Ewa A. Łukaszyk
Faculty of Philology
University of Warsaw
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9969-0459

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Queer Austringers
Helen Macdonald Reads T. H. White

Abstract: In 2014, Helen Macdonald published a bestselling non-fiction text, *H Is for Hawk*. Building upon an inherited cultural practice of keeping and taming goshawks, she offered to the readers a compelling presentation of her personal journey of mourning after the death of her father, parallel to a rebellious maturation in the margin of cultural normativities. The relation between the austringer, that is, the keeper of goshawks, and the bird of prey is presented not only as a process of introspection and healing, but also of almost complete identification with the non-human partner. In parallel to this experience, Macdonald reads the personal history of yet another traumatised austringer, the homosexual author T. H. White. She builds thus a triangle of (mediated) human and (actualized) non-human relationships. This triple line of experience counters and deconstructs the narration of the dominant heterosexual male as a hunter and introduces a maternal element into the interspecies relationship.

Keywords: British hunting literature, queer, interspecies relations, falconry, Helen Macdonald, T. H. White

Queer histories seem to fit in urban settings. The expression "urban air makes free (after a year and a day)," originally a German formulation (*Stadtluft macht frei nach Jahr und Tag*), dates back to the Middle Ages. In fact, it refers to the customary law that used to grant to any city resident the freedom from serf obligations after a period of one year and one day. Although the law was actually abolished in the thirteenth century, the association of the urban settings with greater permissibility remained valid till our times. The cities, with their proliferating spaces of casual encounters, appear as the backwoods of non-heteronormative attitudes and awareness. Yet on the other hand, rural settings may be identified as spaces of solitude and longing, where the non-heteronormative subject is confronted with isolation, grief, and the sense of profound inadequacy in relation to the heteronormative world. An alienating rural setting may become a space of inner development and contestation of the oppressive cultural order. It may also become a space of transgressive quest for alternative, unusual, yet profoundly fulfilling relationships.

Such a process of rebellious maturation is presented in an award-winning non-fictional book *H Is for Hawk*, published in 2014 by the British author Helen Macdonald.[1] This text, situated on the brink of private non-fictional writing, may be framed in the category of queer relational autobiography[2] as it explores a triangle of (mediated) human and non-human relationships built up by the central, transgressive female figure. She develops a profound intimacy and hunting partnership with the she-hawk Mabel; on the other hand, through the close reading of his published and private writings, she establishes an equally deep emotional engagement with a dead writer, the homosexual British author T. H. White.

Macdonald's hybrid book explores in a curious way the tradition of English-speaking and European aristocratic literature, often focusing on the topic of hunting expeditions and adventures. The genre, typical for the nineteenth-century upper-class culture, survives also in our own, more democratic era as a type of falconry autobiography, still published both in Great Britain and in the United States.[3] What makes Macdonald's text stand out against this background of mere hobbyist or vanity literature is the fact that the privileged author she reads and studies in parallel to her outdoor adventures is T. H. White, a writer for whom hunting and taming a bird of prey acquired quite a different meaning, transcending the mundane values usually associated with this practice in the heteronormative, male-oriented society. Together, Helen Macdonald, burdened with bereavement and grief after the death of her father as well as her feeling of inadequacy to the standards of heteronormative femininity, and T. H. White, made present by his published and intimate writings, form a quite unusual couple of queer austringers, that is, keepers and trainers of goshawks. Both of them transform the ancestral practice of hunting with birds of prey into a strategy of de-centring and contesting the dominant, patriarchal and heteronormative order in which male hunter, taking pleasure in subduing other forms of human and non-human life, is a central figure of power and control.

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1. Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014).

2. The notion of relational autobiography, marking the paradigm shift emphasizing the related rather than solitary self and gaining growing popularity in recent literary studies, has been developed, among other scholars, by Anne Rüggemeier, *Die relationale Autobiographie: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie, Poetik und Gattungsgeschichte eines neuen Genres in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2014).

3. To quote just recent examples: Stephen Bodio, *A Rage for Falcons: An Alliance Between Man and Bird* (New York: Skyhorse, 2015); Nancy Cowan, *Peregrine Spring: A Master Falconer's Extraordinary Life with Birds of Prey* (Guilford, CT: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Tim Gallagher, *Falcon Fever* (Boston–New York: Mariner Books, 2008); Sy Montgomery, *The Hawk's Way. Encounters with Fierce Beauty* (New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–New Delhi: Atria Books, 2022); Rodney Stotts, *Bird Brother: A Falconer's Journey and the Healing Power of Wildlife* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2022).

