, this is the best chance he has of attending to things in themselves. When he says he finds not enough air

¹⁴⁸ Ponge, *Le savon*, 105. [These are new, unforeseen, until now unknown, concealed qualities added to the known. Thus they escape from the symbol. And the relation changes. It is no longer a relation of the utility or service man makes of the object. Rather than using something, it has to do with a creation and no longer an explanation.]

¹⁴⁹ Ponge, “Pages bis” section VIII, *Proèmes*, 198. [It is not tragic for me not to be able to explain (or understand) the World.]

in Ponge (as a resource or a model, which may be quite different than as a text not taken as a source for one's own writing), the atmosphere not quite breathable, perhaps it is the claustrophobia he feels in fitting himself to the method Ponge justifies. There is a sense in which Ponge's writings seem to "capture" something about the objects of attention.

The pleasure of recognition they give rise to—recognizing the snail in Ponge's writing of it—is very different from the pleasure of unacquaintedness to be found in Jaccottet's writings. One comes to know what Ponge means by a pebble or a shrimp while one grows less certain of what Jaccottet means by a cherry tree.¹⁵⁰ When Jaccottet identifies in Ponge a kind of "machine verbale," he has a notion of the perils of the mechanical. Though he does not likely have Ponge in mind when he writes the following in his *Observations*, he reveals what is at stake for him in maintaining a certain reserve and tentativeness a machine would smooth over:

[...] C'est celui qui croit le réel saisissable qui est le plus éloigné de le saisir. De celui-là, d'ailleurs, on dit qu'il travaille comme une machine, qu'une machine ferait aussi bien que lui son travail.

Ne pas agir comme une machine, c'est rester de quelque façon ouvert à l'obscurité du monde, c'est reconnaître à la fois une impuissance et une souveraineté.¹⁵¹

The seeming contradiction of these two terms held simultaneously, sovereignty and powerlessness, urges a reconsideration of their habitual meanings. Not to behave like a machine may be more likely

¹⁵⁰ Jaccottet's departures from Ponge resemble in a way Elizabeth Bishop's departures from her mentor Marianne Moore. As Bishop wrote "[Moore's] poems seem to say, 'These things exist to be loved and honored and we *must*,' and perhaps the sense of duty shows through a little plainly." (Bishop, "As We Like It," *PPL*, 682) The anxiety of influence may be over-determined, but the conscious decision to retract the moral imperative, the retreat from certainty, may be characteristic of these two poetic lineages. Both generations sought to place the object in the world in some sense above the poetic object. The pupils found in their mentors indispensable resources for this task but also a conviction they could not share in the moral efficacy of rigorous methods. The sense of mastery, of moral rectitude, which might be necessary to sustain a revolutionary force, the pupils do without (perhaps because they can afford to).

¹⁵¹ Jaccottet, *Observations*, 90. [He who thinks the real is graspable is the farthest from grasping it. Moreover, we say that he works like a machine, that a machine would do his work as well as he. / Not to act like a machine is to remain in some way open to the obscurity of the world, it is to recognize at once a powerlessness and a sovereignty.]

to still than to spur action.¹⁵² Sovereignty means freedom as well as control, and it is perhaps in this sense that it can co-exist with “powerlessness.” Sovereignty through attention could mean a silent assent (even in recognition that really one has no choice) to the obscurity of things, a tolerance of their distance from oneself, without the slightest loss of interest in their being what they are.

¹⁵² As Wallace’s raising of the gun to shoot the panther is “involuntary,” while his lowering of the gun is something different.

Chapter Four: Ardent Attention

(Gilbert White and J.A. Baker)

The contemporary Scottish poet and essayist Kathleen Jamie has written that “Barely a ‘nature book’ is published today without homage to J.A. Baker, or Gilbert White,” which is part of the “recent fashion for combining memoir, travelogue, historical byways, natural history and lore.”¹ In this context, Baker (1926-1987) and White (1720-1793) stand for a (British) history and tradition, touchstones of uncompromising vision for today’s writers of nature (or ecology, or environment, if you prefer) trying to make their way in a too-well-trodden landscape. Jamie herself draws upon Baker, telling the story of the day the “postman brought [her] purchase” of *The Peregrine*, and reading it as she watches peregrines.² Though she draws upon it appreciatively, she is also circumspect, situating it with other books along the lines of her intuition that “there is almost a tradition in literature of lone men engaging with birds.”³

If there is indeed a “fashion” for looking back, in search of resources for finding one’s bearings in language, in the wake of a speechless experience of encounter with the natural world, perhaps this impulse tells us something in itself. Though we are now, as it seems almost obligatory to echo, in a period of traumatic environmental upheavals, we are neither the first nor (most of us hope) the last to find ourselves in the beguiling company of other forms of life. Nor are we the first or last to find that our linguistic resources, especially in writing, are already a site of translation for the other expressive forms in which other forms of life come into our awareness. Gilbert White

¹ Jamie, “Exploding Harpoon,” 2 & 3.

² Jamie, *Findings*, 29. Or watching peregrines as she reads it—as the book informs her watching, and her watching informs her reading.

³ Jamie, *Findings*, 29. Jamie cites T.H. White and Paul Gallico as other constituents of this tradition.

called certain birds that imitate other birds “sweet polyglot” and “delicate polyglot.”⁴ He was a pioneer in recognizing that there was “conversation” going on all the time in the lives of other animals, and to grant that it was meaningful. This recognition of other-than-human centers and sources of meaning in the world opened up a possibility that humans might recede from their assumed dominant position in ‘creation’ to co-exist with these simultaneous ways of being. There is a “sweet polyglot” underpinning to the form of fidelity to other forms of life revealed as possible in both of these writers. In their attention to the multitude of parallel lives in their environment, all arranged around different centers, they constructed texts that overflowed with intersecting bodies and voices. They composed in the form of letters and journal entries, forms distinctly suited to accommodate overflowing, forms with loose endings.

What brings these two observers together in this chapter is as much an opposition as an affinity, even as they have both attained iconic status in the tradition of English nature writing. They mark two historical poles of the dissertation, and not simply for the fact that they are the first-born and the last among the heterogeneous observers I have chosen to include.⁵ As each pair of observers has revealed a different possibility for fidelity to the natural world, the fidelity of White and Baker has to do with an acceptance of distance from other living things, both physically in the moment of attention, and imaginatively in the moment of writing. Since the idea of “distanced” observation is also associated with human exceptionalism and the problem of seeing nature as something separate from human selves, I want to be careful to distinguish the distance of respect for independence that characterizes these two observers, from the self-exempting distance that denies interdependence.⁶

⁴ White, *Selborne*, 95 & 102. See also Anne Secord’s note to 102 on 286.

⁵ By a hair, since Philippe Jaccottet was born in 1925, only a year before Baker, and just died in February 2021.

⁶ See for instance Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* (2007), which diagnoses a problem, inherited from the Romantics but still very much with us, of attachment to the very idea that nature is something at a distance, and that it can be contemplated serenely without actual involvement or implication.

So much happened between White and Baker, with implications for the act of observation as for the act of writing. The revelation of the human capacity for harm on the scale of entire species and environments changes the meaning of distance from other animals, as White and Baker experienced it. For White, distance from the animals he observed developed because unlike most of his contemporaries, he was interested almost exclusively in how they went about their lives. It was a distance that most naturalists of his day, for whom collection and dissection constituted the primary forms of inquiry, would not have contended with, or been content with. In cases where he transgresses this distance, he gives an account of the circumstances, and of what was compromised. For Baker, distance between himself and other animals directly reflected his own human wretchedness. It was a distance exerted by the animals, as it also was for White, but its lessening required a continual negotiation with the other creaturely life. A transgression of distance could be innocent for White, inadvertent.⁷ Baker, by contrast, begins in a state of always already having transgressed, because of the kind of being that he is. In both, the desire for nearness makes the

⁷ James Russell Lowell may have oversimplified when he famously wrote, “Mr. White seems never to have had any harder work to do than to study the habits of his feathered fellow-townfolk, or to watch the ripening of his peaches on the wall. His volumes are the journal of Adam in Paradise.” (as quoted and cited by Anne Secord, Appendix II to *Natural History of Selborne*, 253. Russell Lowell, ‘My Garden Acquaintance,’ *My Study Windows* [Boston, 1871], 1-23, at 1-5) But as White stands out by contrast with J.A. Baker, there is something apt in this caricature. White as a founding father of ecology presents a version of environmental writing that is familiar to us today in its ethos, and yet free of the melancholy that comes with human shame at the threat we pose to our environment. For so many later readers, it is as though White inhabited what we now want, with a manifest awareness of its value that is much harder for us to locate in his contemporaries or even his 19th-century successors, like Darwin, so much more preoccupied with great theories. Donald Worster historicizes this view of White, characterizing the inheritance of *The Natural History of Selborne* as an “Arcadian ecology.” He writes, “What is important is the need felt by [later] nature essayists to locate a compelling image of an alternative world *and* an alternative science. [...] If Selborne could be used as a symbolic contrast to industrial civilization, then its parson-naturalist could serve as a precedent for a different kind of scientist. In place of urban disintegration, the disciples of White dreamed of rural community. Instead of the arrogance of technological civilization toward nature, they called for arcadian humility.” (Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 20) The myth of White and Selborne conjured by Russell Lowell and documented by Worster is clarifying, since it makes thinkable the idea that it was not inevitable for us to learn ecological value the hard way that we now seem to have learned it, and to be learning it, already in the midst of ecological destruction that seems to gather momentum exponentially. E.O. Wilson’s notion of biophilia taps a similar vein, suggesting that in some sense we already know, and have long known—instinctively, as it were—the non-utilitarian value to us of coexisting with other forms of life.

distance tangible, and recognizing the independent life of the other creature requires a continual coming to terms with their own longing to be close to it.

Their different senses of loss, too, were incommensurate. The only loss White experienced was cyclical. He never had reason to doubt that the hirundines would eventually return to him. Aware of the fragility of individual organisms, there could be no question for him of fragility for entire *forms* of life. As to the question of whether they hibernated or migrated he was never completely satisfied, and he was sensitive to the withdrawal of presence that made fall and winter so much lonelier than spring and summer. He misses them when they are away, welcomes them when they return. This is not to diminish the emotional stakes he had in the question of migration, for it would have meant for him a distance of another order. It would have meant that a part of the avian lives he loved happened in a world apart, and his regional ethos held Selborne as a world in itself, a microcosm. Migration would then mean this world was not bounded, that beings could be held in it lightly.

In sharp contrast, Baker starts from the perception of an “incipient extinction.”⁸ It is the same extinction documented as more than possible some years earlier by the British ornithologist Derek Ratcliffe, and in broader strokes by the American Rachel Carson.⁹ Baker was confronted with the question of what it would mean to lose a form of life out of the world, and to be a member of

⁸ David Farrier’s phrase (he gives it as a compound, “incipient-extinction narrative”). Farrier, “J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*,” 743.

⁹ Carson’s *Silent Spring* came out in 1962, and Ratcliffe’s ominous report on “The Status of the Peregrine in Great Britain” came out in June of 1963. Ratcliffe was one of the first scientists to put forth a well-supported study of how DDT harmed wildlife, namely the way its poisonous effects were compounded as it traveled up the food chain. Baker certainly read *Silent Spring*. (Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 105) When Baker published *The Peregrine* in 1967, DDT was still widely used despite a voluntary scaling-back that began in 1962, post-*Silent Spring*. DDT would not be officially banned in the UK until 1984 or 1986. In the US it was banned in 1972. For an account of its use and decline in the US, see Dunlap, *DDT: Scientists, Citizens*. For a collection of source texts that tell a story see Dunlap, *DDT, Silent Spring, and the Rise of Environmentalism*. The point is that Baker would have had no reason to assume the Peregrine would survive as a species, if the use of DDT was to continue unchecked, and he had no reason to assume that it would be banned. He operated rather from an assumption that humans as a species could see and yet not care enough about the destructive effects of their actions to alter them.

the species causing that loss. It matters that he started from a form of life he loved in particular, the peregrine falcon, but his rage at the scourge of DDT was part of a more penetrating, expansive and insidious sense of human disturbance. For this reason, he registered the response of other animals to his own disturbance, sometimes with a vehemence that exceeded the disturbance, commensurate with the inconsolable dimension of his own shame at being human. He might have said, with Simone Weil, “When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart.”¹⁰ He suffered from the distance that separated him from the peregrine and other wild creatures, excessively because it signified to him more than a natural antipathy of prey for predator, or indifference of predator for creatures with potential neither as prey nor competitor, only just possibly as ally.¹¹

The excess in his reading of the way nature flinched from him, his own excess of offensiveness, corresponds to an excess he located in nature itself, in other creatures. Their life would always exceed the bounds of his own perception, and his own expressive capacity. In an analogous way, in choosing to be a field biologist (*avant la lettre*), rather than an indoor naturalist, White recognized an excess in the lives of the creatures he studied, a part that would always elude him because of the mobility, independence and separateness with which he credited their existence. White’s response to these other creatures had its own excess, in the form of curiosity, a passion related to but also in tension with that of affection, and he was in some sense always trying to find a way that “the human inquirer may gratify his curiosity without injuring the object of it.”¹² He was

¹⁰ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 37. [Quand je suis quelque part, je souille le silence du ciel et de la terre par ma respiration et le battement de mon coeur. (Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, 95)] The vehemence is even stronger than the translation suggests, for “je souille” carries a meaning of not just disturbance but sullyng, dirtying, polluting... While dirt is often considered something tracked indoors (on one’s shoes, for instance) from outside, pollution is increasingly understood as something humans track, as it were, into the outdoors as the waste-product of their indoor living.

¹¹ A potential on which falconers capitalize—see later in the chapter for a discussion of Baker’s affinity for and divergence from the falconry tradition.

¹² White, Letter 46 to DB, no date, *Selborne*, 198-9.

aware that curiosity had teeth. If his primary interest in “lives and conversations” over anatomy and classification was unusual in his time, he had nonetheless tacitly accepted a handicap, in studying a dimension of life inaccessible to the conventional tools and technologies of his trade (the collector’s gun, the dissecting knife, the microscope, for instance). He experimented to find ways of getting closer to those lives without disturbing them.

Baker’s marked absence of curiosity in this sense, his persistence instead driven by a much more basic yearning for encounter, may arise from the fact that from where he sat, the human species appeared incapable of exerting itself in curiosity without injury to its object. As Rachel Carson had articulated for him, humans were capable of reckless, heedless gambles, introducing “indiscriminate” agents of destruction into the environment, and basically seeing what would happen. Those responsible were gambling with not only individual lives but forms of life and entire ecosystems. Here is a wry comment from Carson that would not have gone unnoticed by Baker, on the Secretary of Agriculture’s non-responsiveness to conservationists’ urgent demands for research before the application of heptachlor and dieldrin in what E.O. Wilson has called the “Vietnam of Entomology,” the pesticide campaign against the fire ant: “The protests were ignored and the program was launched in 1958. A million acres were treated in the first year. It was clear that any research would be in the nature of a post mortem.”¹³ Baker was observing and writing in the thick of this heated conflict between volatile technological possibilities and belated awareness of environmental casualties. Human curiosity, as combined with urgent problems already brought on by human curiosity or avidity (the very problem of invasive agricultural pests usually unintended consequences of humans carrying out other ambitions), might have seemed to Baker among the worst of passions, for entirely different reasons than it had been vilified as sinful in other eras. Or it

¹³ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 165. Wilson’s comment in the afterword is on p. 360.

might have been a passion shut down in him—he had no stomach for questions like those that enthralled White, did not need to know where the animals went when they were elsewhere, or how they constructed their nests and burrows, when the very foundation of their existence was destabilized. The “post mortem” is a mode that Baker himself explores in his attention to dead animals in the wild, especially to peregrine kills, but he brings these sustaining deaths into relief, against which incipient extinction and anthropogenic harm of other species belong to another order.

This fundamental difference notwithstanding, neither White nor Baker seems driven to the kind of knowledge-seeking that could ever be the subject of ‘mastery.’ Hence their chosen epistolary and journalistic forms as open, indefinite, provisional. We might understand them in loose generic counterpoint, as comic and elegiac. They both sought to recuperate in writing something of the excess that eluded or transcended them in the physical presence of their objects of attention. The excess in other living things frequently disarmed them, as it did Darwin and Wallace, and yet unlike Darwin and Wallace, recollecting without ever collecting was the norm for them, rather than the exception. This accommodation of excess meant that if they had comic or elegiac tendencies, the forms into which they channeled them were indefinitely unfinished. The genre of their works comes through most clearly in the cast of their metaphors—White tended towards domestic comparisons, which allowed him to develop a narrative of intimacy and familiarity with the creatures he attended to, while Baker drew from a wide field of comparison but often invoked exotic terms, especially of places or subjects unfamiliar to him (Africa, Mars, a “plainsman under his buffalo hide”). The effect and purpose of this is not so much romantic as deliberately displacing, mimetic of the uneasy relationship he perceived between places on the earth and creatures, a relationship that had been severed by human beings. This effect is compounded by the way he erases human presence from the land where he watched birds and other wildlife, despite the fact that he generally moved in densely

populated places, around his home in Chelmsford, Essex, where it would have been difficult to avoid at least sometimes running into people.¹⁴

Even as he remains grounded, always physically present in the land where he watches birds and other animals, he is also painfully conscious of the fact that this land is growing hostile to non-human life, barely fit to hold it. So he de-familiarizes and displaces, his metaphors restlessly searching for apt comparison, sometimes moving through multiple likenesses without settling on one. The loss of place for dwindling lives blurs into the loss from the place of those lives. When he does give a direct description of place, its bleakness comes depressingly into focus, as in this diary entry from Monday, September 8th of 1958:

To Chelmer Valley, Brook End to Stoneham's Lock, and back; out 5:40 to 7:55. Dull at first, big grey clouds with threat of rain, but brightening late, with a space of late, watery sun, and low red-gold light, fine in the west.

The river had returned to its banks and wasn't even particularly high. The fields, however, were [?] and covered in water, the big meadow smelly with sewage. Water between 3" and 1 foot deep, but placed [sic] had dried out. Grass less lank everywhere, looking lifeless, a laid down, forlorn look, like sorrowing hair. Fences have been swept away, reeds and weeds uprooted from the river bed and scattered on the bank; a dismal scene.¹⁵

The lifeless, uprooted place does not entirely stay that way, and into this "dismal scene," Baker will see enter a "huge mass of 1000+ Starlings" as well as Lapwings, Snipe and Ruff. But it is a reminder that the ground zero from which he worked was a place that often wore this aspect, not just a generic dreary Essex landscape, but a place he felt humans were rendering less and less habitable for wild creatures. It has been pointed out that part of the catch of modern ecological elegy, is that it moves from "mourning [...] *in* nature" to mourning "*for* nature."¹⁶ As Timothy Morton writes, "What

¹⁴ People show up more, but still not much, in his diaries and in his second book, *The Hill of Summer*, than they do in *The Peregrine*. I suspect he was deliberately unseeing them, especially in the first book where his intensity of focus on the falcon threatened by pesticides saw the bird surviving in a landscape imaginatively depopulated by humans, and he resolved at the outset to "shun the furtive oddity of man," because "To share fear is the greatest bond of all." (Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 30)

¹⁵ Baker, 8 September 1958, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 383.

¹⁶ Costello, "Fresh Woods," 329.

happens [...] when this sounding board [nature, in traditional elegy] itself becomes the object of lamentation? [...] We have lost the objective correlative for loss itself, and have slipped away from mourning, which finds an appropriate way of symbolising loss, back into melancholia, which has no way of redressing woe.”¹⁷ There is in fact a very forthright “objective correlative” in the passage quoted above from Baker’s diary—the meadow like “sorrowing hair.” The elegiac force of Baker’s writing is oblique. In a way, he uses the conventional elegiac language against itself, mourning for the land with the land. He mentions the peregrine’s dwindling due to farm chemicals at the start of *The Peregrine*, but once under way, the book is all presence and immediacy. The incipient extinction that casts its shadow over the book is displaced by the bird in all the fierceness of its still present life. Later in the chapter I take up further the question of Baker’s engagement with elegy as it counters certain powerful critiques recently aimed at the political failures of ecological elegy.

White’s metaphors are hyper-familiarizing by comparison to Baker’s, even if, as Alan Bewell puts it, he “defamiliarized English nature in order to see it clearly for the first time.”¹⁸ White’s vivid sense of “life and conversation” was defamiliarizing because it was radical to consider other animals as having an internal life with its own reference points for meaning. “The importance of this linguistic turn can hardly be overstated,” writes Bewell. As he puts it, “although naturalists before White had recognized that every species of bird had its own unique song, they did not interpret these vocalizations as a mode of communication, but instead saw songs as being fixed mechanical or instinctual phenomena [...] Birdsongs were useful in identifying birds, but not intrinsically different from the fixed external markings of their plumage.”¹⁹ White, by contrast, held that “The language of

¹⁷ Morton, “Dark Ecology of Elegy,” 253-4.