Terence Hanbury White (1906–1964), a writer born in British India, was the author of several fantasy and science-fiction novels, as well as books dealing with falconry, such as *The Goshawk*.[4] He became best known for his recreation of the Arthurian world in a series of fantasy novels published jointly in 1958 under the title *The Once and Future King*, an edition that included former bestsellers such as *The Sword in the Stone*.[5] His childhood spent in the crippling shadow of an alcoholic father, allegedly responsible for the homosexual and sadomasochist tendencies attributed to the writer, was partially explored in a biography published three years after his death by Sylvia Townsend Warner.[6] Macdonald returns to the archives, reading White's private notebooks as well as his published works and delving in a queer life spent in the epoch in which homosexual tendencies were still the object of ostracism and susceptible of medical treatment.

Helen Macdonald herself was born in 1970 and grew up in Camberley in Surrey, a town situated at a distance of some fifty kilometres from London. *H Is for Hawk*, distinguished with 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction as well as Costa Book Award, is by far her most recognizable publication, although she has also authored other texts on falconry and its symbolism, namely *Falcon* (2005), as well as the collection of essays *Vesper Flights* (2020) dedicated to the topic of the Anthropocene extinction of species and destruction of the natural world. Having studied English at Cambridge University, she has made a career as a naturalist active in the media rather than author of fine literature in the traditional sense. Namely, she wrote and narrated several radio and television programmes; in 2010, she appeared in the BBC series *Birds Britannia* and in 2017, as a part of the BBC *Natural World* series, she created *H Is for Hawk: A New Chapter*, where she trained a new goshawk chick. Be that as it may, I argue that *H Is for Hawk* alone is enough to treat Helen Macdonald as an important contributor to the new wave of queer nature writing understood as a strand of literature deconstructing the practice of upper-class writing, well-rooted in British and European early-modern and modern culture, that used to serve the vanities of dominant heterosexual masculine subjects accentuating their class inscription through the practice of hunting. In the existing scholarship concerning this author, even bolder statements may be found. Just to give an example, in the optics of LeeAnn Derdeyn, *H Is for Hawk* is a book that "straddles all four waves of Ecocriticism" and might even be seen as a text "illustrating a proto-Fifth Wave Ecocriticism."[7] By this, the scholar means

4. T. H. White, *The Goshawk* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951).

5. T. H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* (London–Glasgow: Collins, 1938); T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London–Glasgow: Collins, 1958).

6. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1967).

7. LeeAnn Derdeyn, "Trauma and the Anthropocene: Fear and Loathing in Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 4 (2018), 767–768.

that Helen Macdonald introduces a new hope as she moves from her awareness of dire reality to a pragmatism of love and acceptance, promissory of further coexistence of species in the Anthropocene.

Manning various species of birds of prey (such as falcons, hawks, eagles, owls, and occasionally even vultures) is deeply rooted in mankind's prehistory. It is testified in diverse nomadic and sedentary cultures that developed over a great expanse of the Old World, on the steppes of Central Asia, in Korea and Japan, as well as Indian subcontinent, Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Those facts justified the recognition of falconry as a part of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in more than twenty countries. The official UNESCO statement describes it using such expressions as "traditional activity" and "cultural heritage" that is passed on from generation to generation, providing "a sense of belonging, continuity and identity" as well as "a way of connecting with nature." It is justified as a form of "conservation": increasing the "awareness of intangible cultural heritage and its importance" in order to ensure its "transmission."[8] Considerable attention should be paid to precise meanings associated with those rather cursory expressions. Certainly, in some cultures, those meanings are quite unsophisticated. Just to give an example, a seventeenth-century Pashtun falconry treatise barely goes beyond the justification of this practice as a legacy transmitted not only for the sake of a mere sporting activity, but also in order to strengthen the sense of belonging to a tribal lineage. Hunting with the birds of prey reinforces the links between male subjects:

> The art of hunting runs through
> Our very lineage
> We've inherited this great skill
> As a family heritage.[9]

In other contexts, the same ancestral input received far more refined elaboration. Falconry became a symbol of secular power and status, accompanying the ruler and epitomizing the state (this is why birds of prey appear so often in European heraldry). As it has been mentioned, it became the appanage of the upper classes in European societies. Yet it gained also an important place in the domain of religious and spiritual symbolism, translating human aspiration of heaven. In the Islamic world, the primordial hunting partnership became a symbol of

8. UNESCO, *Falconry, a Living Human Heritage*. 2021. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/falconry--a-living-human-heritage-01708 (21.08.2023).