¹⁸ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 167.

¹⁹ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 168.

birds is very ancient, and, like other ancient modes of speech, very elliptical; little is said, but much is meant and understood.”²⁰

Instinct itself, explored later in this chapter, was also richer and more ambiguous to White than a “fixed mechanical [...] phenomen[on].” In suggesting that his outlook was comic as compared to Baker’s elegiac, I mean this in a more everyday sense, that in seeing into the lives and conversations of other animals, he saw their forms of happiness too; he proceeded from the premise that life had savor for them, that they enjoyed their lives. He was more sparing with metaphor than Baker (though it is not hard to be), and the kind of metaphor he tended to favor brought the lives of other animals closer to his own experience, not because he would obscure what was particular to them, but because he perceived that there was a common basis for the experience of animated life.

Attention to Birds and Tolerance of Distance

The intimate familiarity of White and Baker with the places where they lived and worked stands in tension with their mutual affinity for birds, many of which are *not* limited to the land through which they walk and observe, but may come in and out of it, hover about its edges, leave entirely for certain periods of the year and return suddenly. White in particular was concerned with the problem of whether swallows, swifts and martins migrate or hibernate during the time of year when they are not to be seen in England. So he is committed to immersive local observation of a place and everything that lives there, but one kind of creature with a particular claim to his affection does not (or from his point of view, may not) make its home there definitively—at most one could

²⁰ White, Letter 43 to DB, 9 September 1778, *Selborne*, 191.

safely assert that Selborne is *part* of the hirundines' home. Birds demand a certain lightness, an agility of the eyes, as White writes:

A good ornithologist should be able to distinguish birds by their air as well as by their colours and shape; on the ground as well as on the wing, and in the bush as well as in the hand.²¹

Baker's love of birds also takes into account their tendency to come in and out of his visual field, which is also his grounded location. In fact he celebrates their superlative freedom of movement, their "passionate mobility," how "their lives quicken and warm to a pulse our hearts can never reach."²² Baker writes, almost as a confession, "I came late to the love of birds. For years I saw them only as a tremor at the edge of vision."²³ As I read him, birds never cease to occupy this elusive place in Baker's visual field, but he learns to focus his attention there, at the periphery. He does not get the birds to move towards the center, but attends to them at the edge, where they remain because they are always moving.

White's Shifting Distance—Curiosity and Gentleness

In White's journals, as in the notebooks and journals of many other writers, a poetics of compression and brevity reigns—the exclamation mark often working as a shorthand for White's enthusiasm, surprise, pleasure. Consider the following examples, all taken from 1779:

Feb. 20. Field-crickets have opened their holes, & stand in the mouths of them basking in the sun ! They do not usually appear 'til March.

Mar. 25. Picturesque, partial fogs, looking like seas, islands, rivers, harbours, &c. !! Vivid Auroras.

July 9. A surprizing humming of bees all over the common, tho' none can be seen!²⁴

²¹ White, Letter 42 to DB, 7 August 1778, *Selborne*, 188.

²² Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 33, 28.

²³ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 28.

²⁴ White, 20 February, 25 March, 9 July 1779, *Journals*, 160, 164.

In the entry of February 20th, the exclamation point could mark his astonishment at the earliness of the field-crickets' appearance. Arrivals and departures of species are one of the sets of long-term data White tracked throughout his life as a naturalist. So he would be sharply attuned to the potential significance of an early arrival. He could also simply be excited at seeing a harbinger of spring. But then there is the content of the observation, a sense of the heart catching in the throat; the field-crickets "have opened their holes, and stand in the mouths of them basking in the sun!" To witness the actions of so small a creature carries its own wonder—they "have opened," they "stand," they are "basking." The latter verb in particular gives the sense that White imagines the cricket's own version of pleasure in the sun's warmth. White's affinity for the small and inconspicuous resembles Darwin's after him (indeed, they are two of the classic observers of and writers about earthworms in the history of science). Though he makes clear that he is "no entomologist" (while he does acknowledge his authority as an ornithologist), the passages he wrote about tiny creatures remain bracing, startling. He has a miniaturist's feeling for their completeness, their being in possession of all that is necessary for life. When one has the occasion to see insects up close, it can bring a jolt (that jumping spider has *eyes*, has *jaws*; that fly is rubbing its tiny front legs together; that singular katydid is stroking one of its antennae). For White (as for Darwin) the observation of the very small in detail quickens tenderness, rather than awakening disquiet. Keeping's Darwin's description of the tiny spider on board the *Beagle* in the back of the mind,²⁵ consider White's encounter with one of its kin:

Every day in fine weather, in autumn chiefly, do I see those spiders shooting out their webs and mounting aloft: they will go off from your finger if you will take them into your hand. Last summer one alighted on my book as I was reading in the parlour; and, running to the top of the page, and shooting out a web, took its departure from thence. But

²⁵ From chapter 2 of the dissertation, on Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. The spider passage is from Darwin's zoological notes on board the HMS *Beagle*.

what I most wondered at was, that it went off with considerable velocity in a place where no air was stirring; and I am sure I did not assist it with my breath. So that these little crawlers seem to have, while mounting, some loco-motive power without the use of wings, and to move in the air faster than the air itself.²⁶

The scene he narrates is thoroughly domestic, and he takes the sudden presence of the tiny creature in stride. As he tells it, his attention moves seamlessly from the words to the spider running across the page (the spider moving in the opposite sense, perpendicular to the words, if it runs to the top while the words run from left to right). He has also mentioned how the spiders show what they are capable of if “you will take them into your hand.” As with the cricket basking in the sun at the mouth of its hole, he becomes absorbed in the activity of the creature, what it does of its own accord, its “mode of life” as he calls it.²⁷ His reflection on the account of the spider underscores this point: what strikes him most is how vigorously it shoots off from the top of the page “in a place where no air was stirring.” And he adds, after a semi-colon, “and I am sure I did not assist it with my breath.” This sense of the creature’s own capacity he carefully separates from external influence, and then more pointedly from his own influence. White’s physical involvement in the act of observation communicates a kind of tenderness. He takes the tiny spider into his hand (its tiny legs might even tickle his palm), but then is careful not to interfere, as it “goes off” from his finger. His certainty that he has not influenced the spider on his book in the parlour almost implies not only that he did not blow upon it, but that he might have actively restrained his breath so as not to alter the course it would take.

His letter to Daines Barrington on the field-cricket gives a more complex picture of the tension White consciously negotiated between physical engagement in the pursuit of knowledge about the life of these creatures, and interference with the very life he sought to observe. By way of

²⁶ White, letter 23 to DB, 8 June 1775, *Selborne*, 156.

²⁷ White, letter 46 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 198.

introduction to his interest in the species *gryllus campestris*, and the difficulties he faces in order to pursue it, he writes,

As their cheerful summer cry cannot but draw the attention of a naturalist, I have often gone down to examine the oeconomy of these *grylli*, and study their mode of life: but they are so shy and cautious that it is no easy matter to get a sight of them; for, feeling a person's footsteps as he advances, they stop short in the midst of their song, and retire backward nimbly into their burrows, where they lurk till all suspicion of danger is over.²⁸

This account of the crickets' sensitivity to human presence brings with it a sensitivity to one's own size, weight, destructive potential (even if inadvertent). The song of the cricket is what draws the naturalist towards it, and yet the naturalist's approach is what puts the cricket off its song. Both Baker and White figure this space between their own attraction to the creature, and its retreat from their approach, into their accounts of observation. In Baker it is touched with longing and eros, self-loathing in proportion to the wild creature's recoil from him. In White the complications it introduces are more practical, as he is not fraught with the human shame that so persistently haunts and hunts Baker. Thus he recounts,

At first we attempted to dig [the field-crickets] out with a spade, but without any great success; for either we could not get to the bottom of the hole, which often terminated under a great stone; or else, in breaking up the ground, we inadvertently squeezed the poor insect to death.²⁹

The first attempt to get close is thwarted by the crickets' extreme sensitization to his presence. Undeterred by the crickets' shyness of him, he tries to force his way in. His awareness of their fragility arises only through experimentation. The inclusion of failed methods provides a window onto the nature of White's curiosity: the creature will not let him near, so he must devise a way to overcome its cautiousness. The casualties incurred by his first attempt are inadvertent, but he accepts what insight they will yield. The "oeconomy," one might say the home-life (as in *oikos*), of

²⁸ White, letter 46 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 198.

²⁹ White, letter 46 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 198.

the crickets he seeks to observe is met with his own economy of attention. He considers that he has failed in his attempt when the cricket is squeezed to death, but recuperates part of that loss in learning something else about its oeconomy, having to do with details of reproduction:

Out of one so bruised we took a multitude of eggs, which were long and narrow, of a yellow colour, and covered with a very tough skin. By this accident we learned to distinguish the male from the female; the former of which is shining black, with a golden stripe across his shoulders; the latter is more dusky, more capacious about the abdomen, and carries a long sword-shaped weapon at her tail, which probably is the instrument with which she deposits her eggs in crannies and safe receptacles.³⁰

Many (though not all) of White's accounts of dissecting dead animals come with a back-story linking their death to accident. Though on occasion he deliberately procures a specimen in order to investigate its insides, generally "he dissected when doing so might throw light directly on behaviour."³¹ Similarly, although it would have been common practice among naturalists of his time, "apart from the wild and foreign plants he gathered into his garden, [White] made no collections."³² Daines Barrington, one of White's two correspondents in the *Natural History*, expresses the practicality and centrality of dissection and collection, suggesting that "the only method of attaining real knowledge in natural history depends almost entirely upon having frequent opportunities of thus killing animals, and examining them when dead."³³ While White would not have denied that there are certain crucial pieces of knowledge that it would only be possible to gather from animals when dead, it was more vital for him to recognize the kinds of knowledge it is only possible to gather about animals when they are alive, and more specifically, when they are going about their lives. Other kinds of knowledge (classification, anatomy, physiology) interested him insofar as they allowed him to attend to their lives and conversation more deeply. While Baker insists that "the

³⁰ White, letter 46 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 198.

³¹ Dadswell, *Selborne Pioneer*, 29.

³² Dadswell, *Selborne Pioneer*, 1-2.

³³ Quoted in Mabey, *Gilbert White*, 120. Can be found in Barrington, "On the periodical Appearing and Disappearing," 201.

emotions and behaviour of the watcher are also facts,” White testifies to the facticity of the living and not only the dead animal. It is not only specimens that make facts—there are ‘facts of life’ too.

In his account of the field-cricket and his efforts to inquire into its “mode of life,” he takes advantage of the casualty to glean the kind of information Barrington suggests is the main object of natural history. But even there he is restless. The speculation in the last sentence of the paragraph, about the function of the female’s “sword-shaped weapon,” signals an end to his interest in the dead cricket, and the awakening of a question that only a living cricket would be able to answer. He has taken stock of the anatomical and aesthetic differences between the male and the female, but only by watching the female in the act of depositing her eggs in “crannies and safe receptacles” could he do more than speculate about the function of her tail. Through trial and error he arrives at the following method, which he describes in such a way that others interested in the lives of field-cricketers might learn from his mistakes:

Where violent methods will not avail, more gentle means will often succeed; and so it proved in the present case; for, though a spade be too boisterous and rough an implement, a pliant stalk of grass, gently insinuated into the caverns, will probe their windings to the bottom, and quickly bring out the inhabitant; and thus the humane inquirer may gratify his curiosity without injuring the object of it.³⁴

He had a notion of the way means might be fitted to their ends. Barrington’s statement about the need to kill to attain “any real knowledge” has validity that White would have recognized so far as it goes, especially for the science of comparative anatomy. But in a passage like the one just quoted, the object of “curiosity” is not the body of the animal as such, but how it lives in that body—the life being removed, at least half the knowledge it could possibly share about itself is extinguished and irretrievable.

³⁴ White, letter 46 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 198-9.

Here is White on another kind of fit between means and ends, namely the adaptation of form or style to content:

I always was of the opinion that the stile should be in some measure adapted to the length of the composition, or the subject in all cases; and therefore long flowing sentences can't be suitable to short descriptions in a work that professes to be a synopsis.³⁵

If we can take this statement as applying to his own formal and stylistic decisions, there is good reason to ask how the “stile” of *The Natural History of Selborne* is “adapted to [...] the subject” it considers.³⁶ The statement reflects a view that form and content should be proportional, and that it is the writer’s work to adapt himself to the exigencies of his subject, rather than the other way around. This may sound intuitive, but it is not every writer who takes it literally. He expresses a sensibility keenly attuned to the fitness of means to end, expression to content. Just as the “gentle means” he deploys to scoop the cricket out of its cavern allow him to “satisfy his curiosity without injuring the object of it,” a style may be too blunt, too overbearing, too finished to communicate uncertain knowledge, or to give the contours of the “life and conversation” to which he attends. It is possible to crush a subject with a form or style ill-suited to it—where the spade fails, the pliant stalk of grass succeeds. But the fitting instrument is found through trial and error. As his subject is the “life” of an animal, the challenge is not only how to inquire into it without killing it, but how to bring something of its life into the prose in which he narrates his attention. As he expresses it to

Daines Barrington,

³⁵ Quoted in Mabey, *Gilbert White*, 123. The source he cites is a manuscript letter to Thomas Pennant (British Library Add. MS 35138) from 12 January 1771. This sentiment is also, of course, the principle of decorum in rhetoric, which White would have studied at school. I am suggesting, along the lines of Anne Secord (see note below), that in the context of his work as a naturalist, it meant something more personal.

³⁶ Anne Secord, in her introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition, makes a similar point: “The novelty of White’s natural history lies in the clarity with which he showed the importance of appreciating not only the kind of attention an object invites but also the manner most appropriate for expressing what is observed. The systematic language for ordering plants and animals developed by Linnaeus and others [...] greatly facilitated the categorization and classification of natural objects beyond local boundaries.” White benefited from, and agreed upon the necessity of, this greater facility. “But description of this sort was not his aim. White wanted instead to find a method by which the ‘life and conversations’ of animals could be expressed.” (*Selborne*, xvii)

Faunists [...] are too apt to acquiesce in bare descriptions, and a few synonyms: the reason is plain; because all that may be done at home in a man's study, but the investigation of the life and conversation of animals, is a concern of much more trouble and difficulty, and is not to be attained but by the active and inquisitive, and by those that reside much in the country.³⁷

In assigning the “trouble and difficulty” he does not differentiate explicitly between the active “investigation” and the style in which it would be best expressed. For the description of life, he suggests, is an active investigation in itself. The epistolary form in which he wrote *The Natural History of Selborne* was itself an investigatory form, “active and inquisitive.” The fact that some of the letters were never sent only underscores this point, since it was the form itself he realized enabled the kind of openness required to accommodate the ongoing-ness of “life and conversation.” Langdon Hammer’s observation about the usefulness of letters for Elizabeth Bishop applies equally to Gilbert White: “the letter’s conversational form keeps [her] thinking unsettled, mobile, incomplete.”³⁸

White, Instinct and the Receding of Natural Theology

Amy King has characterized White’s narrative style as “quietist,” and his sensibility as one that, “while not averse to action, acts generally free of desire and striving.”³⁹ Yet “curiosity” is a force as strong as gentleness in White’s narration of his observations. He exposes the inadvertent killing of crickets by the first method, and the advantage he takes of one particular death in order to dissect. Quietism on the order King wants to claim for White would suggest a piety that constrains inquiry, not accounting for his spirit of trial and error, his willingness to probe, the ardor of curiosity that makes him want to remove the cricket from its home in the first place. Curiosity was not an innocent character trait then as it is now. Especially in a natural theological context, excessive

³⁷ White, Letter 10 to DB, 1 August 1771, *Selborne*, 120.

³⁸ Hammer, “Letters” (no page number).

³⁹ King, “Quietism and Narrative Stillness,” 539.

curiosity about living things, beyond their creaturely testament to God's wisdom, could have been suspect. Though White expresses no misgiving about his curiosity from a theological standpoint, he does connect the force of curiosity with the potential for harm.⁴⁰ Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* gives another meaning of "curiosity" relevant for White: "Accuracy, exactness." Under this definition, Johnson quotes from White's forefather John Ray: "Our eyes and senses, however armed and assisted, are too gross to discern the *curiosity* of the workmanship of nature."⁴¹ White had read Ray closely, and a passage like this would not be lost on him. The faculty of curiosity in the observer as "inquisitiveness" (Johnson's first definition) is attuned to the quality of curiosity in nature as accuracy and exactness. The accuracy and exactness with which nature was created may be too perfect for the imperfect organs of perception in the human observer. But it stands to reason that curious attention would remain open to something in excess of what it can "discern."

Yet there is still something to this quietist characterization, something deeper than the myth (or monolith) of White as a saintly figure of retiring disposition and unfailing gentleness. The insight into the "quieting of desire" that yet does not preclude activity does capture something fundamental about White's distinctive form of curiosity. The "desire to own or consume" is almost absent from the letters and journal entries, and what one finds there instead, is the desire that would in fact be frustrated rather than satisfied by acquisition. This is the desire to see the creature living its own life, even to imagine what its life might be *like*.

Long before the polemical skepticism articulated by Thomas Nagel on the intractable problem of trying to imagine what it is like to be a bat, White is both innocent of the polemic and

⁴⁰ In White's time both the "blamable" and the "neutral or good" senses of curiosity one finds in the OED would have been possible, judging by the historical coexistence of these meanings. White does not seem to feel any shame in the admission of a desire to "satisfy curiosity," so it is most likely neutral. Still, he does draw attention, in the passages on his inquiry into the cricket's mode of life, to the potential for harm latent in the energy of curiosity. OED online, March 2020, s.v. "curiosity (*n.*)," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/46038?redirectedFrom=curiosity>.

⁴¹ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755 edition), s.v. "Curiosity."

wise to the folly of overextending the analogy of self to other. He was circumspect about analogical thinking in general, yet in the tentative mood would sometimes venture into it, and did not hesitate to grant basic principles of sensitivity and agency to the animal objects of his attention. His fascination with “instinct” is in part a fascination with the principles by which different animals navigate their worlds; instinct as he understands it is not a pejorative “mereness” easily placed below human reason in a hierarchy—he allowed that instinct “in some instances, raises the brute creation as it were above reason, and in others leaves them so far below it.”⁴² Instinct becomes a form of intelligence distinct from reason but not necessarily below it. It is a word that marks the mystery of what it is like to be another animal. Take for instance his account of young vipers. This passage contains the ambiguity of White’s special regard for living things in a particularly condensed form:

On August the 4th, 1775, we surprised a large viper, which seemed very heavy and bloated, as it lay in the grass basking in the sun. When we came to cut it up, we found that the abdomen was crowded with young, fifteen in number; the shortest of which measured full seven inches, and were about the size of full-grown earth-worms. This little fry issued into the world with the true viper-spirit about them, shewing great alertness as soon as disengaged from the belly of the dam: they twisted and wriggled about, and set themselves up, tokens of menace and defiance, though as yet they had no manner of fangs that we could find, even with the help of our glasses.⁴³

Just as he had the field-cricket in his journal of 1779, he comes upon the creature “basking in the sun.” In this account, symmetrical to the one he gives of looking inside the dead pregnant cricket, White writes about his investigation of dead animals especially when that investigation provides insight into their reproductive systems. In this case the opening of the dead reveals a multitude of living animals—a literal demonstration of Dadswell’s insight that White’s interest in dead animals was almost always oriented towards, channeled back into his research into how they lived. The “true viper-spirit” in which these earthworm-sized creatures enter the world occasions the

⁴² White, Letter 56 to DB, undated, *Selborne*, 214.

⁴³ White, Letter 31 to DB, 29 April 1776, *Selborne*, 168-9.

letter and furnishes its subject in the first place, as he turns in the next paragraph to a reflection on the marvel of instinct:

To a thinking mind nothing is more wonderful than that early instinct which impresses young animals with the notion of the situation of their natural weapons, and of using them properly in their own defence, even before those weapons subsist or are formed. Thus a young cock will spar at his adversary before his spurs are grown; and a calf or a lamb will push with their heads before their horns are sprouted. In the same manner did these young adders attempt to bite before their fangs were in being. The dam however was furnished with very formidable ones, which we lifted up (for they fold down when not used) and cut them off with the point of our scissors.⁴⁴

“To a thinking mind”—presumably one that uses human reason? Instinct is wonderful specifically *to* reason. Because it works differently, because it contains a separate range of possibilities not available to reason. He permits himself a disciplined analogy in this case not to limit the particularity of the vipers or to use them as an illustration of instinct in general, but to draw attention to a specific sub-genre of instinct: the instinct “which impresses upon young animals a notion of the situation of their natural weapons, and of using them properly in their own defence, even before those weapons subsist or are formed.” To focus on such an instinct as wonderful is to celebrate the ability of the animal to thrive, to protect itself, to inhabit its body with an awareness of how it will develop in maturity. Looking closely at the analogy, some crucial differences become apparent: the vipers are presumably wild, while the young cock, calf and lamb would be most familiar in a domestic sphere. The viper also uses its fangs for predation, injecting its prey with venom, while the other three use their “natural weapons” in self-defense or in competition with others of their kind. In each case the phenomenon illustrates the readiness of the animal to participate in its particular form of life. Note that John Ray in his *Wisdom of God as Manifested in the Works of Creation* had used a strikingly similar set of examples for instinct (including the calf which knows how to butt its head before its horns have

⁴⁴ White, Letter 31 to DB, 29 April 1776, *Selborne*, 168-9.

sprouted), but explicitly to argue “that they are directed to ends unknown to them, by a wise superintendent.”⁴⁵

Though White was in general suspicious of analogy as a form of *reasoning*, he did not hesitate to include it as a form of illustration. He thought it invalid to predict or draw conclusion by analogy, but not to notice and draw attention to affinities of form and function throughout the animal kingdom. He suggests that “the bane of our science is comparing one animal to the other by memory,”⁴⁶ and avows to Thomas Pennant, “I delight very little in analogous reasoning.”⁴⁷ On the subject of White’s careful comparison of human to animal life, in this instance to house-martins and their young, Richard Mabey reflects:

It would be foolish to deny that Gilbert was thoroughly soft-hearted about his ‘martlets’, and sometimes he seems to ascribe human emotions and purposes to them. The adult birds, he noticed ‘are industrious artificers ... at their labours in the long days before four in the morning’; and when they carry off their nestlings’ droppings they do so with ‘tender assiduity’. Yet in the context of the whole paper, these reflections seem not so much anthropomorphic as an affirmation that there is a core of experience and challenge which is common to all life. On the one occasion when he does explicitly compare the behaviour of humans and martins it is the birds’ skill which is offered as the model.⁴⁸

Affirming a “core of experience and challenge which is common to all life” grants White the freedom to make intuitive comparisons without collapsing the distinctions that separate one mode of life from another. Without an evolutionary context, White resisted the tendency to place human life automatically above the lives of other animals. And he does this without sounding radical, without systematically dismantling any specific position on human superiority. By the nature of his attention to their lives and conversation, he includes the possibility that human life is not necessarily greater or fuller than that of other animals. It is a thought that seems to occur quite naturally to him,

⁴⁵ Ray, *Wisdom of God*, 110-11.

⁴⁶ White, Letter 32 to TP, 19 October 1770, *Selborne*, 72.

⁴⁷ White, Letter 26 to TP, 8 December 1769, *Selborne*, 63.

⁴⁸ Mabey, *Gilbert White*, 140.

as in his even-handed comment about instinct as “in some instances so much above reason, in other respects so far below it!”⁴⁹ or in the instance cited by Mabey, where he suggests that humans may have learned from house-martins how to build mud houses, rather than the other way around. Or again, in a “*Query*” he poses to Daines Barrington, he wonders whether a practice of which he has heard tell from “travellers of credit,” whereby observant Muslims on their way through the desert will bathe in dust in absence of water, does not arise from observing the habits of “pulveratrices” (birds who take dust-baths).⁵⁰

While the precedent of natural theology would imply that the value of these homologies lies in their evidence of the creator’s underlying pattern, White never stresses this aspect. He may take it for granted. His primary interest lies in the stuff of that “viper-spirit,” the viper way of being in the world. The detail he includes of the mother’s fangs brings the investigation full-circle, not only as he notes their “formidable” character, but in his parenthetical, “(for they fold down when not used),” the way they work in the living creature.

It is a subtle shift, but numerous other readers have noted White’s inheritance of natural or “physico-“ theology as unquestionable and yet all but imperceptible. As I understand it, White’s faith would have obliged him to accept the Creator as the ultimate cause of the phenomena he investigates. For him the question of origins was then a settled matter. He would also acknowledge the hand of the creator as the genius behind the wonder of adaptation, the way each creature seems marvelously fitted to its needs, its environment. But it is a question of directionality: for White, attention to adaptation rarely appears to issue from a search for God, or to end in a conclusion as to His wisdom in creation. Rather than engaging in natural history as a form of worship, he sought to appreciate the particulars of existence for members of the Creation other than himself. To ask, “how

⁴⁹ White, Letter 16 to DB, 20 November 1773, *Selborne*, 132.

⁵⁰ White, Letter 7 to DB, 8 October 1770, *Selborne*, 110.

do they live?” is not to ask how the Creator designed them, though he is certainly interested in the marvelous interrelations among living things (now part of the science of ecology), and the intricate adaptation of organism to environment—instead, he asks how they go about their lives now that they are in the world.

This is a crucial distinction for considering the nature of White’s attention. While his forefathers John Ray and William Derham were formidable naturalists in their own rights, the theological commitment of their work was primary, urgent, and direct. Derham’s classic text is *Physico-theology*, and Ray’s is *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*. They also work from an interest in the way animals live, but their attention never strays far from the creator whose wisdom so perfectly adapts, for instance, the woodpecker’s anatomy to its way of life.⁵¹ Their originality and creativity went into the work of “reconciling” what they saw in nature with the faith that God was its author—they revealed the possibilities of hermeneutic attention to the natural world. Such attention motivated by faith could stimulate discovery, entail an uncompromising rigor of its own, and enable a wonderfully subtle appreciation for the fine-grained fit between living things and their conditions of life. As an example, consider Ray on an “argument of providence and counsel relating to animals,” namely “the various kinds of voices the same animal uses on divers occasions, and to different purposes.” He cites the different vocalizations of hens when they call their mates, when they sit on their eggs, when they call their chicks to eat, and when they spy a predator:

⁵¹ “[...] there are a whole genus of birds, called *pici martii*, or woodpeckers, that [...] have a tongue which they can shoot forth to a very great length, ending in a sharp stiff bony tip, dented on each side; and at pleasure thrust it deep into the holes, clefts, and crannies of trees, to stab and draw out coffi, or any other insects lurking there, as also into ant-hills, to strike and fetch out the ants and their eggs. Moreover, they have short, but very strong legs, and their toes stand two forwards, two backwards, which disposition (as Aldrovandus well notes) nature, or rather the wisdom of the Creator, hath granted to woodpeckers, because it is very convenient for the climbing of trees, which also conduces the stiffness of the feathers of their tails, and their bending downward, whereby they are fitted to serve as a prop for them to lean upon, and bear up their bodies.” (Ray, *Wisdom of God*, 125)

These actions do indeed necessarily infer knowledge and intention of, and direction to, the ends and uses to which they serve; not in the birds themselves, but in a superior agent, who hath put an instinct in them of using such a voice upon such an occasion; and in the young of doing that upon hearing of it, which by Providence was intended.⁵²

White no doubt accepts this account of how instinct arises in animals. And yet his fascination with instinct proceeds in a wholly different direction. It is “a most wonderful unequal faculty”; “wonderful” to “a thinking mind,” and then it is, “taken the least out of its way, an undistinguishing, limited faculty.” Finally it is a “wonderful limited faculty.”⁵³ There is no opposition between terms in the last formulation; the faculty is not wonderful *but* limited, as one might expect the order of values to dictate. As he places instinct sometimes above and sometimes below reason, he does not accept the customary hierarchy of reason over instinct in all cases. It is one step from here to say that the hierarchy of man over other animals does not hold in all cases, or in all respects. Nor does he rest complacently with the model of instinct “put” in animals; though as I acknowledge he must accept it as a basic truth, the origin of instinct in a “superior agent” does not seem to imply for him that the animal has no experience of it. He is concerned with what the faculty of instinct means for the animal way of life, which as he figures it, may be just as full as a human one.

The originality of White’s work lies apart from that of Ray and Derham. It has been noticed that the ‘physico-theology’ he inherits is indeed present in the *Natural History*, but that its discourse is “sparingly” and “conventionally rather than inventively employed.”⁵⁴ Another critic notes (without disapproval) that “White accepted without thought the argument from design.”⁵⁵ And Virginia Woolf commented on White’s invocation of “Providence,” venturing: “In another fifty years Providence would have been neither so inscrutable nor so wise—it would have lost its shade. But

⁵² Ray, *Wisdom of God*, 138-9.

⁵³ White, Letters 16, 19, 31, 56 to DB, *Selborne*, 132, 141, 168, 214.

⁵⁴ King, “Quietism and Narrative Stillness,” 538.

⁵⁵ Mullett, “*Multum in Parvo*,” 372.

Providence about 1760 was in its prime; it sets all doubts at rest, and so leaves the mind free to question practically everything.”⁵⁶ When the Creator is not the object of attention, but its background, the creatures are free to take on a life of their own without risk of impiety. The naturalist can also indulge his passion without the explicit need to justify himself theologically. If one assumes all living things were created by an infinitely wise God, then whatever one discovers, however puzzling it may seem from a theological standpoint (the behavior of the cuckoo is a famous provocation), it cannot be unholy. White’s attention thus subsists apart, both from the tradition of physico-theology he inherits, and from the contemporary trends of natural history. His conviction that field observation is the heart and soul of natural history (even though collection and examination of specimens were also indispensable to its progress) seems to belong to a mind distinctly “free to question.”

From Shyness to Fear

The intractable presence of an observing, attending human self haunts all of Baker’s writing. This human presence appears in *The Natural History of Selborne* too, as we have already seen in the passage where White remarks on the cricket’s sensitivity to a human footstep. But for White this is not a painful fact. It is rather a part of his life in the field, and instead of taking it as a judgment against himself or humans generally, he observes shyness as part of the “life and conversation” of the animal to which he attends. Despite his religious background and vocation, he actually does not seem to feel a significant difference between himself and other large animals or predators that the small and vulnerable may fear. He considers wildness or shyness a challenge but not an indictment. By contrast consider Baker’s anguished attention one December 24th:

⁵⁶ Woolf, “White’s Selborne,” 191-2. This passage also figures in the Introduction.

Near the brook a heron lay in frozen stubble. Its wings were stuck to the ground by frost, and the mandibles of its bill were frozen together. Its eyes were open and living, the rest of it was dead. All was dead but the fear of man. As I approached I could see its whole body craving into flight. But it could not fly. I gave it peace, and saw the agonised sunlight of its eyes slowly heal with cloud.⁵⁷

That animals fear him Baker feels as a curse. He approaches the heron with something like love, but the heron fears him, wants anything but for him to come nearer. He locates the heron's aliveness in its eyes, from which he also apprehends the bird's fear of him. Fear permeates Baker's writing about the point of connection between himself and the creatures to which he attends, and fear brings him into direct contact with the aliveness of those creatures. This fear establishes a completely different relation between the human and the other animal than White's perception of "shyness" in other animals. Where shyness can be a temperamental characteristic, generalized and independent of any particular other who might activate it, fear directly implicates the one who instills it. At the beginning of *The Peregrine*, Baker expresses his own resolve to "Learn to fear." "To share fear is the greatest bond of all."⁵⁸ Sharing fear in this sense could be not only fearing the same entity (other humans), but sharing the burden of the fact that there is fear between oneself and the other, becoming sensitive to the fear one imparts to the other. It is a "bond" not just as a connection, but as "an agreement or engagement binding on him who makes it."⁵⁹ The ethical force of such a bond is that the other's fear is "binding," that it requires us to accept a limit for ourselves.

Baker's brooding self-consciousness sometimes enlarges his perception of fear in another creature. It is not that the heron doesn't feel the fear Baker identifies in it, but Baker's description of

⁵⁷ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 112.

⁵⁸ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 30. Perhaps there is also an echo here of Emerson, "glad to the brink of fear," but that the emotional current runs the other way, so it is shared fear, across a species boundary, that makes possible an unknown kind of joy. Emerson's experience of a joy proximate to fear in Nature also seems closer to Humboldt's (see note 69), in that he imagines an exultant human spiritual attunement to Nature, while Baker feels his humanity in discord with, if not exile from nature. Emerson feels a bond with nature while Baker is apart, almost unnatural.

⁵⁹ OED online, March 2021, s.v. "bond (*n.1*)," 8a, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/2162?rskey=YyNVNi&result=1&isAdvanced=false>. See also my discussion, in the Introduction, of this word and the "bond of the furthest apart," via Robert Bresson and Sharon Cameron.

that fear is mingled with his torment at being the object of it. “As I approached I could see its whole body craving into flight.” (Elsewhere he describes an owl “cringing” away from him.) The structure of this interaction repeats itself throughout Baker, only possibly finding relief in *The Peregrine’s* ending: The bird attracts Baker, he feels himself pulled towards it; then at a certain moment Baker awakens the bird’s fear, and he feels pushed back by that fear, repelled by the bird’s wish for him to keep his distance.

His account resembles that of a lover refused by his beloved, and compelled to respect the beloved’s wish—“I gave it peace”—and finally able to love the peace the beloved can enjoy only with his retreat—“[I] saw the agonised sunlight of its eyes slowly heal with cloud.” He continues to watch the heron even after he has “given it peace,” seeming to retreat to a safe distance.⁶⁰ Much of his life of attention consists in this delicate negotiation of the necessary distance. Just after his account of the heron, he offers an expansion upon it, giving us insight into the psychic problem for Baker of being what he is rather than what he observes. He is so self-effacing here that he verges upon self-absorption (in observing how much animals fear “man,” he figures man as terribly important to them). He speaks of “man” generally but as if from direct experience:

No pain, no death is more terrible to a wild creature than its fear of man. A red-throated diver, sodden and obscene with oil, able to move only its head, will push itself out from the sea-wall with its bill if you reach down to it as it floats like a log in the tide. A poisoned crow, gaping and helplessly floundering in the grass, bright yellow foam bubbling from its throat, will dash itself up again and again on to the descending wall of air, if you try to catch it. A rabbit, inflated and foul with myxomatosis, just a twitching pulse beating in a bladder of bones and fur, will feel the vibration of your footstep and will look for you with bulging, sightless eyes. Then it will drag itself away into a bush, trembling with fear.

⁶⁰ Ambiguously, the only “safe distance” for the heron seems to be death. Thanks to my husband and to Mark Payne for opening my eyes to the likelihood that Baker’s “gave it peace” means that he killed the heron, to put it out of its misery. At first I took him to mean that he simply retreated to a distance that could allow the heron to relax its vigilance against him, to die in peace. I suspect my readiness to take shelter in this particular euphemism arises from my own avoidance of a kind of encounter Baker urges us not to avoid—“to make plain the bloodiness of killing,” even when it is merciful. And yet, I find myself wondering why in this case Baker did not make it plainer, why not say ‘I killed it’? Perhaps the covert expression gives a kind of privacy to the dying creature, but it also gives Baker cover, a claim to forgiveness for what might otherwise seem a transgression.

We are the killers. We stink of death. We carry it with us. It sticks to us like frost. We cannot tear it away.⁶¹

Before plunging fully into this passage, I want to look back at how he got here, at what leads Baker to the conclusion that he cannot change his human figure, and that this is to be lamented. Because his sense of human wretchedness (some may call it misanthropy) never seems to leave him; and his attention is both limited and liberated by it. The previous day's entry carried an intimation of this grim pronouncement ("We are the killers...."), as Baker narrated one of his many encounters with the "hawk" (by which he usually means the peregrine, drawing upon the language of falconry):

I move out of the dark of the wood into the paler shadows of trees. The hawk hears, looks up. His white-ringed eyes are huge with dusk. I creep nearer, knees soaking in the marshy ground. Thin ice crunches. Frost is forming where the late sun shone. The hawk pulls at his prey, looks up. Four yards separate us, but it is too far, a distance as unspannable as a thousand foot crevasse. I drag like a wounded bird, floundering, sprawled. He watches me, moving his head, looking with each eye in turn. An otter whistles. Something splashes in the cold, piky depth of the brook. The hawk is poised now on the narrow edge between curiosity and fear. What is he thinking? Is he thinking at all? This is new to him. He does not know how I got here. Slowly I mask the pallor of my face. He is not afraid. He is watching the white glitter of my eyes. He cannot understand their staccato flicker. If I could stop them moving he would stay. But I cannot stop them. There is a breath of wings. He has flown into the trees. The owl calls. I stand above the kill. Red ice reflects the stars.⁶²

Baker alternates between the past and present tense throughout his published and unpublished writings. I'm not sure we would gain much from trying to pin down rigorously the passages where he uses one and the other, but in this passage at least the present tense allows a reconstruction or reenactment of a significant moment, placing memory in the present tense. In one sense, all he narrates is past. And yet the distance he marks as "unspannable" in this passage makes closeness in time all the more precious, since closeness in space is evidently impossible to achieve. Baker's own questions and speculations about the internal life of the bird in this moment are not entirely consistent with each other (from "what is he thinking?" to "*is* he thinking?" to the assertion of

⁶¹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 113.

⁶² Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 112.

himself as a novelty in the peregrine's experience, an assertion which Baker cannot possibly verify but which allows him to entertain the possibility that the peregrine has registered his existence). From moment to moment his understanding of the situation shifts, evolves. He casts about, improvises, and the passage moves through phases: from description of what he is doing as he comes upon the "hawk," to description of what the hawk is doing, notation of ambient noise and atmosphere, narration of a series of actions (both his and the hawk's), articulation of questions that run through his mind (whether at the time of the encounter or in the moment of writing is open to interpretation), to an envisioning of himself from the hawk's perspective, to the conditional upon which the whole passage turns: "If I could stop them moving he would stay."

One might well ask, how does he know the bird would stay if he could stop the "staccato flicker" of his eyes? At the end of the book he suggests he is able to approach the bird because it sees through him: "The great eyes look into mine. When I move my arm before his face, they still look on, as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away."⁶³ Nothing suggests the bird has changed, but perhaps Baker's lessening of the "unspannable" distance between himself and the bird is nothing but a lessening or lightening of his own subjectivity. In the earlier passage, where he cannot stop the flickering of his eyes, it is that he cannot stop asserting himself, exhibiting his desire to be close to the bird, to be acknowledged by it.

He describes his own strange antics, his *own* unaccountable behavior in the presence of the hawk: he does not explain why he would "drag like a wounded bird," but the most obvious conclusion to draw is that he wants to draw the peregrine's attention to himself, and he knows that its attention is keenest towards whatever behaves like prey. Also that he would rather be anything than what he is—rather be the peregrine's prey than a creature it fears. There is a self-sacrificial

⁶³ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 169.

aspect to this performance, since if the peregrine were really to take him for the creature he imitates (though he would also have his size to overcome in order to perfect the illusion), it might kill him.

Baker's Compression (The Peregrine)

Baker is forthright about both the aesthetic compression and the indispensable subjectivity that have shaped his first book, *The Peregrine*. He condenses the peregrine-watching of ten winters into one winter.

In my diary of a single winter I have tried to preserve the unity, binding together the bird, the watcher, and the place that holds them both. Everything I describe took place while I was watching it, but I do not believe that honest observation is enough. The emotions and behaviour of the watcher are also facts, and they must be truthfully recorded.⁶⁴

First, consider the choice to preserve “unity.” He frames it as a question of preservation, of truthfulness, but this “unity” he strives to keep is also unquestionably aesthetic. I am not sure Aristotle or his neoclassical followers would have recognized Baker’s unity, but certainly in the *Peregrine* there is unity of place (though as other readers have observed, the place goes unnamed), unity of thought and action folded together in the pursuit of the peregrine. Almost certainly without thinking of Aristotle, his sense of a necessity behind the form of his work does resonate with the *Poetics*, as when the ancient philosopher writes of scale, “A concise definition is to say that the sufficient limit of a poem’s scale is the scope required for a probable or necessary succession of events which produce a transformation either from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse.”⁶⁵ Were Baker to have represented ten winters in reality as ten winters in the text, it might have given a more accurate sense of the passage of time. But as Darwin also knew, it is far more difficult to grasp a gradual process on its true scale than when described as analogous to a process we can perceive

⁶⁴ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 31.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch. 7, 40.

directly. The ambiguous transformation (and resistance to transformation) that takes place in Baker's *Peregrine* may in fact not have taken place chronologically as told, as though he really got closer to the bird over time. But closeness to the bird is the end towards which every moment of watching inexorably draws him. It begins in "affliction" that is never entirely transformed. The most abstract version of its plot might be summarized so: a man suffers from the distance that separates him from the bird he loves, and in the end the distance is diminished. The "action" that occupies the narrative is a contraction of that space, which in reality may have expanded and contracted many times over.