9. Khushal Khan Khattak, *The Book of Falconry*, trans. Sami Ur Rahman (Islamabad: PanGraphics, 2014), 26.

the companionship of man and God or, like in the well-known mystical poem *The Seed Market* of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, of the gratuitous grace offered by God:

> A perfect falcon, for no reason
> has landed on your shoulder
> and become yours.[10]

Nonetheless, as it is easy to comprehend, contemporary hunting remains a highly objectionable practice both for ethical and ecological reasons, especially in the depleted natural world of the British Isles. What is more, the companionship of human and non-human predator is based on their common attack on a victim that may be larger than those usually killed by predatory birds. It is thus the human hunter that in most cases must actually end the life of the struggling prey. This is why the most dramatic, highly controversial passages of *H Is for Hawk* are dedicated precisely to the problem of death, killing and dying. What increases the transgressive complexity of Macdonald's text is the fact that she presents the relationship with the goshawk female Mabel as an element of the process of mourning after the death of her father, sketching a compelling personal story of grief. In parallel, the grieving over the disappearance of the paternal figure marks a crisis of patriarchal order and opens a space for questioning of gender identity. The subjectivity narrated in the text hardly enters the traditional frame of female taste, sensitivity and activities. On the other hand, intimate attention dedicated to T. H. White as a fellow austringer transforms the writer into a queer soulmate.

H Is for Hawk relates the period of approximately one year starting with the death of the author's father, a private "widening gyre" expressed, just like in Yeats's famous poem *The Second Coming* (1920), through the metaphor of a falcon and a falconer. The bereaved and frustrated female subject, unable to realize the socially accepted existential pattern of heteronormative relationship, motherhood and family, ends up resuming her situation by the identification of multiple spheres of lack and loss: "*No father, no partner, no child, no job, no home.*"[11] The goshawk serves as a crucial mediator in her discovery of the dualism of life and death, that from the private sphere expands into the social, national, and historical domain. Striving to fathom the mystery of death as she participates in the agony of the prey caught by her bird, she reflects on the shadow zone of bloodthirstiness, epitomized by the goshawk, but not alien to man. No wonder that the twentieth-century world wars appear constantly in the background of her

10. Jalal-al Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: Harper One, 2004), 53.

11. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 207 (italics in the text).

interspecies story as she muses on her understanding of Britishness and the sense of shadowy History that went on during the Cold War decades. Such historical musing encroaches onto the intimate sphere of family and private home. History is made present not only by the recollection of the father's passion for observing and cataloguing different types of aircraft landing in the nearby military base, but also by troubling domestic discoveries. The artefact that makes the austringer deeply perplexed is a statuette of an Übermensch with a goshawk on his fist that in 1937 had been offered to British falconers by none other than the Nazi leader Hermann Göring. By all means, even in the twentieth and the twenty-first century, falconry is a troubling legacy illuminating, in a random, and thus particularly disquieting way the bloody implications of patriarchal order and the dominant cultural constructs of male gender identity.

The triangle Macdonald – Mabel – T. H. White provides multiple intersections of time as one of the physical dimensions of the reality that mark the division between 'cultural' and 'natural' beings and create opportunities for their interconnections. In a parallel essay on *H Is for Hawk*,[12] I explored the way how the human partner of the hunting relationship adapts the "thirty-second" present of attack and seizure of the prey that is the dominant perception of time of a predator. Quite to the contrary, L. J. Boyle delves in the double connection of the human self to nature and to history, a temporality of duration that contrasts so sharply with the perspective of a natural predator: "For each [i.e. Macdonald and White], the act of training and flying a hawk simultaneously connects and disconnects them to and through history; readers become embedded in the same history as they follow both authors' journeys."[13]

Macdonald "re-stories" an interspecies practice – the relation between the hawk and the austringer – in such a way that it cannot be reduced to the primitivism of a futile pleasure of killing, a gratuitous destruction, or even instrumentalized as a mere hunting technique. This "re-storying" of falconry bears a queer inflection, since it is performed from the position of a blurred gender identity of a girl reading "boys' books" and implies the exploration of a homosexual legacy of T. H. White in which training the goshawk became a strategy of dealing with his own non-heteronormative urges. The queer subjects search for their inner clearness exploring a complex maze of the wild and the tame, as well as the stereotypically "male" affects related to killing and dying, epitomized by the figures of the hunter

12. Ewa A. Łukaszyk, "Becoming (In)human. The Search for an Alternative Present in Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk*," *Ilha do Desterro* 76, no. 2 (2023), 57–73.