Beyond the contraction of space and time, Baker specifies a unity of "the bird, the watcher, and the place that holds them both." Reverberations of Aristotle's *Poetics* return:

A plot-structure does not possess unity (as some believe) by virtue of centring on an individual. For just as a particular thing may have many random properties, some of which do not combine to make a single entity, so a particular character may perform many actions which do not yield a single 'action'.

Furthermore, the "parts" of a unitary plot-structure "should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work's wholeness. For anything whose presence or absence has no clear effect cannot be counted an integral part of the whole."⁶⁶ Despite the fact that the structure of Baker's *Peregrine* follows that of a diary, which traditionally suggests a day-to-day contingency, the mind of the watcher is unwavering in its purpose. His sense of necessity could hardly be sharper or keener, in that he seems to feel an irresistible calling to do nothing but attend. He states this most explicitly at the end of the first journal-like entry of *The Peregrine*:

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch. 8, 40.

⁶⁷ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 48.

He takes up the vocation with the fervor of a religious seeker, and what he seeks is a deeply personal communion with a higher being. There is no mistaking this spiritual cast of the text: he places his salvation in the bird. And yet, there is a strange inversion in the final sentence of this passage, for the kind of purification through nature he seeks would seem to bring him closer to paganism; whereas he implies that he is already an abject pagan with respect to a higher religion of nature, and has been called to an arduous conversion. The singularity of this desire for purification unifies the days of watching recounted in the “diary” that makes up *The Peregrine*. In Baker’s telling, not only does the presence of each living thing have a “clear effect.” There is also, because of the crisis out of which the book is born, a desperate sense that we are on the brink of absence, of losing one of the integral parts of this whole.⁶⁸ But there is also a sense in which the peregrine covers the beginning and the end for him in each moment of attention. Take his account of a peregrine stoop on December 15th:

He fell so fast, he fired so furiously from the sky to the dark wood below, that his black shape dimmed to grey air, hidden in a shining cloud of speed. He drew the sky about him as he fell. It was final. It was death. There was nothing more. There could be nothing more. Dusk came early. Through the almost dark, the fearful pigeons flew quietly down to roost above the feathered bloodstain in the woodland ride.⁶⁹

The assertion, “There could be nothing more,” is the counterpart of Aristotle’s requirement of unity that there could be nothing less. The peregrine fills up the whole screen, the whole watcher—and the book, as its desire is for the peregrine to exist, exists in order to restore the depleted whole of the peregrine’s survival.

⁶⁸ As Mark Payne has reminded me, Aristotle’s notion of an organic poetic unity may have actually developed out of or alongside his zoological thinking, particularly when it comes to the relation between scale and unity. Thus, as David Gallop writes of the kind of completeness Aristotle envisions for tragedy, “the action represented by the play must possess the wholeness of a full-grown animal.” (Gallop, “Animals in the *Poetics*,” 153) The important point for me in connecting Baker’s notion of unity with Aristotle’s is that he conceives of the liberties he takes (compressing ten winters into one, for instance) as still in some sense “organic,” that is, not a distortion but a transposal onto a smaller scale, a distillation.

⁶⁹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 102.

Consider now the concern for “facts” Baker voices, which stands in natural tension with the commitment to unity, insofar as facts have no responsibility to justify themselves as part of a unity. His facts do not have the quantifiable nature and evidentiary status of Darwin’s criticism of Wallace’s *Narrative of Travels* (“hardly facts enough”), but they seem to signal for him some promise of fidelity to experience, of not making things up. “The emotions and behaviour of the watcher are also facts,” he asserts, suggesting that facts have implicit value, and implicitly referring to and rejecting their reputation as exclusively objective phenomena. Subjective phenomena, he counters, are “also” facts; implying that the qualities we associate with facts, whatever they may be—hardness, incontrovertibility, the necessity of contending with them if we are to understand a world of which they are the unignorable part—these qualities belong as rightfully to subjective as they do to objective phenomena.⁷⁰

But for Baker, this claim is also significant as it arises in distinguishing his hybrid of lyrical prose and a naturalist’s daily observation. Baker does some of the things a field naturalist does—he spends many hours attending to living things in their environment, and makes notes on them. But the kinds of notes he makes, as we shall see in some of his diary entries, do not make possible any kind of systematic study; each sighting is an occasion involving himself as the “watcher” in an experience of another living thing. Some scientists individualize their living objects of study, giving names, for instance, to certain individual chimpanzees, or elephants, or ravens. Baker does not distinguish individuals in this way, but rather considers each encounter with another life as unprecedented. He calls his first book *The Peregrine*, with its singular definite article, and writes, “For

⁷⁰ The inclusion of subjectivity in natural history dates at least back to Alexander von Humboldt, who developed within his work a robust theory of relationship between human subjects and the natural world: “in the innermost receptive mind, the physical world is reflected, living and true. That which designates the character of a landscape—the profile of the mountains that border the horizon in the hazy distance, the darkness of the fir forests, the roaring forest river that plummets between overhanging cliffs—all of it stands in an ancient and mysterious association with the disposition of the human temperament.” (von Humboldt, *Views of Nature*, 117)

ten years I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it”—*the, it*. Having read the book through multiple times one still does not sense that this singularity refers either to a single bird or expands so generally as to encompass the entire species.

He reminds us in the second short introductory section of the book, called “Peregrines” (indefinite plural), that “Everything about peregrines varies: colour, size, weight, personality, style: everything.”⁷¹ In practice he observes an indeterminate number of individuals over the course of ten winters. He is, however, very exact as to the number of “peregrine kills” he found during that time: 619.⁷² Each “kill” has been an event, and marks an individual, but not an individual predator; rather the life of an individual prey animal has ended. Indeed the dead are easier to count, and easier to account for, than the living. Hence the necessity of specimens for systematic study. After Baker promises to “make plain the bloodiness of killing,” he expresses the contradiction that “It is so easy to love the dead.”⁷³ The entire book could be taken as a lesson in loving the living; they remain in some sense uncountable, and unaccountable. The book alternates quite fluidly between particular and general peregrine, never allowing us to feel, because Baker never seems to have felt, complete familiarity with any individual peregrine; and yet never allowing us to think of them as a general type with predictable characteristics, never forgetting the unprecedented force of life he witnesses in each encounter with a peregrine. He loves the species and the individual, and both levels of existence seem to demand his attention, since what he witnesses are individual creatures, and yet the distance they keep prevents him from knowing the personalities of individuals. No peregrine he describes in the book is a specimen. Which also means that no peregrine he describes in the book can stabilize our sense of the species, or provide us with a foundation upon which to build knowledge about it.

⁷¹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 33.

⁷² Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 40.

⁷³ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 31.

The “facts” of Baker’s “emotions and behaviour” as watcher are similarly facts that come from a watcher in motion who does not objectify, not a watcher-specimen. Like each peregrine he watches, he is strangely representative of his kind, humanity (in that he suffers a tormented conscience on behalf of his entire species), and an unmistakably singular, embodied man. Hovering between universal and particular, he tends to search restlessly for comparison—his emotional state transmitted not directly (not by saying “I was enraptured as I watched the peregrine”) but through his ecstatic lyrical prose. His intuition that birds “know suffering and joy in simple states not possible for us” does not stop him from trying to attune himself to those impossible states.⁷⁴ He returns to this suggestion of a disparity between the peregrine’s own possibilities of experience and our own (ever implying ours as impoverished by comparison), as he suggests, “The peregrine sees and remembers patterns we do not know exist.” He is less sure how to characterize the bird’s experience of that seeing and remembering:

He finds his way across the land by a succession of remembered symmetries. But what does he understand? Does he really ‘know’ that the object that increases in size is moving towards him? Or is it that he believes in the size he sees, so that a distant man is too small to be frightening but a man near is a man huge and therefore terrifying? He may live in a world of endless pulsations, of objects forever contracting or dilating in size.⁷⁵

Searching and inquiring, he enters into the subjunctive mood. He is indicative about what the peregrine “sees” and “remembers” and “finds,” but subjunctive about the world in which he lives. There is something of a paradox even in the initial suggestion, for if “we do not know” these patterns exist, how can he assert (as though he knows) that the peregrine sees and remembers them? These assertions, questions and speculations occupy a restless range of speaking postures, as Baker searches for a fit mode of expression for the peregrine, but also for his own desire to enter into its way of seeing, remembering, and living in its world. His painful sense of distance, possibly reducible

⁷⁴ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 28.

⁷⁵ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 46.

but ineradicable, between himself and the bird, which structures the book, also reveals its necessity in this passage, as a coordinate of fear. At a distance he (Baker, man) is small and unthreatening, but the closer he gets the larger he looms until he becomes an object of terror. He cannot both exist as he is and enter into the peregrine's presence.

Baker's Expansion (The Hill of Summer)

The seasonal settings of *The Peregrine* (winter) and *The Hill of Summer* (naturally, summer) condense observations from many years into a single year—a year that never was, but that exists to create a formal compression, to present the material not as he experienced it in time, but as a kind of ideal. Perhaps the less enthusiastic reception of *The Hill of Summer* arises from dissatisfaction with the diffusion of unity. The unifying presence of the peregrine itself, the sense of quest, of telos, organizes the first book. By contrast the second book, coincidentally much closer to the structure of the *Natural History of Selborne*, follows a place more than it follows any single species. As Hetty Saunders tells it,

Ultimately Baker's second book suffered in comparison to *The Peregrine*. He had written it with more speed but without the same sense of purposeful anger that had driven him before. One reviewer complained that the book's cast was too large, there was too little action, and it lacked the crucial concentration of Baker's first work.⁷⁶

More surprising is the summary that while some appreciated "his lyricism," "many others considered it as 'too literary, too poetical.'"⁷⁷

If anything, I would suggest the second book is less obviously literary, less shaped and more open to contingency, than the first. Its field of comparison and register of language are no more (indeed, could hardly be more) fantastic than that of *The Peregrine*. He does take the title from a poem

⁷⁶ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 123-4.

⁷⁷ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 124.

by A.E. Housman (a far more restrained lyricist than he). Baker was devastated by the second book's reception, and began to obsess over its shortcomings, but also apparently to mine it for what might be salvaged. "Poetry," he wrote next to some passages, and "Possible Poetry" on the title page, but whatever his ambitions, he never did make anything else out of it, so we can only speculate.

Alongside such constructive notes-to-self, he berated himself, "vigorously chastising his own writing: 'Poor', he scrawled in the margins, 'Very Poor', 'Rubbish'. It was a disappointment that was hard to recover from."⁷⁸ In my own perusal of these proofs, I even found "Bad stuff, factitious" and "Bad, made-up stuff."⁷⁹ Perhaps he believed he had gotten carried away, falsified what he perceived, indulged in lyrical flourishes that departed from rather than attended to the natural world.

But perhaps those comments also reflect an ambivalence about the very indecency, the shame and the nerve of writing, when the world of living things to which he has brought his attention remain separate from writing. As he narrates over and over, in order to be tolerated in the presence of the creatures he loves, he must commit himself entirely: "Let your shape grow in size but do not alter its outline. Never hide yourself unless concealment is complete. Be alone. Shun the furtive oddity of man, cringe from the hostile eyes of farms."⁸⁰ He is writing specifically about peregrines then, but the imperative (less 'advice' to his readers, I take it, than a performance of his own self-discipline) could be adapted to each form of life. If, as he writes, "the hunter must become the thing he hunts" (which by now might ring as a cliché), there is a self-transformation required of

⁷⁸ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 124. I have examined the proofs myself, along with the maps and other Baker ephemera in the Baker archives at Albert Sloman Library of the University of Essex. It is something of a pilgrimage for Baker fans to visit this archive. Nature writers Mark Cocker and Robert Macfarlane have written about what it was like to be there, handle those binoculars, see the handwriting, try to square the old photographs of this doughy-looking fellow with the daimon responsible for his electrifying writings. Some of this has to do with the mystery in which his biography was shrouded for some time, a mystery about which some fans are still fetishistic, even since Saunders published her biography in 2017. But that biography also reinforces the reverence for the objects of the archive, by including some 67 pages of high-quality photographs sampling its contents. There is also a short essay by the environmentalist John Fanshawe, "Into the Archive," introducing the photographs.

⁷⁹ Pp43 and 44 of the proof, H3.3 in the Baker archive.

⁸⁰ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 30.

the observer, each time he seeks an encounter with other life. There is no inoculation against the betrayal that writing makes possible. The shame Baker inhabits is brought on especially by the shattered illusion that his own writing could get closer to the living objects of his attention than they allowed him to come in person. He returns to his writing to find the animals have flown, and that only the words remain, hollow.

Whatever he felt in the wake of the “flop” that was *The Hill of Summer*, I raise a dissenting voice in appreciation of the way it progresses from *The Peregrine*, and opens up the field of attention. In allowing the variety and multiplicity of life to guide his writing about the place he regularly observes, he relinquishes the shape that a single organizing creature gives the whole work. While there was nothing contingent about the peregrine—which feels inexorably chosen, and takes on the status of the beloved in a tale of courtly love—the unfolding of summer in a place is open to digression. While *The Peregrine* feels as though it is drawn irresistibly to its telos, *The Hill of Summer* has relaxed its formal grip, dwelling with a multiplicity of proportions and paces of life, with which the former book could only linger while waiting for the peregrine to return.⁸¹

The cult status of *The Peregrine* has tended to eclipse the subtler achievement of this second book. Yet it also marks an expansion, an opening made possible by the working out of the first book. In the final lines of *The Peregrine*, Baker reached a resonant equilibrium:

Screened by the low green bank of the wall, I stumble along on my hands and knees towards the place where I think the hawk will be, hoping he will stay there till I come. The short grass is dry and brittle and sweet-smelling. It is spring grass, clean and sharp as salt water. I bury my face in it, breathe in it, breathe in the spring. A snipe flies up, and a golden plover. I lie still till they have gone. Then I move forward again, very softly, because the hawk is listening. [...] I have to guess where I am in relation to the hawk. Three more yards, and I decide to take a chance. Very slowly I straighten up and look over the top of the wall. I am

⁸¹ In more recent literature, there is a further exploration of the possibilities that come from such attention *while* waiting for a specific bird to appear: James Macdonald Lockhart’s *Raptor: A Journey Through Birds* (2016) organizes each chapter around the pursuit of a specific bird of prey, but spends much of its time attending to what happens and appears while searching and waiting, or even attending to the non-appearance of the sought-for bird.

lucky. The hawk is only five yards away. He sees me at once. He does not fly, but his feet grip tightly on the thorny twigs of the bush, the ridged knuckles tense, and big with muscle. His wings loosen, and tremble at the edge of flight. I keep still, hoping he will relax, and accept my predatory shape that bulks against the sky. The long feathers of his breast are rippled by the wind. I cannot see his colour. In the falling gloom he looks much larger than he really is. The noble head lowers, but lifts again at once. Swiftly now he is resigning his savagery to the night that rises round us like dark water. The great eyes look into mine. When I move my arm before his face, they still look on, as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away. The last light flakes and crumbles down. Distance moves through the dim lines of the inland elms, and comes closer, and gathers behind the darkness of the hawk. I know he will not fly now. I climb over the wall and stand before him. And he sleeps.⁸²

In the movement from “The great eyes look into mine” to “they still look on, as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away,” Baker finds himself seen and seen-through. In this moment, Baker’s “stumbling” after the peregrine throughout the book comes to a pause. The distance is at first marked, measured, “three more yards,” and “only five yards away.” The final distance covered is not measured—climbing over the wall into an intimate space, a shared space that resists measurement, distance is no longer the thing. No longer measurable, distance “gathers” into a figure: “Distance moves through the dim lines of the inland elms, and comes closer, and gathers behind the darkness of the hawk.” The “flake” and “crumble” of the light coincides with a crumbling of his own being in the gaze of the hawk. Distance, for the moment, is behind the hawk rather than between man and hawk, and they are in the same space because the hawk has “accepted” his form, only as he is rendered transparent.

Where do you go, from that place at the limit of intimacy, the maximum possible closeness between this man and a wild falcon? In a way, *The Peregrine* tracked a demanding, all-too-human observer, who appealed to the bird as though it could absolve him, and then turning on himself, attacked the very creature in himself that dared ask for an audience.

⁸² Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 168-9.

The attention narrated in the later book certainly bears the signature of the same watcher with the same lyrical voice, but the obsessive drive in pursuit of a single kind of creature has subsided. For some this makes for a less satisfying narrative. Certainly it asks of its readers a different quality of attention, a relinquishment of foreknowledge about the objects of desire and about where significance will accumulate. Significantly, the vegetal world makes its way into this book as more than background or framing landscape, and once more the “edge of vision” registers the objects of attention:

Where three roads meet, there is a small grove of slender larches and Scots pine. [...] Within the grove there is always a smell of sun-warmed resin, whether or not the sun is shining. The spirit of this place is elusive, it escapes into the surrounding air. Yet something breathes upon the edge of vision, like rain beginning. It touches the senses lightly, then departs. At a distance the grove seems to have entity, the self-possession of a single tree. But go in, and at once the wholeness leaps apart, fragmenting into more than individual trees. In spring, the grove smells of summer; in summer it smells of other summers, of the past. It is always beyond the present heat.⁸³

The compression of “memories of many years” into one summer appears now not only formally motivated but suggested by a perceptual experience, the experience of time. The grove lives by a different rhythm, on a different scale of time; the counterpart of the birds whose lives he notes at the beginning of *The Peregrine* “quicken and warm to a pulse our hearts can never reach.”⁸⁴ This is also a moment in which Baker relinquishes the sense of unity he had strived to “preserve” in *The Peregrine*, striving instead to accommodate a mode of existence that defies unity.

⁸³ Baker, *Complete Works (Hill of Summer)*, 193. This passage prompts an unexpected comparison between Baker’s way of writing his attention the vegetal world and that of Philippe Jaccottet, particularly in the attention to its elusiveness, its shifting ‘entity’ for the human senses. Also like Jaccottet, Baker is preoccupied with the medium of vision itself, with light and its changes—hence the preponderance I note a bit further down of light-effects (glimmering, shining and so on). There is a disturbance, a tendency towards excess and overheating in Baker that contrasts starkly with Jaccottet’s modesty and reserve. Baker seems to have a tic or a compulsion for these luminous adjectives, which can lay his writing open to the criticism of being ‘overwrought.’ But I am suggesting that the excess and lack of control in Baker has its own fidelity, an obsessive noticing that bears witness to the diverse particularity of present life, while registering the constant underlying threat to life associated with the human omnipresence he marks by largely erasing it.

⁸⁴ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 28.

Simultaneity is the mode of this book, in which everywhere “the wholeness leaps apart.” The final passage is characteristic, giving a series of declarative statements:

The hill reposes in a stratum of deep silence. The light of the sea beats in with a brightness of pale wings. The poplars are still. The smooth leaves of the silverweed glisten. Tall spear thistles stand in the hay-light of the fields, towering like desert cacti above their diminishing shadows. A weasel’s dark eyes glitter in the hedge, like small elderberries. The rose-hips have a fading sunset glow. The striped face of a badger shines in the path to the wood, then vanishes. [...]

The darkness is returning from the sea to the mysterious, unloved lands of the east and the wood has a waiting look. I step softly through the reeds of silence. A fox glides past, a febrile warmth in the cold flow of the field. The wings of a mallard fret among the stars. Bats flutter their dumb language above the dark trees. A partridge calls. The slow dusk of the farm moves in the respiration of the sea. A curlew’s voice curves up into the night. The cowled hayricks glimmer, and grow large. The ferny darkness has a feral breath, but the visionary white owl shines again in the fronds of the air.⁸⁵

A strange ending, maybe not perfect, somehow indiscriminate and possibly clotted with too much glittering, glowing, glimmering and shining. I have left out, too, a bit at the end of the penultimate paragraph that renders the scene more abstract, in wistful terms involving a “misty plain,” a “distant sky.” But there is something in the sheer relentless gathering that wins me over. The drift towards overflow, present throughout the book, is allowed to avalanche in this final passage. Baker has given up the “purposeful anger,” at least as fueled by the plight of a single species, that winnowed and structured *The Peregrine*, and now lets in all who populate that “stratum of deep silence.” The anger at human despoliation has not gone, but it expands and simultaneously lightens as he senses how much sheer life, how many particular and various lives are still going on, and how all of this life surrounds him—the excess of his prose responds almost impulsively to the dearth that humans have wrought in nature. Abundant noticing becomes his answer to the outrage of the human threat to natural abundance. Along with many such ensemble passages, here is a list of living things catalogued in my private index of *The Hill of Summer*: Yellow wagtail, Kingfisher, Sand-martins, Swallows, Corn-

⁸⁵ Baker, *Complete Works (Hill of Summer)*, 274-5.

bunting, Tern, Grasshopper warbler, Shrikes, Spotted flycatcher, Wood sandpiper, Snipe, Green sandpiper, Black-cap, Bullfinches, Lesser whitethroat, Tree pipit, Redstart, Hawfinches, Garden and Willow warblers, Nightingale, Stone-curlews, Reed-warbler, Wood lark, Nuthatch, Wren, Jay, Green woodpecker, Chiffchaff, Herons, Fulmar, Tawny owl, Barn owl, Sparrowhawk, Marsh harrier, Hobby, Kestrel, Merlin, Long-eared owl, Little owl, Adder, Fox & cubs, Badger, Rabbits, Hare, Roe deer, Mole, Vole, Pike, Dragonflies, Grass-snake, Gnats, Stoats, Horse, Pigs, Weasel, Bluebells, Pines, Horse chestnuts, Elms, Cow-parsley, Buttercups, Wild angelica, Firs, the grove of Larches and Scots pine, Beech, Oak, Holly, Hawthorns, Ash trees, Poplars, Barley, Lime-tree, Ragwort, Stinging nettles, Aspen, Sphagnum moss, and even, as though to imagine them in an alternative proportion, some human beings.

Baker's Distance: Elogy, Death, Extinction

The pleasure, sometimes furtive, of lessening distance is everywhere in Baker, though he seems to know that there is a proximity at which the bird will eventually take flight. He is sensitive to a bird's sensitivity to his presence, but seems to find it irresistible to get as close as the bird will let him. He has about him something of the shy but amorous schoolboy. Here he has spotted some waders, and narrates the process by which he approaches them:

When nearer, I crawled along—keeping in line with a tall weed, ahead, sitting up at intervals to have a look at them. When I got to the hard mud, I stood up—still the birds fed unconcernedly—and walked slowly across to them. At 6 yards, they looked a bit uneasy, preening—looking at me in that curious sideface way birds have to use, looking at each other as if enquiring something. They ran a little way into the water, and then fed again. In binoculars I had a splendid view of these two adult Dunlin—both had black tummy patches, one slightly larger than the other's. De-curved bills, beautiful mottled brown back, large eyes, big feet, were plainly seen—they were most confiding, possibly tame birds—hard to say. I got to 3 yards before they at last flew, giving their soft hoora little 'purr' call, keeping low over the water. This was a lovely experience, so close, getting a real idea of the tiny size of

Dunlin, smaller than Starlings, and a large proportion of that size, in bill-length—tiniest waders I've come across, by far.⁸⁶

This is typical Baker, narrating the whole situation of observation, alternating back and forth between what he did and what the bird did, a series of reaction shots stitched together. He seems unconcerned with the fact that he has forced these Dunlin to stop feeding and fly elsewhere, interrupting their lives. Nowadays a field guide might instruct birders to overcome such temptations. “Whether you are observing or photographing birds, it is important to avoid disturbing them whenever possible. Obey any posted rules and property boundaries, watch from a distance, and do not intentionally flush birds.”⁸⁷ Observing such “simple courtesies” promises to “allow you to enjoy their unaltered natural behavior.”⁸⁸ Birding etiquette has no doubt changed between 1959 when Baker wrote that diary entry, and 2017 when Sibley cautioned his readers to respect birds’ privacy. Yet this brings me to a tension at the heart of Baker’s character as an observer and at the heart of his writing, his tendency to intrude, one might say his rudeness, which I would suggest is inseparable from his sense of human implication in the avian lives he attends to. The ‘alterations’ of “natural behavior” with which Baker introduces *The Peregrine*—namely the poisoning effects of DDT—are on such a scale, so outrageously permeating the lives, the very worlds, of these birds, that he would likely find Sibley’s language, his sensible advice, inflected with a cruel irony.

Baker’s writing is full of death. It is important for the meaning of this dissertation not to understate or underestimate the force of this fullness. Baker’s attention to death is distinct from his attention to the risk of extinction—death is honored, as sensuous fact and sustaining law. Extinction at human hands is shameful, and the book is shot through with Baker’s shame, approaching fury, at

⁸⁶ Baker, 10 July 1959, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 400.

⁸⁷ Sibley, “Ethics” in the Introduction to *Sibley Birds East*, xv.

⁸⁸ Sibley, “Ethics” in the Introduction to *Sibley Birds East*, xv.

being human in relation to other living things. He states the elegiac purpose of the book

unmistakably at the end of its first section, an introduction of sorts (“Beginnings”):

For ten years now I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it. It was a grail to me. Now it has gone. The long pursuit is over. Few peregrines are left, there will be fewer, they may not survive. Many die on their backs, clutching insanely at the sky in their last convulsions, withered and burnt away by the filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals. Before it is too late, I have tried to recapture the extraordinary beauty of this bird and to convey the wonder of the land he lived in, a land to me as profuse and glorious as Africa. It is a dying world, like Mars, but glowing still.⁸⁹

What was Africa to Baker, and what was Mars? There is a way that these places signify an elsewhere Baker could know only in books. We could fault him for ignoring the specificity of Africa, for romanticizing and removing it from historical reality. But this would obscure the fact that he uses it as an analogy for a “world” he recognized as real to the bird, not only inhabited but also actively formed by it. He invokes it for the fact that it is physically unknowable to him, but experienced by other bodies, to which he can and does attend with all of his being. There is a trembling between absolute loss—“Now it has gone. [...] Before it is too late [...],” the past tense already deployed (“the land he lived in”)—and a soft assertion of room for survival—“[...] they may not survive. [...] but glowing still.”

While Baker’s attention to extinction reached for the unknown, and displaced, his attention to the dead was intensely woven into the land (and water), a vision of dense interconnectedness:

The low, afternoon sun shone upward to the southward flying gulls. They seemed to be almost transparent, ethereal with the flowing and holy illumination that hollowed out their slender bones and threaded their airy marrow.

Two dead herons lay in the snow together, like a pair of gaunt grey crutches; eyeless and tattered corpses, torn and shredded by many shapes of tooth and beak and claw. Otter tracks led to fish-blood and the bones of pike. A moorhen was dragged back and down under water by a pike that had lanced up at it through a hole in the ice; it tilted over and up and sank like a torpedoed ship.

I stood by a wooden barn, weighing a frozen and shrivelled white owl in my hand. I had lifted it down from a rafter as though it had been a flower-pot. It was cold and dry and

⁸⁹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 31-2.

brittle, stale and long-dead. Something hit the roof of the barn, slithered down, and fell at my feet. It was a woodpigeon. Blood welled from its eye like a red tear, and spread over its face in a horrifying lop-sided circle. The other eye stared out, impelling the bird round in the snow. It clutched with its wings, half of its brain already dead. When I lifted it up, it still kept turning, turning, like a toy train that is meaningless away from its rails. I killed it, threw it down in the snow, and walked on. The chattering, circling peregrine descended to its prey.⁹⁰

This chorus of dead creatures is punctuated by the return of the peregrine. But there is more death here, and more life, than goes into sustaining the peregrine's life, an excess. He assembles a vision of bloody community through these remains. The metaphors here are in the realm of the familiar: crutches, flower pot, toy train.

The context of coming extinction also suggests a way of reading Baker's oblique relation to the discipline of falconry. Hetty Saunders notes how Baker's use of the word "hawk" instead of falcon is "the historical term used by falconers to refer to any of the birds they use, regardless of modern zoological categories."⁹¹ Baker had a collection of falconry books, and adapted some of his methods of making himself acceptable to the peregrines he watched from those advised in falconry manuals (for instance, care and consistency with his own clothing to help the bird learn to recognize and trust him). "Surely in Baker there was something of the falconer as well as the birder," writes Saunders. "He sought a more active, intimate relationship with the peregrine than that of the merely passive birdwatcher."⁹² She suggests that the "sort of bond [he sought] is more the remit of the falconer than the birder—and it requires more of both the hawk and the woman or man."⁹³ Yet unlike narratives of falconry, like T.H. White's classic *The Goshawk*, this is not a book about mastering ("manning") the bird of prey, or learning its nature by compelling it to form a relationship

⁹⁰ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 121.

⁹¹ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 106.

⁹² Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 109.

⁹³ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 109.

with the human self.⁹⁴ Saunders also speculates that Baker may have talked to members of a “small and informal falconry group whose members flew peregrines out in the fields around the Blackwater Estuary during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as later.”⁹⁵ In his diaries, Baker writes of a “hawking party” he has witnessed, in which one person was “carrying a fine female Goshawk on his gloved fist.” He comments, somewhat contemptuously of the men (surely not of the hawk), “They seemed to be happy to make a vole run, or possibly a Moorhen fly.”⁹⁶ He never condemns outright the capture and training of birds of prey, but he registers a kind of meanness, perhaps frivolity, in the amusement of the hawking party. In his entry about this episode there is something pained, a perception of the hawk’s activity cramped by the context in which it occurs:

It was thrilling to see this great hawk over the marsh, a fine specimen, very light on the head with a broad eye-shape, long tail and noble chest and shoulders. But the flight was irritatingly low and short, and we had only very brief views of its flight. After it had doubled back, it eventually failed to kill, for it wouldn’t jump on to the fist, but ran away, quite quickly, but in a big-footed and most ludicrous manner. Its waddling was very peculiar.⁹⁷

With all his experience watching birds hunt, Baker surely knows that many hunts “fail to kill,” but there is a painful embarrassment given the context, which is that the hawk in this case is hunting in a way managed or contrived by the falconers. Likewise, Baker does not shy away from describing birds in their more awkward moments. But awkwardness on their own terms is not “irritating” to him, only natural.

⁹⁴ See, more recently in this genre, in admiring tension with T.H. White, Helen Macdonald’s sensational *H is for Hawk* (2014). Macdonald, in her confiding and personal style, introduces ambiguities into this tradition, with her departures from the masculine cast of T.H. White’s 1951 falconry narrative, *The Goshawk*. A similar relation of admiration and departure could be traced in A.L. Kennedy’s *On Bullfighting* (1999), as it attends to and stands apart from Ernest Hemingway’s masculine celebration of that tradition in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932). In both cases, the (female) pupils looking back to their (male) teachers are also relating an encounter with death that is quite personal to them—the death of Macdonald’s father, Kennedy’s vivid and frank account of her own near-suicide.

⁹⁵ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 108.

⁹⁶ Baker, 30 August 1958, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 381.

⁹⁷ Baker, 30 August 1958, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 382.

At the same time, Saunders is surely right about the kind of “bond” Baker sought with the peregrine, and that the stance of a “passive birdwatcher” would not have been enough to secure it. For one thing, the bloodlessness of birdwatching as it evolved in distinction from hunting (in the early days of birdwatching, people joked that the watchers were “shooting with opera glasses”) both does and does not fit Baker’s ethos.⁹⁸ He did not kill what was not already dying, and yet it is his stated intention to “make plain the bloodiness of killing.”⁹⁹ The stakes of birdwatching for him were life-and-death, not as they are for the hunter, but in the relentless awareness of how birdlife was at every moment, from every side, threatened by human life.

Ursula Heise writes in her study of genres as they operate in modern writing about extinction, “Stories about species that have already gone extinct or may soon disappear frequently rely on the politically mobilizing power of mourning and melancholy. More indirectly, they also rely on some aspects of tragedy, in that not just any species can become the object of such nostalgia. This explains in part the focus on charismatic megafauna [...]”¹⁰⁰ But the resistance to forgetting has also the power to still, which balances that “mobilizing power.” To register fully what will be lost from the world if the endangered animal passes into extinction is for Baker a turning of his entire being towards the threatened form of life.

Jahan Ramazani has documented how “poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and skepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before.”¹⁰¹ In particular, modern elegists reject “the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation.”¹⁰² They

⁹⁸ See the account in Dunlap, *In the Field*, 13-35. I give more attention this history of birdwatching in the Coda.

⁹⁹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1.

¹⁰² Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 3.

are like the Freudian ‘melancholic’ in their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and self-criticism, even as they ‘mourn’ specific deaths, not the vague or unconscious losses of melancholia. Unlike their literary forbears or the ‘normal mourner’ of psychoanalysis, they attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself.¹⁰³

If Baker is such a “melancholic” elegist, it was his power to layer the compensatory, even revelatory mourning of life-sustaining deaths with the inconsolable excess of extinction. As David Farrier puts it, “Death on such a massive scale is a rupturing of the gift relation; Baker’s cultish fascination with the bird of prey as harbinger of death must therefore be read in light of the wider context of incipient extinction, a culture of death (or a cultural acceptance of animal death he cannot condone) the scale of which robs death of the possibilities of the gift.”¹⁰⁴ He must literally, in Ramazani’s terms, deny the “rebirth of the dead in nature,” since the issue at hand is the foreclosure of that very possibility. If the extinction is “incipient” (and indeed, the peregrine falcon as a species has recovered, for the time being), perhaps there is something premature about the elegiac mode. With this intuition, Timothy Morton writes, “In ecological elegy, something strange happens to elegy’s usual organization of time. Ecological elegy asks us to mourn for something that has not completely passed [...] [and] weeps for that which *will have passed* given a continuation of the current state of affairs. The future perfect hollows out time.”¹⁰⁵ For Morton as for Heise, this prematurity is a liability, because for all the “mobilizing” power that mourning can have, it can also concede a loss that has not yet taken place, no more inevitable than other deaths, preventing elegists and their readers from attending to the life that still lingers and matters. “A radical loss is too hastily mourned.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, when put that way, it is hard to account for the prematurity of elegies for endangered species. Morton differentiates between the mournful and the melancholic energies of

¹⁰³ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Farrier, “J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*,” 747.

¹⁰⁵ Morton, “Dark Ecology of Elegy,” 254.

¹⁰⁶ Morton, “Dark Ecology of Elegy,” 255.

elegy, and recovers in the latter a greater ethical possibility, because it remains with the subject that is being lost, rather than attempting to move beyond it. Though he suggests that “ecological poetry must [...] transcend the elegiac mode,” the kind of elegy Ramazani identifies as distinctly “modern” is distinctly melancholic, and does indeed “stick in the throat,” as Morton urges it must. Morton suggests also that *distance* from nature is part of the problem with the structure of traditional elegy, the sense that it is “yonder,” which allows the elegist to hold herself apart from the environment she mourns. But distance as Baker engages with it also poses the opposite sort of problem—there is a distance that the *other* life asserts, wanting nothing to do with the human being either through fear or indifference.

White's Distances

After the melancholy of Baker, White sounds positively jubilant. Yet his awareness of the distance claimed by certain creatures was not without its own ache. As Alan Bewell shrewdly notes, “Because [White] values the animals that he knows best, and he knows best the ones that he can observe on a daily basis, his writing inevitably gives primacy to those creatures that have adapted themselves to living with human beings.”¹⁰⁷ But if Bewell is also right that White seemed a bit out of his element when writing about wilder and shyer animals, what strikes me is that White adjusted himself and his writing to the life held at a distance from him. He was less comfortable, yes, but fully present in his discomfort. Affection certainly enlarged his attention, but as Bewell says, “In contrast to his usually confident observation, this letter [on the sand-martin] is filled with gaps and uncertainties.”¹⁰⁸ Yes, and he dwelt with the gaps and uncertainties, just as in disproving another naturalist’s theory about the vexingly unmotherly behavior of the cuckoo, he maintained that “we

¹⁰⁷ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 174.

¹⁰⁸ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 175.

are still at a loss for the cause of that strange and singular peculiarity in the instance of the *cuculus canorus*.¹⁰⁹ He was undeniably partial to the animals that endear themselves to human society (and morals), but the way he attends to those that do not is equally instructive. I will take up the sand-martin, since it is Bewell's example too. After noting these martins' diminutive size, White writes,

[...] it is much to be regretted that it is scarce possible for any observer to be so full and exact as he could wish in reciting the circumstances attending the life and conversation of this little bird, since it is *fera naturá* [a wild creature], at least in this part of the kingdom, disclaiming all domestic attachments, and haunting wild heaths and commons where there are large lakes: while the other species, especially the swallow and house-martin, are remarkably gentle and domesticated, and never seem to think themselves safe but under the protection of man.¹¹⁰

He seems almost to denigrate their nest-building skills in comparison with the other hirundines, yet he recognizes that their nests appear to be just as effective for the purpose:¹¹¹

[...] the bank-martin terebrates a round and regular hole in the sand or earth, which is serpentine, horizontal, and about two feet deep. At the inner end of this burrow does this bird deposit, in a good degree of safety, her rude nest, consisting of fine grasses and feathers, usually goose-feathers, very inartificially laid together.¹¹²

From this architectural description he proceeds to marvel at how it is accomplished:

Perseverance will accomplish any thing: though at first one would be disinclined to believe that this weak bird, with her soft and tender bill and claws, should ever be able to bore the stubborn sand-bank without entirely disabling herself: yet with these feeble instruments have I seen a pair of them make great dispatch: and could remark how much they had scooped that day by the fresh sand which ran down the bank, and was of a different colour from that which lay loose and bleached in the sun.¹¹³

Of course it could be remarked that here he merely finds in the sand-martin, otherwise inferior to its sister species, a redeeming quality (industriousness) that makes its life more legible in (British) human terms. He is happier to report what he can observe than what remains hidden, and perhaps

¹⁰⁹ White, Letter 30 to DB, 3 April 1776, *Selborne*, 168.

¹¹⁰ White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 143.

¹¹¹ In this, White's attention to the sand-martins resembles Darwin's pained attention to the Fuegians, whose appearance, circumstances and ways of life he finds unaccountable, which does not prevent him from admitting that they must have their share of "happiness," however illegible to him. There is a concession made to the life that cannot quite be affectively embraced by the observer, and yet that has its own claims on the shared world.

¹¹² White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 143-4.

¹¹³ White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 144.

he ‘domesticates’ the sand-martin somewhat with his approval. Yet the quality of his attention to signs of the bird’s presence and activity, with which he makes do in the absence of the bird itself, reveals him in the abiding patience that tempers his curiosity. He “could remark how much they had scooped that day by the fresh sand which ran down the bank, and was of a different colour from that which lay loose and bleached in the sun.” This bit of noticing has something in it of the secret admirer, who loves the lingering proof of a departed presence.

He goes on to reassert his uncertainty, “In what space of time these little artists are able to mine and finish these cavities I have never been able to discover, for reasons given above.”¹¹⁴ He also owns that “whether the dams ever feed [their young] on the wing, as swallows and house-martins do, we have never yet been able to determine; nor do we know whether they pursue and attack birds of prey.”¹¹⁵ As to White’s assertion that the sand-martin is “rather mute,” Bewell notes, “He seems not to question whether these birds, whose vocal skills are hardly less developed than other hirundines, seem mute because they do not converse, or because he has not been able to observe them in situations where he might have heard their conversation.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, White’s only indication of the sound they do make is prompted by his own (or a fellow human’s) intrusion into their space: “making only a little harsh noise when a person approaches their nests.”¹¹⁷ Bewell is surely right to observe how significant this limitation would have been for White, who took such “great pleasure in using the language and manners of an animal to register its inner life.”¹¹⁸ The general tone of the letter on sand-martins does indeed reveal White out of his element, because this bird’s life is lived at a remove from him, and beyond the domestic sphere into which he welcomes

¹¹⁴ White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 144.

¹¹⁵ White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 145.

¹¹⁶ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 175.

¹¹⁷ White, Letter 20 to DB, 26 February 1774, *Selborne*, 145.

¹¹⁸ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 175.

virtually all comers so warmly (even invasive cockroaches!).¹¹⁹ Yet I take it as an indication of a capacity not commonly appreciated in White, rather than (or as well as) a liability, if “This is one of those rare instances in the text when White does not portray a species of bird as being part of *his* world, but instead portrays himself as an intruder in *its* world.”¹²⁰ Despite the sweetness of temper, unselfconscious and affectionate enthusiasm, that have endeared White to so many readers, equally compelling to readers today might be the capacity for doubt and even sadness when faced with the withdrawal or withholding of presence. Migration, wildness and shyness elicited this capacity from him, but so did the disruption of his own senses. It was a blow to him when he began to suffer from hearing loss, not only for the inconvenience but because listening is what held him in relation with the lives and conversations he never tired of witnessing—“Frequent returns of deafness incommode me sadly, and half disqualify me as a naturalist; for, when those fits are upon me, I lose all the pleasing little notices and little intimations arising from rural sounds; and May is to me as silent and mute with respect to the notes of birds, &c. as August.”¹²¹ Mabey notes that he soon had to use an ear-trumpet to hear those “little notices and little intimations,” a sensory prosthetic that must have underscored for him the limitation he had always accepted as built into his life as a naturalist, of relying on freely given signals of presence; he could not force a confidence.¹²²

As I have mentioned, death itself did not seem to fascinate or pose any particular problem for White, except that he felt more keenly than his contemporaries that animal deaths at human hands could be cruel; he took an interest in dead animals insofar as they could help him to

¹¹⁹ As Bewell documents in the brilliant chapter from which I’ve been quoting, “Gilbert White and the Black-Bobs of Selborne,” White had occasion to attend to these new immigrants in his kitchen, where they mingled with the native house-crickets. “After the servants have gone to bed, the kitchen-hearth swarms with young *crickets*, & young *Blattae molendinariae* of all sizes from the most minute growth to their full proportions. They seem [*sic*] to live in a friendly manner together, & not prey the one on the other.” (White, 7 October 1790, *Journals*, 370)

¹²⁰ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 175.

¹²¹ White, Letter 22 to DB, 13 September 1774, *Selborne*, 154.

¹²² Mabey, *Gilbert White*, 142.

understand how creatures lived, conversed, reproduced, nourished themselves and their young. “Swifts, when wantonly and cruelly shot while they have young, discover a little lump of insects in their mouths, which they pouch and hold under their tongue.”¹²³ Baker’s bloodiness, about which he warns his readers at the start of *The Peregrine*, has struck some readers, even appreciative ones, as unaccountable excess. Helen Macdonald phrases it as a contradiction: “Baker loathed brutality and suffering but rejoiced freely in the gory death-dealing of his falcons.” Robert Macfarlane describes balking, on his own examination of the ephemera in the Baker archives at the University of Essex,

Pocking the maps, too, were hundreds of inked circles, each containing a capital letter or pair of letters: LO, M, K.

It took me longer than it should have done to realize that each of the circles recorded a raptor sighting. P = peregrine. SH = sparrowhawk. M = merlin. LO = little owl. BO = barn owl. HH = hen harrier. K = kestrel. Only raptors – birds that hunt and feed on other animals – were recorded in this way by Baker. Our word *raptor* comes from the Latin *rapere*, meaning ‘to seize or take by force’. I felt a sudden surge of unease at seeing Baker’s obsession with raptors recorded in this way: as if I had stumbled into the room of someone fixated on serial killers, note-boards and walls papered with yellowing news-clippings of past crimes . . .¹²⁴

Macfarlane’s temperament is perhaps closer to White’s than to Baker’s, though Baker is clearly his chosen predecessor. As Farrier comments, “Macfarlane is far too humane a writer, too committed to the lived history of the landscapes, to adopt Baker’s scornful misanthropy.”¹²⁵ In this case, Macfarlane’s uneasiness with Baker’s “fixation” on raptors speaks to his own gentleness, and perhaps he overstates not the bloodiness but the prurience of Baker’s vision. He sees in *The Peregrine* the genre of “a detective story: there is the same procedural care, the gathering of clues as to the nature of the killer, the bagging of evidence, and the following of hunches when evidence falls short and deduction will not suffice. As with so many crime dramas, the killer comes to fascinate the

¹²³ White, Letter 21 to DB, 28 September 1774, *Selborne*, 148.

¹²⁴ Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 150.

¹²⁵ Farrier, “J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*,” 750.

pursuer.”¹²⁶ But in the context of Baker’s fury about human rather than avian rapaciousness, it is possible that these raptors obsessed him because of the way they struck their prey *without* ever committing a crime, that they knew necessity, and killed, like Baudelaire’s butcher, “sans colère / Et sans haine.”¹²⁷ From the beginning he insists upon not “sentimentalising” the song of a bird, never “forgetting the killing that sustains it.” And indeed this is part of what makes his attention work against the consoling nostalgia of which nature writing can sometimes be fairly accused.

On the other side, if as Macfarlane feels, Baker’s accounts of peregrine kills can be unnervingly rhapsodic, it is in the attention to an act that “sustains,” rather than any lurid serial-killer excess of pleasure in harm—which does not preclude the possibility that the sustaining kill has its own kind of excess. Baker attends to prey animals with as much immediacy as he attends to predators. Here is a passage almost unbelievable, just as the 619 peregrine kills have been hard for some readers to believe:

At the side of the lane to the ford, I found a long-tailed field mouse feeding on a slope of grass. He was eating the grass seeds, holding the blades securely between his skinny white paws. So small, blown over by the breath of passing cars, felted with a soft moss of green-brown fur; yet his back was hard and solid to the touch. His long, delicate ears were like hands unfolding; his huge, night-seeing eyes were opaque and dark. He was unaware of my touch, of my face a foot above him, as he bent the tree-top grasses down to this nibbling teeth. I was like a galaxy to him, too big to be seen. I could have picked him up, but it seemed wrong to separate him now from the surface he would never leave until he died. I gave him an acorn. He carried it up the slope in his mouth, stopped, and turned it round against his teeth, flicked it round with his hands, like a potter spinning. His life is eating to live, to catch up, to keep up; never getting ahead, moving always in the narrow way between a death and a death; between stoats and weasels, foxes and owls, by night; between cars and kestrels and herons by day.¹²⁸

As any nature-watcher will attest, it is rare enough to glimpse such a tiny, furtive animal used to keeping out of sight, even harder to credit that it would allow Baker so close, harder still that it

¹²⁶ Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 150.

¹²⁷ Baudelaire, “L’héautontimorouménos,” lines 1-2, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 110. [without anger / And without hate]

¹²⁸ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 52.

would not notice being touched by him. But like many other readers I feel compelled to suspend this incredulity, not out of any special reverence for Baker as a performer of miracles, but in the awareness that unaccountable things may happen, and that what he dramatizes is an encounter with his own non-existence for this tiny being. “I was like a galaxy to him, too big to be seen” turns the power dynamics of size inside-out, for he is disarmed rather than emboldened by his invisibility to the mouse. What could be read as self-congratulation, for not having picked up the mouse when he had power to, for bestowing the gift of the acorn, seems immaterial, since he exercises this restraint and this giving from the position and experience of his own irrelevance. What he notices next is one of the mouse’s ecological counterparts:

For two hours, a heron stood at the side of a field, by the hedge, facing the furrowed stubble. He was hunched, slumped, and drooping, on the long stilts of his legs. He shammed dead. His bill moved only once. He was waiting for mice to come and be killed. None came.¹²⁹

Suspended between prey and predator, in the space where they just miss each other, Baker situates himself. He attunes himself to the meaning of each for the other—what the heron and the mouse mean for each other. The clarity of hunger is a great equalizer, and yet as he recognizes, the meaning of hunger in a life is not always equal, neither in its urgency nor in the risk that attaches to its fulfillment.

Comparison, Excess and Accuracy

Though White was careful not to make spurious analogies, when he does analogize and make metaphors, the precision of his comparison can be both delightful and arresting—as much so as in any poet or novelist. Since his sensibility warns him off of indulgent or unjustified comparison, the comparisons he does make tend to stay close to the object of attention. His comparisons are

¹²⁹ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 52.

“precise” in the sense that when he observes something that is beyond his understanding, he carefully attends to what is there and tentatively frames it in terms that are familiar to him. He kept to what he knew, following the contours of the mysterious or unfamiliar object.

White’s knack for metaphor as a precision tool coincided with his sense that other animals had ‘prosaic’ lives to match our own. Rather than exploiting metaphor’s license to invoke the faraway or distant, he implies that though the strange and unfamiliar creature may be wonderful to us, it is as used to itself as we are to ourselves. To see them rightly we ought not to gawk and gape and exaggerate but rather to keep a level gaze. This ethic of judicious comparison is on display in the following journal entry after he has quoted from Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Act II, scene i (“there the Snake throws her enamel’d skin.”)¹³⁰:

About the middle of this month [September] we found in a field near a hedge the slough of a large snake, which seemed to have been newly cast. From circumstances *it appeared as if turned wrong side outward, & as drawn off backward, like a stocking, or woman’s glove*. Not only the whole skin, but scales from the very eyes are peeled off, & appear in the head of the slough like a pair of spectacles. The reptile, at the time of changing his coat, had intangled himself intricately in the grass & weeds, so that the friction of the stalks & blades might promote this curious shifting of his exuvia. [...] It would be a most entertaining sight could a person be an eye-witness to such a feat, & see the snake in the act of changing its garment. As the convexity of the scales of the eyes in the slough are now inward, that circumstance alone is a proof that the skin has been turned: not to mention that now the present inside is much darker, than the outer. *If you look through the scales of the snake’s eyes from the concave side, viz.: as the*

¹³⁰ As was then conventional in natural history, there are literary quotations throughout White’s journals as well as in *The Natural History of Selborne*. A source in Shakespearean comedy supports a genre association with White as comic, but one of the authors he draws upon most frequently is Milton. As Stuart Peterfreund argues persuasively, White suppressed any mention of some catastrophically hot summers and cold winters throughout many of his letters (though he gets to them in the end). “White’s repression arose from the fact that, as much as he would have liked it, he did not have the luxury [...] of seeing the world as unchanged and unchanging. His may have been ‘the journal of Adam in Paradise,’ but White’s *Selborne* at once represses and recognizes the fact that any re-creation of Eden entails re-creating both the conditions that occasion humanity’s loss of innocence and the consequent expulsion from Paradise. This preoccupation is evident from White’s choice of English precursor texts to provide literary counterpoint and ornament throughout his text—he repeatedly cites Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as well as other texts by Milton.” (Peterfreund, “Great Frosts,” 90) Peterfreund also elucidates White’s awareness of global upheavals and revolutions, despite his regional idyllic preoccupations, his ethos of focusing on a local environment. “[...] even at the beginning of 1768, an aura of apocalyptic political presentiment pervaded relations between England and its American colonies.” (Peterfreund, “Great Frosts,” 94) In tracing White’s notation of disturbance and global change throughout his writings, he challenges the notion of White’s serenity, and suggests that especially by end of his life and letters, White registered the instability of the natural world even within his ‘Paradise.’

*reptile used them, they lessen objects much. Thus it appears from what has been said that snakes crawl out of the mouth of their own sloughs, & quit the tail part last; just as eels are skinned by a cook maid. While the scales of the eyes are growing loose, & a new skin is forming, the creature, in appearance, must be blind, & feel itself in an awkward uneasy situation.*¹³¹

The first thing to notice is the explicit domesticity of the comparisons. The stocking, the woman's glove, the cook maid's eel-skinning technique—all belong to the realm of everyday human life. Yet their claims are not anthropomorphic in the classic sense—the point is not to suggest the snake's likeness to a woman's hand, or leg, or even to the cook maid's eel. It is rather—like the analogy of the infant vipers to young cocks, calves and lambs—to attend to a behavior, an action in which a particular animal engages, to describe its unfamiliar unfolding by locating in the familiar sphere strikingly similar movements. The offhand comment, that “It would be a most entertaining sight could a person be an eye-witness to such a feat, & see the snake in the act of changing its garment” continues the domestic comparison in the figure of the garment, but also asserts the hiddenness of the actual movement being imagined. Part of the rationale behind the relative prominence of figurative language in this journal passage then becomes clear: White is engaging in a deductive observation, concentrating all of his attention upon the only thing he has, the skin, but filling in the absent snake with his curious, exacting imagination. He would love to see the snake actually sloughing off its skin, “in the act,” and perhaps this desire reveals a glimmer of prurience. Absent that opportunity, he gives an almost forensic reconstruction of how it might be done, observing the convexity of the eye-scales and the darkness of inside and outside, but also thinking of analogous movements with which he his familiar. One can almost imagine him peeling off a stocking, or

¹³¹ White, 7 October 1790, *Journals*, 370-1. [italics mine]

watching the cook-maid prepare the eels for dinner, to confirm the image he has in mind with the evidence before him.¹³²

The other two moments I have italicized in the passage speak to White's interest in the snake's own experience of the moment he tries to reconstruct. "If you look through the scales of the snake's eyes from the concave side, viz.: as the reptile used them, they lessen objects much." And, "While the scales of the eyes are growing loose, & a new skin is forming, the creature, in appearance, must be blind, & feel itself in an awkward uneasy situation." We are given to understand that White actually tried to look through the scales as the snake had looked through them—no doubt aware of the imperfections in the experiment, aware that his eyes are not snakes' eyes, and so he can only hazard a partial sense of how a snake sees. But the gesture is fundamentally an affirmation of the thought that the snake sees differently than he sees. Nor does this constitute a small difference for White. Just as his fascination with instinct is more than an interest in a sub-human quality, which in fact he was willing to grant could sometimes raise animals "far above reason"—his interest in animal perception and embodiment (the infant vipers' awareness of their incipient fangs is another instance) is nothing short of an interest in an animal's way of being in its world, as something analogous but not identical to his own way of being. (In one sense he shares a world with all of the objects of his attention—the world of Selborne. In another he demonstrates an awareness that the animals to which he attends see and experience that world not as he sees and experiences it.)

Baker's appetite for comparison was insatiable. Far from White's reserved, circumspect and judicious analogies, fantastic, sometimes giddy metaphor is one of Baker's indispensable resources.

White would not stray far from the objects of his attention, and his comparisons would tend to

¹³² Here is a delightful recent variation on this tradition of prosaic metaphor in natural history. Katherine Rundell writes of how the birth of giraffes "is a wonder: they gestate for 15 months, then drop into existence a distance of five feet from the womb to the earth. It looks as brisk and simple as emptying out a handbag." (Rundell, "Consider the Giraffe," no page number)

follow the contours of a creature very closely. Baker, on the other hand, would pile comparison upon comparison, drawing liberally from the natural and the manmade, from humans and other animals at varying degrees of separation from the animal to which they are compared. This is true even in his diaries, so that we find him reaching for likenesses at the very root of attention, from the first moment he breaks his silence. There is a restless searching for apt expression, both in the diaries and in the published works.

Sometimes the comparisons Baker makes are not figurative at all, but literal field-comparisons, the same as one would find in a field guide, as for instance among the Little Ringed Plover, Sandpiper, Snipe, and Ringed Plover.¹³³ But these belong on a continuum in the effort to relate and distinguish, to express the unprecedented life of each bird, which yet cannot help but remind the watcher of other birds. Consider the following passage from the diary, which includes both a field-comparison and a complex, multi-part simile:

In the ploughed field, opposite the last meadow, there were some more Golden Plover feeding. They were being disturbed by a tractor, changing position in the air very gracefully. They called ‘too-loodi-oo’, rather like subdued distant Redshanks calling. The gold over black colouring looks like a blackbird that has drawn a golden leopard skin over it, as disguise; like the ‘plainsman’ under his buffalo hide.¹³⁴

The comparison of the call to “subdued distant Redshanks” is a modified field-comparison; not just one bird to another, but one bird as another modified. Already this deviates slightly from the pattern of cross-species comparison for purposes of identification; it involves an imaginative distortion of another bird’s call. His attention to the bird’s coloring takes the comparison into another realm altogether—another kind of animal enters, the whimsical proposal of a costume, extended into the comparison with a human figure, however imagined. It is probably safe to assume Baker never saw a “plainsman,” except perhaps in photographs or paintings. But it may be that whatever his exposure

¹³³ See for instance Baker, 13 August 1959, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 405.

¹³⁴ Baker, 13 April 1957, *Complete Works (Diaries)*, 346.

to a man wearing a buffalo hide, the aptness of the comparison comes from a flash of imaginative seeing rather than a meticulous matching up of parts. Baker the diarist searches for a way to communicate the extraordinary effect produced by the sight of this bird. Suddenly it comes to him.

I have never seen this bird, nor have I seen a plainsman wearing a buffalo hide. Looking at a group of colored scientific drawings of the Golden Plover in the Collins guide, we can catch what Baker is referring to, looking at the adult summer male, especially in a representation of a “spring flock”—they really do look like black birds wearing some sort of fur-edged cloak. The description in the guide tells us, “At distance looks brown above, but seen close has dark grey upperparts with feather edges densely notched greenish- or ochrous-yellow and white.”¹³⁵ As compared with Baker’s description, this sounds like a different bird. Baker’s descriptions are unsurprisingly full of colors, but he tends not to render in such plain, crisp terms as these. We may not recognize the same bird in the two descriptions with our eyes closed, yet both seem to correspond exactly to the visual representation.

The description in the guide does give a certain satisfaction—even more acutely does its description of the Golden Plover in flight: “Migrating flocks dense, flight rapid; roosting movements at dawn and dusk involve much manoeuvring (flock flicking from yellow-brown to white as birds turn).”¹³⁶ This is the pleasure of staying as close as possible to the object of attention; the beauty is found rather than made, only modestly accentuated and savored in the alliterative “flock flicking.” But Baker trusts to the field guides to give such descriptions, and urgently sets off after something they cannot give: “Everything I describe took place while I was watching it, but I do not believe that honest observation is enough.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *Collins Bird Guide*, “Golden Plover,” 134.

¹³⁶ *Collins Bird Guide*, “Golden Plover,” 134.

¹³⁷ Baker, *Complete Works (Peregrine)*, 31.

In fact, the question of his ornithological accuracy is a point of dispute. According to his wife Doreen, he had “no truck with birders,” and there were those who questioned the veracity of his account, despite his own insistence. As Mark Cocker writes in his introduction to Baker’s collected works, “By far the most challenging and difficult speculation to address, is the claim that Baker made up parts or even all of the contents of *The Peregrine*. It has long been a response, particularly among readers who are knowledgeable about birds.”¹³⁸ As he summarizes, “There are serious issues that all informed readers of *The Peregrine* have to face. One is that Baker was finding his falcons in and around the Chelmer Valley, where few or no other fellow observers managed to see them.”¹³⁹ There was also the incredible number of peregrine “kills” Baker claimed to have found—619 over ten winters, an oddly precise number if he had not meant it to be taken literally. He even breaks down the percentages of the various prey species (Woodpigeon 38%, Black-headed gull 14%, Lapwing 6%, etc.) As Cocker notes, “Anyone who walks regularly in the countryside will recognise how unusual it is to see dead birds of any kind. So the author’s claim to have located the remains of so many corpses eaten by individual peregrines does seem remarkable.”¹⁴⁰ Aside from those diehards who devote themselves so fervently to the book and its author that such doubts seem heretical, there are many fans who would consider these qualms about accuracy simply beside the point, uptight, blind to what Cocker calls its “literary truth.”¹⁴¹ Among such fans is no less than Werner Herzog. In a much-circulated interview with Robert Pogue Harrison, Herzog underscores the “ecstatic” dimension of Baker’s book, which he assigns as required reading to his film students.¹⁴² He maintains that it does not matter at all whether Baker describes what really happened; that “fact”

¹³⁸ Cocker, Introduction to *Complete Works*, 8.

¹³⁹ Cocker, Introduction to *Complete Works*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Cocker, Introduction to *Complete Works*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Cocker, Introduction to *Complete Works*, 9.

¹⁴² <https://shc.stanford.edu/multimedia/werner-herzog-talks-books-author-robert-pogue-harrison>

is irrelevant in such a work. (In this moment he is responding to those allegations that Baker's account appears to be full of factual inaccuracies.) Even in documentary, Herzog claims provocatively, one can make things up as long as they are true. He expresses, in one sense, a reactionary stubbornness, defiant, dismissive of the value of common accuracy. Herzog's feeling for Baker's book tallies with his own sensibility, evident in his own most brilliant documentaries, like the disarming *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), where even when he interviews people invested in scientific accuracy, he impishly courts their less defended selves, exposing them in wonder's thrall.

I find in Baker a vacillation between signs of investment in precision and accuracy—those 619 kills, with percentages for each prey species, those measured distances, those elaborate ordnance maps covered with notations, marking the exact spots where certain species were observed—and blazes of vision that confound measure, as in the fantastic reach of his metaphors. Helen Macdonald's affectionate characterization of Baker as a “winningly bad birdwatcher, [...] his diaries brimming with confusion over the identification of birds he saw in the field,” strikes just the right chord, if we understand his ornithological ‘badness’ as a function of this vacillation, such that we are disarmed of the warrant to interrogate his claim to accuracy, even as he himself makes it an issue.¹⁴³ He seems at once to invite and to ward off the scrutiny of his facts. We may never know the extent of whatever license he took. Yet as David Farrier writes, “*The Peregrine* is fundamentally a text about perception, and the experience of observation as an ethical act.”¹⁴⁴ Baker's engagement with the terms of objectivity is irregular but not flippant, and he gives a portrait of himself as a man wrestling with ways of seeing and ways of writing, sometimes at odds with each other, that would allow him to do the greatest justice to the (still) living object of his attention. Baker's lyrical response to nature, meeting creatures with creation, results in a different understanding of accuracy. It is primarily an

¹⁴³ Macdonald, “rapture of the raptor,” 45.

¹⁴⁴ Farrier, “J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*,” 746.

expressive rather than a descriptive accuracy, and rather than obeying a law of economy, it is excessive, profligate. Objective facts are not irrelevant to Baker, but filtered through the thick medium of his body, translated into his experience of them. Or, as Virginia Woolf suggested about what it is (for the English) to read Greek, it is not a technical matter only, “for it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek.” Even as she does read Greek in the essay, offering characterizations that seem to cut straight to the quick, she circles “back and back” to a place of doubt—and this is her insistent theme—fundamental to the reading. “Are we not reading wrongly?” she asks, “reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack?” The not knowing is fundamental. It is vain and foolish to talk of knowing birds, and what Woolf says in the end about Penelope, Telemachus, and Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*, sounds like the way Baker “reads” birds, rightly or wrongly: “and their actions seem laden with beauty because they do not know they are beautiful [...] With the sound of the sea in their ears, vines, meadows, rivulets about them, they are even more aware than we are of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate.”¹⁴⁵

If we return to the final passage of *The Peregrine*, that vacillation between verifiable and unverifiable, between measurable and immeasurable, comes back into play—at a distance, it is possible and desirable to observe the values of accuracy, but when the distance collapses and becomes figure, the watcher and the bird are together in a space, rather than apart with a space between them. The eyes of the bird appear to Baker, “as though they see something beyond [him] from which they cannot look away.” He sees in the bird not quite what it has, perhaps, which ever eludes him, but his own lack, which gives way.

Conclusion: Baker and White Being Human

¹⁴⁵ Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” 48, 50-1.

Baker's attention is almost always deeply afflicted, his affliction occasionally lifted by his absorption in the lives of the creatures to which he attends. He is not so much, however, a personal self, as a self that stands for human being, and especially that takes on the burden of humanity's offense, its ongoing offensive, against nature. He is fiercely solitary but not exactly individual. (I speak of the self that narrates the books, not of the man, who was eccentric but not entirely isolated or friendless, childless but by all accounts lovingly married.¹⁴⁶) As Hetty Saunders writes of Baker's narrating self in *The Peregrine*,

The town where he comes from and returns to each day isn't named, nor is it clear who he is or why he began his quest. His own strangeness is part of the book's otherworldly feel—the author's own revenant-like state becomes a mirror for a species that was facing chemical extinction. The figure of the writer in *The Hill of Summer* is similarly indistinct.¹⁴⁷

This is a discerning characterization. Nor does it exclude the equally forceful sense of Baker's presence as a perceiving, desiring being in these two narrative accounts of attention. Like a "revenant" or a specter, he may be indistinct, impersonal, nameless and yet still full of urgent claims upon the living.

Baker has an affinity with Frankenstein's monster, in the moment when the monster finally finds the courage to enter the cottage of the peasant family he has fallen in love with in secret, watching them go about their lives day in and day out.¹⁴⁸ "Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me?" He knows already that he is monstrous, having seen his own

¹⁴⁶ See the recent biography by Hetty Saunders. The myth that nothing is known about Baker's life persists among fans, including Werner Herzog. The idea that it is better we know nothing seems to come from the wish for his books to remain pure, to be voices unattached to any contingent mortal. *The Peregrine* in particular has something of a cult status, and the obscurity of its author is a part of that status. I think the fear that any knowledge of his life threatens this obscurity mystifies and in fact grants too *much* importance to his biography, as though the books needed protection against the life of their author. The observing self who narrates Baker's two books is not the same as the individual who emerges from his biography. But the books do recount a recurring and definitive part of Baker's life, which is his life as a bird-watcher. The fervent impersonality of his narrating self only appears more striking when one remembers he was a somewhat awkward, blustering, fairly ordinary human being.

¹⁴⁷ Saunders, *My House of Sky*, 17.

¹⁴⁸ I am indebted to Lorraine Daston for intuiting this unlikely resemblance.

reflection, and having been the object of horror for other humans, but those had been strangers. In the countenance of those he has come to identify with goodness itself, the violence of rejection makes him the most miserable of creatures. Felix, the young boy in the family,

darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground, and struck me violently with a stick. I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained. I saw him on the point of repeating his blow, when, overcome by pain and anguish, I quitted the cottage, and in the general tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel.¹⁴⁹

In truth, there is monster and human being both in Baker, just as the cruelty of humanity towards the monster is the source of the novel's excruciating pathos. The vehemence with which Baker expresses his own offensiveness to other creatures is even a kind of attack, a lashing out. Human, he casts himself in the role of the abject monster, which for him *is* human. The pathos of the passage in which the peasant family rejects the monster is partly that neither the family nor the monster is quite 'at fault'; Viktor Frankenstein has been cruel to the monster he created, but the monster knows the peasant family is good, from having watched them living in kindness, day in and day out. It is excruciating that they could be so good, and yet repulsed by him, a creature as good as he could possibly be, given what he is. The animals that recoil from Baker are likewise not cruel. I suggest that in spite of his manifest misanthropy, Baker was also writing a memoir of humanity's common monstrousness as he experienced it. Only in acknowledging this monstrousness could he begin to be a subject of pathos, and capable of the unconditionally unrequited love for other creatures that the human monster must learn to bear.

A few steps back in the story, there is a surprising echo of Gilbert White –the monster tells of a period before he has had his heart and his hope broken, in which he came into awareness of the world. First, "I was delighted when I first discovered that a pleasant sound, which often saluted my

¹⁴⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 135.

ears, proceeded from the throats of the little winged animals who had often intercepted the light from my eyes.”¹⁵⁰ This period of innocent wonder giving way to “observ[ing], with greater accuracy” and “perceiv[ing] objects in their right forms” eventually leads him to his fateful encounter with the peasant cottagers. “My mode of life in my hovel was uniform. During the morning, I attended the motions of the cottagers; and when they were dispersed in various occupations, I slept: the remainder of the day was spent in observing my friends.”¹⁵¹ What he describes is essentially the life of an observer, and he even takes pleasure in being able to do for these “friends” what modest acts of love he can:

When they had retired to rest, if there was any moon, or the night was star-light, I went into the woods, and collected my own food and fuel for the cottage. When I returned, as often as it was necessary, I cleared their path from the snow, and performed those offices that I had seen done by Felix. I afterwards found that the labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them, on these occasions, utter the words *good spirit, wonderful*; but I did not then understand the signification of these terms.¹⁵²

The most White-like part of his life observing the cottagers is perhaps the following:

I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes, produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose. Their pronunciation was quick; and the words they uttered, not having any apparent connection with visible objects. I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference.

What is this but his “ardent desire” in attending to the “life and conversation” of the peasant family? With “great application” he eventually learns some of the most basic words and their referents (“*fire, milk, bread, and wood*”) as well as the names by which the family call one another. He even learns to recognize without knowing the meaning of “*good, dearest, and unhappy.*”

¹⁵⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.

¹⁵¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 114.

¹⁵² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 114-15.

The monster happens to contain within himself a development that resonates with the two historical-ecological poles at which I placed White and Baker at the start of this chapter. In his happiness with peering in, White never has the awareness, which Baker has in excess, of the offense that other animals can take to human presence. He registers “shyness” and “wildness” but not fear. Even when he “inadvertently” crushes or disturbs, he cannot know the monstrous dimensions of his own species, the more-than-inadvertent avoidance of humanity by certain creatures, even as others (those dearest to him) manage to make the most of the way humans go about their lives. And these latter, we might recognize today, have just been the lucky few, not the unhappy majority of other species for whom human activity and expansion have meant only disturbance (now in the all-pervading medium of climate) and diminishment in numbers, if not outright extinction. The ecological monster the human animal becomes in Baker’s account is continuous with the ecological creature of White’s account. But the meaning of the distance exerted by the non-human takes on a new urgency, reflecting back on the human.

Both of these observers opened themselves, from within their own limitations, to the life-sustaining distance at which so many other creatures keep themselves. They each recount the ardor that sustains their attention to and their happiness at the very existence of other creatures. At the same time, they recount their own relinquishment of the pleasure of possession, how in attending ardently to the life that goes on without them, they accept they cannot lay claim if that life is to endure.

Coda: On Birding

I love when Dorothy Wordsworth writes in her journals, in varied ways, “Nothing very new, or interesting.”¹ She does not dismiss the uninteresting, for she does not expect the world to be interesting. To take an interest in what is neither new nor interesting is also to accept that what *is* interesting does not exist for the sake of the observer, but has its own reasons for being, its own life apart.

Birding is an odd way to spend one’s time, though perhaps no odder than many. In his engaging history of “birders and their guides,” Thomas Dunlap writes of how birding expeditions to city parks became “so familiar even to non-birdwatchers that the *New Yorker* could print a cartoon of people peering up into a tree with binoculars over the deadpan caption “The Audubon Bird Walkers Add a Scarlet Tanager to Their List.”² At first I simply missed the joke. The caption describes what birdwatchers on a walk might do. I came to the conclusion that the very activity of birding, on its face, is found funny. Or is it the “list” that makes it so? Dunlap tells the story of how birdwatching caught on and evolved in North America.³ He writes how it gradually grew out of and gradually overtook hunting and collecting. But it never shrugged off the acquisitive instincts that attended those activities, only channeled them into the activity of listing.⁴ Of course listing takes a

¹ See Alfoxden Journal February 7th, 24th, March 7th. Here is January 27th, 1798 (Wordsworth, *Grasmere and Alfoxden*, 142) “Upon the whole an uninteresting evening.” But goes on to describe how “the moon burst through the invisible veil which enveloped her, the shadows of the oaks blackened, and their lines became more strongly marked. The withered leaves were coloured with a deeper yellow, a brighter gloss spotted the hollies; again her form became dimmer; the sky flat, unmarked by distances, a white thin cloud.” She also throws in a note about the “strange, uncouth howl” of the manufacturer’s dog.

² Dunlap, *In the Field*, 112.

³ See Dunlap’s 2011 *In the Field, Among the Feathered: A History of Birders and Their Guides*.

⁴ As a typical example, a recent article in the *Chicago Tribune* featured Chicago native Nathan Goldberg, who has had a “big year—a challenge birders take to see as many species as possible in a given area in 365 days.” At the end of 2020 he broke the Illinois birding record (he saw 341 bird species in Illinois in 2020). The article quotes him on having missed seeing a black-legged kittiwake by “about 20 minutes”: “I don’t want to say I have a vendetta against it, but it really hurt to find out that I was that close to getting one and didn’t get it.”

(<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/environment/ct-birding-record-illinois-20210104-n3id2opyd5fvzozmmuudgmgjky-story.html>) Birders often talk about birds they’ve seen in acquisitive or possessive

far lighter toll on the birds than hunting and collecting, and even contributes to conservation efforts that need population data. But the activity does not by default engage the kind of undeceiving attention to other forms of life that an Elizabeth Bishop or a Gilbert White practices and so reveals as possible.

Birding⁵ does not automatically compel the watcher to reckon with the fullness of being in birds, just because she becomes skilled at identifying them. Furthermore it can take on a frivolity that the hunter and the collector, if aware of and alive to the killing that sustains their activity, are possibly less prone to. I have heard a fellow birder just starting out refer to the “collect-them-all” appeal of seeing and listing the migrating warblers in the springtime. I balked at the phrasing but knew just what he meant: flipping through the Peterson and Sibley guides at that time of year, there is a frivolous satisfaction in noting we’ve seen all the warblers on a given page, and just one has eluded us on the next—and thinking, maybe tomorrow morning we’d see ‘our’ Northern Parula, ‘our’ Hooded Warbler, at last... That is no doubt what makes the *New Yorker* cartoon funny, and what makes it barbed in a way that I must reckon with. When the stakes are no longer felt to be life-and-death (though not all collectors and hunters would feel equally that there is moral consequence in taking a bird’s life), when you ask nothing of the birds except to tolerate your presence from a distance, then you might equally feel that they ‘ask’ nothing of you. Your watching them could then be a matter of moral indifference—a harmless game, as Dunlap shows it has been conceived from its earliest days.

terms, and though it’s clearly figurative (they don’t physically collect the birds they list), a collecting impulse undeniably drives the intensity of their activity.

⁵ I should clarify that I don’t have a lot at stake in the difference between “birdwatching” and “birding.” As Dunlap notes, “no single set of terms will satisfy everyone,” though some jealously protect the word “birding” for something more serious than casual backyard and park-strolling pursuits, which they designate mere “birdwatching.” He decides to set them apart in his history by using “birdwatching” pre-1970, and “birding” thereafter, since the latter term in its more competitive sense gained traction at that time. I’ll mostly stick to “birding” since it’s a shorter word, and it conveys an existential yearning; for me, to bird is not to want to become a bird, but to delight in the existence of birds, and to want it to continue.

The “bloodlessness” of birding potentially takes on at least two meanings. It is bloodless in the sense that it sheds no blood, which I count as a good. In the early days people joked that birdwatchers were “shooting [birds] with opera glasses.”⁶ But if it becomes bloodless in the sense “lacking in vitality, strength or spirit; cowardly; feeble; anaemic,” which can shade into the sense of “cold, unemotional; heartless, cruel,” then there is a strange way that the birder is capable of not really loving birds, or of not thinking to ask herself what it would mean to love them, but bypassing the whole question and seeing them no longer as game but as game pieces. On the whole I don’t think birders really tend to bloodlessness in the second sense; most of them do have a feeling for what W.H. Hudson called the “feathered people,” because it is not hard to, and hard not to; the birds, if one spends any extended time with them, make this so. They are charismatic. A bird can unknowingly beguile the smitten birder with every movement it makes—preening, scooting along a branch, scratching an itch. But the way birds are easy to love evades the original ambiguity of “shooting with opera glasses,” of the list as a form of virtual collection. There can be bloodlessness in the listing impulse.

Environmental scientists, scholars, and philosophers have pointed out that there are many forms of life (bacteria, most fungi) we do not warm to; and that they have yet as much claim to being alive as the easily loved, and sometimes even more of a claim to ecological fundamentality (without them the charismatic forms of life, including ourselves, would not even exist).⁷ It is also

⁶ Quoted at the opening of chapter 1 in Dunlap’s book (Dunlap, *In the Field*, 13), from Frank Daggett (1904).

⁷ See for instance Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan’s *Microcosmos* (1986), and Ursula Heise’s observation in *Imagining Extinction* (2016) that the discovery of the chytrid fungus, not only a species but a genus of fungus previously unknown to science, which has taken a dire toll on frog populations, was far from celebrated, whereas “if the species constellation had been the reverse—a new frog species discovered as the disappearance of certain fungi was being investigated—the news would have been celebrated across scientific and public spheres. But the logic of species preferences has it that we care about beautiful or strange frogs (somewhat), whereas fungi leave us indifferent.” (Heise, 36) I agree but add that the human responsibility for introducing the chytrid fungus into South America, like the white nose syndrome in the bats of North America, must also have something to do with how we understand these events. (See Elizabeth Kolbert’s accounts of both of these events, especially in chapters one and ten of *The Sixth Extinction*) The suffering of other

true that even among classes of living things we generally praise, like birds, there are the oddities, which for a range of reasons (aesthetic, self-preserving, cultural, psychological) we do not look upon with delight. This has a history, and surely changes with the times: Dunlap recounts how the early field-guides (in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the century) expressed open dislike and even moral disgust for Cowbirds, House Sparrows, and bird-eating hawks. For instance, the brood-parasitic Cowbird “stood for the breakdown of family life,” the House Sparrow (introduced from Europe, then called the “English Sparrow,” and actually not a sparrow at all, but a weaver finch) “all associated with the unwashed immigrants with whom it shared the city streets,” and while they accepted predation, “describing the Osprey as a hard-working fisherman and praising *buteos* like the Red-tailed Hawk as the farmer’s friend for their diet of rodents,” “Goshawk, Sharp-shinned, and Cooper’s Hawks, [...] they regarded with horror, for they ate other birds.”⁸ These are unmistakable prejudices, and though they may now seem quaint, others have taken their place in ecological discourse.

For me it is an indispensable thing, and perhaps the least available to elaboration: the direct joy of being in the presence of a bird. But if attention and its writing can bring us to recognize the claims of other forms of life, I must conclude that this element of joy, of pleasure, of affection, is not strictly necessary. We cannot count on it, exactly because it would be the greatest arrogance, and a reconfiguration of anthropocentrism, for us to expect other forms of life to delight us, or to expect of ourselves to be delighted with other forms of life, and to withhold our recognition of their life

creatures because of how we live, even when we do not intend it, matters, and that is a problem not reducible to our natural affection for some species over others. The chytrid fungus also did not *come into existence* when it was discovered; so it was not the beginning of a form of life in the way that the amphibian forms of life into which it entered were facing a probable end. Furthermore it is often (though not always) the species we love most, or love most easily, that we place in the greatest danger of extinction, that are most vulnerable to the excesses of industrialized human ways of life. Our love has not protected them, just as our indifference and even hostility to fungi and bacteria have not particularly harmed them—certainly not on the scale that we have harmed the “charismatic” birds, mammals, amphibians that exert a more immediate claim on our affections.

⁸ Dunlap, *In the Field*, 23-4.

when they do not delight us. I have a garden-variety fear of venomous spiders and snakes, and feel a bit nauseous at the thought of bedbugs and ticks. But there are also forms of life that exist beneath our notice, or to our indifference. This is why Dorothy Wordsworth can write without contempt of the “nothing particularly new, or interesting,” which exists on a continuum with the negatively interesting. All affective responses to the natural world are possible, and relevant to our life within it, but attention is something that can be sustained towards another being, regardless of the level and kind of interest it elicits from us. Attention and its reckonings are not a matter of love or hate, but of recognition.⁹ So I will reflect on some of these unloved or less easily loved birds, before returning to a less easy regard for even those birds dubiously blessed with a form of life humans, and I among humans, particularly favor. Most of the texts studied in this dissertation have a feeling, call it love or wonder, reaching out towards the object of attention, but the Fuegians did without Darwin’s love. And Wallace recognized that the Bird of Paradise’s “cycle of existence has gone on independently of [man’s],”

disturbed or broken by every advance in man’s intellectual development; and their happiness and enjoyments, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death, would seem to be immediately related to their own well-being and perpetuation alone, limited only by the equal well-being and perpetuation of the numberless organisms with which each is more or less intimately connected.¹⁰

I will continue to speak openly of my love for birds, understanding this subtext always to be present.

I am now thinking of cowbirds. They lay their eggs in other birds’ nests, producing no nests of their own. Historically they have been scorned for the perceived immorality of their lifestyle.

⁹ I am thinking also of Thom van Dooren, who recognizes the necessity of detachment in our consideration of difficult conservation decisions, which ask us to weigh the lives of individuals and of species—not a cold detachment, but the ability to set aside our own affinities for some species over others, and equally to refuse ever to consider lives expendable or subservient even for a perceived ‘greater good.’ If not, then we could only ever hope to preserve a version of the world that we deem worthy of survival. See *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. See also Mark Payne’s essay, “What’s an Ark?”

¹⁰ Wallace, *Malay Archipelago*, 339-40.

Now they represent quite a different set of problems: the species they parasitize are increasingly vulnerable to them the more fragmented the forests become. (They tend to avoid “dense unbroken forest.”) Now they present a serious threat to some species that have not developed defenses against them, who appear to have been rendered more vulnerable by human fragmentation of the forests where they build their nests. Yellow warblers are exceptional for detecting the alien eggs, building a “floor” over them, and laying new eggs of their own—they will even do this repeatedly as the cowbirds try again and again.¹¹ But many birds simply end up raising cowbird chicks instead of their own.

The Wood Thrush, to which I confess a deep partiality, is particularly vulnerable. Partiality is a fact of birding as it is of most any activity that involves variety.¹² I do not love all birds with equal intensity—nor do I think Gilbert White or John Clare or J.A. Baker loved them all equally. White loved especially the hirundines, Clare the furtive skulkers, Baker, of course, the peregrines. I am partial to Wood Thrushes, then. There is the thrill of its rust, and of its generous speckles all fully inked. But it isn't that. It couldn't be only that. Color has its own elusive hold on us, and only seems at first blithely detachable from form and life, for it is only so at the layer of the cosmetic. I do not know what it is for the Wood Thrush to be such a shade, to have such speckles. But I am also talking about Wood Thrushes in general, as I am not expert enough to distinguish individual Wood Thrushes from each other. I must admit that most any Wood Thrush would have a similar claim on my affections. I have only been able to distinguish individual birds when I've noticed some injury or

¹¹ Kaufman, “Brown-Headed Cowbird” and “Yellow Warbler,” *Lives*, 627, 523. For varied responses to Cowbird parasitism see the extremely vulnerable, “Wood Thrush” (475) to the vulnerable “where forest is broken up into smaller patches,” “Worm-Eating Warbler” (543) to the “Ovenbird” (545), which does face heavy Cowbird parasitism, “but Ovenbird nestlings often survive even when sharing the nest with young cowbirds.” (545)

¹² I am able to enjoy watching soccer or basketball without caring much who wins or having a favorite team, but to friends who take sports-watching more seriously than I do, this serenity is anathema, even suspect. The birds are not always in competition the way sports teams are, but in this case, the Wood Thrush is quite acutely in ecological competition with Cowbirds.

mutation—a Canada goose with mottled head and neck, instead of the standard pure black, another goose missing a foot, a Cardinal with no feathers on part of his head and neck.¹³ I deduce that when I see a bird with the same anomalous feature, it is the same bird. Even this may be an unwarranted assumption. Furthermore, the meaning of being an individual and loved as an individual may hold more or less weight for different forms of life, and so my attachment of significance to individuality in the moment of attention comes from my own experience of life. Different bird species, for instance, have different ways of forming pairs—ranging from the very fleeting, where birds of the opposite sex come together only for a brief assignation, to the lifelong partnership, and everything in between.¹⁴ The sense of being individual and of being so for another, of caring about another as an individual, must be intricately bound up with such questions. Attention to another form of life must be open to the possibility that the meanings of its actions in its own life, as the meanings of its color and pattern, are not the meanings they hold for me when I attend to them. Even if I guess rightly, that it does such-and-such to impress a potential mate, or find food, or protect its young, I imagine these explanations go as far as they do for human actions: though they identify a general telos, fit means to ends, the meaning of the action is watered down in the explanation.

I do not see each Wood Thrush as “Wood Thrushes in general,” even though I am not capable of differentiating one Wood Thrush from all the others. Whatever I feel for the Wood Thrush, it is not what I would feel for a particular human being, nor could it possibly be affection in the Wood Thrush’s own language, what one Wood Thrush might feel for another. Yet I feel affection *as though* for a particular individual each time I see a Wood Thrush foraging in the leaf

¹³ And in the case of the cardinal, the condition is only a temporary phase, at molting.

¹⁴ At one extreme, think of Wisdom the Albatross, a member of a species that mates for life: at 70 years, having just hatched at least her 30th chick, she has probably outlived at least one mate (and definitely outlived the biologist who originally tagged her). <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/05/973992408/wisdom-the-albatross-now-70-hatches-yet-another-chick>.

litter, perhaps because my affection only knows the grammar of individual connection. The thought I have had more than once, a thought I wonder how many birders have, is, *this bird will never know that I love it*. This is especially so when a bird is afraid of me. The disjuncture is chastening; the sweet Wood Ducks or the Green Heron panicking at my approach—then I think, *my kind of love is no good to them*. And it isn't, but there we are.

Just so, my partiality does not force me to reject the Cowbird, which (helped along by humans) poses one of the greatest threats to the Wood Thrush's survival as a species. Elaine Scarry's argument about beauty, that it is not exclusionary but on the contrary, enlarges the heart of the beholder, holds here for my commonplace birder's partiality. And what about the form of life that Cowbirds take? I have watched them, as they gather together in sociable groups, and especially in the springtime when the handsome males perform their charming bows. I cannot help but like them. The earliest American bird-guide author Florence Merriam found the Cowbird guilty of "foist[ing] its offspring upon its neighbors," which did "such violence to the one redeeming instinct of the lower types of man and beast that it is hard not to regard the bird with unqualified loathing."¹⁵ Well that is how they live, I'd say. They don't know the first thing about building a nest.¹⁶ We humans are arguably the ultimate parasitic species from the perspective of many others (in the sense that we live off of them and provide no benefit to their life in return), so we can hardly say without self-deception that we object to parasitism on principle; and it is human fragmentation of the forests, especially of Eastern North America, that has made the Cowbird a greater threat than it was previously to many of its host species.

¹⁵ As cited in Dunlap, *In the Field*, 23.

¹⁶ And even if they did—as certain species, like North American cuckoos, build nests but also sometimes lay eggs in other birds' nests—well then, that would be how they live too.

But these dismantlings of anti-Cowbird rhetoric work on the level of rational argument, and I am trying to account for the intelligence that is directly available to the attention to living birds, and to the writing that proceeds from that attention, rather than from my reading about the larger conflicts at play between species. In the attentive encounter with birds, both partiality and prejudice must let go at last. What is it to attend to the life of the Wood Thrush and to that of the Cowbird equally, while knowing them to be in conflict? To make the conflict vivid I must have recourse to another moment: I love Crows very much, and yet when one day my husband and I saw two of them attack and kill a fledgling Robin, I was beside myself. In the moment I wanted to yell at them: Why did you have to do that? A childish impulse. And were I to witness a female Cowbird pushing the Wood Thrush's eggs out of the nest, and laying her own, tears of indignation would no doubt well up in me.¹⁷ I wouldn't be able to help it. But these fresh responses to the way living things harm and are harmed by one another as individuals—to Wood Thrush eggs crashing to the ground and the Cowbird making room for her own egg, to the fledgling Robin desperate and helpless to escape, to the merciless Crows—do not become judgment. As J.A. Baker writes of the “cold-eyed thrush”: “We should not sentimentalise his song, and forget the killing that sustains it.”¹⁸

Gilbert White, though not unfailingly gentle, reminds me of the possibilities retained for the open attention that reserves judgment and registers all manifestations of life with curiosity. The European Cuckoo is the moral equivalent of the North American Cowbird (our cuckoos only occasionally lay eggs in other birds' nests, and when they do it is often in each others'), and White shares the bafflement of his contemporaries at its parental irresponsibility. But his bafflement does not become disgust.

¹⁷ Says Kaufman, “Female may lay nearly one egg per day for several weeks, up to 40 in a season, exceptionally 70 or more. Female often removes an egg from ‘host’ nest before laying one of her own. Known to have laid eggs in nests of over 220 species of birds, and over 140 of those are known to have raised young cowbirds.”(Kaufman, *Lives*, 628)

¹⁸ Baker, *Complete Works*, 31.

A countryman told me he had found a young fern-owl in the nest of a small bird on the ground; and that it was fed by the little bird. I went to see this extraordinary phenomenon, and found that it was a young cuckoo in the nest of a titlark: it was become vastly too big for its nest, [...] and was very fierce and pugnacious, pursuing my finger, as I teased it, for many feet from the nest, and sparring and buffeting with its wings like a game-cock. The dupe of a dam appeared at a distance, hovering about with meat in its mouth, and expressing the greatest solicitude.¹⁹

The mischief of this scene makes me half want to scold him, but half mirthful; why does he tease the poor creature? But it does give him occasion to describe that wonderful “fierceness,” that tenacity John Clare establishes for us so unforgettably with his badger. That is one way of holding onto life, and White does not discount it. He cites a French anatomist’s attempt to rationalize the Cuckoo’s nesting behavior as a contingent fact arising from an “impediment,” which “he supposes, arises from the internal structure of their parts, which incapacitates them for incubation.” White looks into the matter (for once he does dissect), and finds the anatomist’s proposition untenable, since the fern-owl, which incubates its eggs as dutifully any other bird, bears the same internal structure advanced as an excuse for the Cuckoo’s deviance.

Now as it appears that this bird, which is so well known to practise incubation, is formed in a similar manner with cuckoos, Monsieur Herissant’s conjecture, that cuckoos are incapable of incubation from the disposition of their intestines, seems to fall to the ground; and we are still at a loss for the cause of that strange and singular peculiarity in the instance of the *cuculus canorus*.²⁰

It is characteristic of many great observers, including all of those I have chosen to study closely in this dissertation, that they are willing to dwell “at a loss,” while they lose none of their interest in the life whose principles and meanings elude them. The playful curiosity that registers fierceness, and the deferral of explanation in these two Cuckoo passages I take as following from the same capacity. As Anne Secord notes, “Letters, which could be read as private communications, even when made

¹⁹ White, Letter 6 to Daines Barrington, 21 May 1770, *Selborne*, 111.

²⁰ White, Letter 30 to Daines Barrington, 3 April 1776, *Selborne*, 168.

public, lent themselves to the discussion of provisional knowledge,²¹ which does not mean White had no interest in the answers to such mysteries as the parasitic existence of the Cuckoo, but his interest in them was never contingent on having those answers, nor do I imagine he would cease to attend to the Cuckoo even had the mystery appeared solved beyond a doubt.

When I attend to Cowbirds, as to Wood Thrushes, I would still set to one side what the field guide can tell me about them (and I have no reason to doubt its accuracy), so as not to obscure the sense in which I am also “at a loss” in their presence. Today this means setting to one side not only the knowledge of science about every aspect of these species, but also the knowledge of their conservation status, and of their respective ‘roles’ in an ecosystem (which no one ever asked, nor ever can ask them whether they would accept). I am not tempted to check birds off a list, but I must say in the next breath that I do *write* lists, after every walk where we have seen birds, and even of the birds I see or hear from our apartment. I keep a sort of diary made mostly of these lists, also including notes about the weather, and effusions about unusual circumstances or events, unaccountable actions of birds, other living things noticed (a coyote on the driving range in winter, a raccoon sleeping in a tree-hole, a praying mantis feasting on Monarch butterflies, eating the bodies and discarding the wings), sometimes even people, when they enter my field of attention in a particular way. I include the dead in these lists: birds on the sidewalk from window-strikes during the migrations (not a spot of blood on them), a dead mouse on the trail through the Bobolink Meadow (possibly killed by a dog), a pregnant opossum killed on the busy road that runs alongside Washington Park.

How do I write this without betraying them, the birds in whose presence I have quickened? Of course I do not mean that they should take the slightest interest in what I write about them, even

²¹ Secord, Introduction to *Selborne*, xxiii.

if, as in rare cases, usually through circumspection, they have taken an interest in my watching them. There are some kinds of bird, like the Hermit Thrush, famous for taking an interest, for turning to face the birder, rather than “skulking” (like the Rails, Bitterns and Soras; the “skulker seldom seen” is an epithet for such birds in some field guides), or remaining indifferent (like the Golden-crowned Kinglets who will hop about in branches an inch from one’s nose, without startling, almost looking right through one). But to betray them would not mean—as it would in the kind of relation I can have with a person, or an animal I take into my life and promise to care for—that I fail them in a certain expectation they hold of me, in something they count on me to do or not to do. Instead I would fail them if in any way I diminish the fullness of their being, if I attenuate or deny their excess in my account of them. They themselves will not be diminished or attenuated in this failure, how could they be? But I will have turned my back on them, denied myself the recognition of the sufficiency they bring to their own lives. And in this self-deprivation I will become less aware of the space they actually occupy in the world, more liable to blunder into it, to underestimate their existence and to overestimate my own. There are countless ways to do this. Presuming unwarranted familiarity is one. Indulging in fanciful comparison is another. Smothering them, drowning them in a syrup of flattering adjectives is another.²² Francis Ponge, coincidentally the least nature-loving of my observers, helps me here. His attitude does not derive, as mine does, necessarily from the direct physical proximity of another form of life. But he puts himself in his place with regard to all that is not himself, about which he tries to write:

L’objet est toujours plus important, plus intéressant, plus capable (plein de droits): il n’a aucun devoir vis-à-vis moi, c’est moi qui ai tous les devoirs à son égard.²³

²² Timothy Morton confronts the poetics of self-deceived nature writing in *Ecology without Nature* (2007). If writing can allow the observer to become accountable to what her attention has registered in silence, it can also lead her away, to construct a fantasy of her relation to the observed.

²³ Ponge, “Berges de la Loire,” *La rage de l’expression*, 10. [The object is always more important, more interesting, more capable (replete with claims): it has no obligation toward me, it is I who have all the obligations with regard to it.]

How to respond to the claim of these “devoirs”? Why should writing have anything to do with it?

And how could the writing that is attentive have to do with anything else?

The following passages I have left in the present tense, because they were present when I wrote them. Where I was then is now not quite 600 miles distant.

Where I am now, in the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia, vultures circle and wander most every day, often preceded by their shadows. Joy erupts even then. Vultures are reputed to be ugly and grim, and to make one think of carcasses and grisly death. I don't think I'm being romantic when I say that I cannot see this ugliness they are supposed to have. Of course they make me think of carrion because it is what they eat, but what is so grim in that, really? And I see their wrinkled meat-colored heads. It isn't a matter of looking at them a certain way and 'seeing the beauty' in them, of saying really they have their own 'kind' of beauty. That would embarrass me for them, a little the way my paternal grandmother once told me it embarrasses her to be called “young lady” by a smarmy salesperson. I haven't observed them at a meal, which it is true might test my equanimity; they are said to break their usual silence at those times, making “hisses, grunts or growls around food.”

One day we set out a large piece of pork that had begun to rot, right at the edge of the yard, hoping the vultures might take it as an offering. Twice, a vulture flew directly over the rotten roast, and came to perch in the old apple tree within view of it. Twice a vulture (we do not know whether it was two vultures, or the same returned) sat in that tree, seeming to strain towards the meat to gather further information about it. Perhaps the vulture had learned to be wary—perhaps others he knew (or she knew, we couldn't say) had been poisoned by similar enticements. Perhaps it was the way it didn't take the form of a carcass, but was simply a smooth piece of meat, without bones or limbs or a head, not taking part in the shape of any recognizable animal; not legible. Whatever the reason, twice a vulture stayed in the apple tree and twice a vulture flew off after ten minutes or so of restrained keenness. Someone came during the night (a bear, a raccoon, feral cats?) and cleaned it up.

They rest on the power poles, four or six together. We see them perched there in various postures (one drying or warming his wings like a cormorant; I can never help feeling when I see cormorants in that posture, with some self-admonishment, that they look as though they wanted someone to hug them), and they see us, as we walk along the road. As soon as we get close they depart from the poles into the wind, one by one, ever phlegmatic, nor looking alarmed, but as though enforcing an inexorable distance. I wish there were a way to communicate peace, to say ‘oh, don't get up,’ as we might when paying a casual visit to a friend, letting them know that company is all that's sought, no exertion of hospitality. Even less than that. It is only that we don't intend to interfere with their siesta, to mess with them in any way; just to walk by, just to be proximate.

If I were more like J.A. Baker, I might have felt in this impossibility a universal loathing and horror of humanity on the part of all wild creatures. Is this on the other side of the youthful fantasy of wild creatures coming to eat from one's hand or rest at one's side, of the birds weaving one's hair into their nests (as my mother encouraged me to imagine, when she told me to leave a snarl from the brush in the yard)? On both sides it is a wish to matter to them, a longing for more than indifference. In this, it is not so very different from the attitude of an unrequited lover, for whom the hardest and greatest movement of love is just to let go of any requirement, any effort to force the beloved to attend in return. There are ways we have, putting out birdseed for instance, of tempting them into proximity. But we must not confuse this; we must never try to extract a promise.²⁴ Recently I came across a discussion of the notorious 19th-20th century debates about whether vultures possess a sense of smell, which made me think again about what happened with the Turkey Vulture who spurned our rotting meat. It is possible, as Thom van Dooren suggests of certain nineteenth-century experiments, that our offering "may have been smelled by vultures, but passed over in whatever the vulture equivalent of disgust may be."²⁵ Maybe this vulture was just being particular.

The texts that anchor the previous chapters have made vivid to me a kind of open companionship that is possible for an observer. I have often stated or implied that solitude is intrinsic to the act of attention, at least as narrated by these observers. Especially for Clare and Bishop, this solitude attends company they open themselves to in the absence of human

²⁴ This "we" I own is a shifting quantity. It is myself and others, broadly construed.

²⁵ van Dooren, *Vulture*, 35. As van Dooren relates, the answer to the question is complicated. Some vulture species—Turkey Vultures and two other New World species—have a very keen sense of smell, and the rest don't, instead locating their carrion by sight. As Robert O. Paxton commented in a recent review of three new bird books (the genre is booming), "Audubon [...] proved to his own satisfaction that turkey vultures located carrion exclusively by sight. But in fact these birds have unusually large olfactory organs. They locate carrion by smell but prefer fresh carrion and thus disdained Audubon's highly decayed offering. Oil company engineers nowadays add a sulfurous chemical to natural gas; they can then find pipeline leaks because turkey vultures will circle over them." (Paxton, "Intrepid Navigators," no page number)

companionship (or when they are lonely even among humans). Well, I have rarely been solitary or lonely in my birding life. My husband is the one who taught me to watch birds (for my first year or so we had only one pair of binoculars between us), and the circumstances of our life have so far allowed us to go birding together often. This fact prompts me to refine the account I have given so far of the singular act of attention by a human being towards another kind of living thing. There is the distinct form of company that another kind of living thing in proximity can be, going about its own life. But there is also the way the form of life that is a bird, when we two attend to it together, alters the kind of company we are to each other. This bears no comparison to the kind of alteration I have heard described by two people when their attention turns towards raising children; nor does it compare to the way ours was turned towards the cat for whose happiness and freedom from fear we were responsible. Because, as I keep reminding myself, these birds ask for nothing from us. How do we learn to give the exact nothing for which they ask? I look back to these lines from Elizabeth Bishop's "The End of March":

I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.²⁶

There was something held in the line break, between the emphatic "*nothing*" and the "nothing much," as there would also be in "Poem": "—the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust. Not much."²⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth's "nothing very new, or interesting" comes under the same sign. To "look through binoculars" and "write down useless notes" are indeed familiar actions to a birder, and Bishop honored the "perfectly useless concentration" of Darwin.

²⁶ Bishop, "End of March," Lines 32-7, *PPL*, 168.

²⁷ Bishop, "Poem," lines 58-9, *PPL*, 166.

The lists and short journal entries I “keep” remind me in their bareness of the excess in the birds—the part of them, the best part of them, I didn’t try to keep. In the lists, like Gilbert White in his journals, I have frequent recourse to the exclamation point. In giddiness I even regress to smiley faces, crude effusions of joy. As I have said, the birds are so easy to love. They are adorable, in the root sense. The task that faces me each time I try to account for the intelligence of my attention, is at minimum to write their names. In the same breath, to acknowledge silently, but somehow to make the acknowledgment perceptible, that the names I use for them are not their names. I am with each one so fleetingly. My impressions are surely hasty, for my sense of their temperament can only ever be impressionistic, and is usually inflected at the level of species rather than individuals. Thus I find myself thinking and saying flycatchers and Yellow-rumped Warblers seem “contemplative” or “inquisitive” (they are always cocking their heads, getting a sense of their prey, but why could this not be a form of contemplation?), Scarlet Tanagers seem “phlegmatic,” mockingbirds “strident” and “serious,” Red-winged Blackbirds “agitated,” the Rose-breasted Grosbeak “thoughtful,” the way it considers and slowly mulls over each seed at the feeder. I can’t help feeling the song of the House Finch is “lusty,” the two notes of the chickadee “teasing,” the burbling of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet “breathless.” These words are my cartoonish verbal sketches. The brevity of the encounter frequently leaves me with just one or two words. The journal or diary structure in which the lists appear daily, sometimes twice a day, means that I will repeat indefinitely, that no bird will be “checked off.” It’s a way of keeping time with the birds, noticing their comings and goings and implicitly my own being in one place, waiting for them. When a bird happens to stay a little longer than an instant, every moment it stays beyond my initial recognition of its species is luxuriant. The

“begging cup” is what the writer Merrill Gilfillan calls a certain disposition, in certain moments, towards birds.²⁸

Each of the observers I have studied came to terms with the insufficiency in themselves and the limits of language in a genre, and yet used the attention to writing at least in part as a way of undeceiving themselves (and so their readers) about the fullness of other beings.²⁹ In this fullness is the extent to which they as writers must always be at a loss, and not an unhappy one, about the life that goes on under the eye of their attention. This loss is the occasion for gentleness, for fidelity rather than abandonment. Concrete perceptions rendered through techniques of description seem to have permitted these observers to posit and convincingly evoke the excess that cannot be indicated directly, the strictly *indescribable* dimension of the object of attention. To repeat the words of Simone Weil invoked as a touchstone in the Introduction, when it comes to attention, “only an indirect method is effective.”³⁰ The attention to writing itself becomes a way of being, to corrupt Henry James, a person on whom all is not lost.

²⁸ Gilfillan, *Warbler Road*, 24.

²⁹ Seamus Heaney at least thought that poets should be “on the side of undeceiving the world.” (“A soul on the washing line.” Interview in *The Economist*, June 22, 1991. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A10895383/PPPM?u=chic_rbw&sid=PPPM&xid=e4a03430)

I am most interested in the way this undeceiving depends on attention *to* “the world,” which is never finished, nor can the observer exempt herself from the ranks of the deceived.

³⁰ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 106.

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