13. Louis J. Boyle, "Helen Macdonald, T. H. White, and Hawks," in *Avian Aesthetics in Literature and Culture: Birds and Humans in the Popular Imagination*, ed. Danette DiMarco and Timothy Ruppert (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022), 154.

and the soldier. This is why the taming of a goshawk becomes a complex process of introspection and inner healing in the company of a non-human partner: it could have been for T. H. White and it is for Helen Macdonald.

Although hunting as such may not appear as an intellectually enriching activity, it is a fact that falconry, as it has been mentioned, has always been a centre of specific forms of literacy; as we have seen, even among the Pashtuns. In modern Great Britain, hunting adventures served as a pretext to create gender- and class-specific forms of autobiographical writing. This apparently obsolete legacy is revived by Macdonald to provide a paradoxical connection between the "misanthrope" queer subjects, hemmed in their bubbles of rural isolation in the margin of heteronormative society. She confesses that her childish habit of reading "all the boys' books" provided a leverage for her gender and class, as well as national identification:

> Being in the company of these authors was like being dropped into an exclusive public school, for they were almost entirely written a long time ago by bluff, aristocratic sportsmen who dressed in tweed, shot Big Game in Africa, and had Strong Opinions. […] I was unconsciously soaking up the assumptions of an imperial elite. I lived in a world where English peregrines always outflew foreign hawks, whose landscapes were grouse moors and manor houses, where women didn't exist.[14]

Reading T. H. White's autobiographical account in *The Goshawk* is an experience that stands out against this background. The book seemed particularly captivating precisely for the lack of expertise that White made ostentatious, contrasting so sharply with the certitudes of "the men in tweed." Most importantly, White was authentic, whereas the other British writers, independently of their rank, glory or competences, appeared as essentially ungenuine and deceitful. Later on, as White's reader, Macdonald delves not only in the Arthurian universe, but far more importantly, in a life in which violence suffered in childhood left an indelible trace, causing sadistic urges and the will of flying away from men and the so-called civilized life.

Although many testimonies raise doubts concerning the writer's effective homosexuality, presenting him euphemistically as a misanthrope unable of maintaining any close human relationships, the papers examined by Helen Macdonald on the occasion of their common interest in birds of prey throw a compassionate light on the struggle of T. H. White against multiple normativities. Macdonald studies White's notebooks dating from the period in which he followed a psychoanalytical therapy in order to get rid of the condition that at the time was

14. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 28.

diagnosed bluntly as a sadistic homosexuality. As a twenty-nine years old teacher at a school for boys, he was planning to abandon his profession in order to live entirely of his pen. Nonetheless, the proper source of his suffering, rather than homosexuality, seems to reside in the persistent fear of failure that he counters with endless demonstrations of skill and bravado, trying to excel precisely in the sports and hobbies that the dominant culture associated with heteronormative virility. He "flew aeroplanes, shot, fished for salmon, hunted,"[15] at the same time collecting books on flagellation and delving deeper and deeper in his alcoholism.

Macdonald's endeavour of a profound understanding of this tortured existence comes true only through the resource of a direct, vital experience of becoming-bird, coming close to the wandering concept of "becoming-animal" that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed in a number of their writings. Also in the austringer's case, the transformative experience kicks the human subject out of the realm of stability and continuity into the realm of anomaly and instantaneousness, epitomized by the temporal perspective of the predator (acute, sensual awareness of the world and beings in the moment of attack). This mode of sharp, instantaneous confrontation with the world alienates the queer subjects from the usual, human perspective of living through painful recollections, ruminations, and the fear of whatever the future might bring. The direct experience of the process of becoming-bird that Macdonald lives through after White fills the gaps that remained open at even the closest and most attentive reading of his texts. The original act of reading White was only the starting point of an exploration that could culminate only in shared practice. What is more, this intimate understanding of an "other life" and a fellow human being leads to a new level of queer self-awareness:

> Ever since I'd read *The Goshawk*, I'd wondered what kind of man White was and why he had tied himself to a hawk he seemed to hate. And when I trained my own hawk a little space opened, like a window through leaves, onto this other life, in which was a man who was hurt, and a hawk who was being hurt, and I saw them both more clearly. Like White, I wanted to cut loose from the world, and I shared, too, his desire to escape to the wild, a desire that can rip away all human softness and leave you stranded in a world of savage, courteous despair.[16]

It is important to notice that, since the very beginning, the choice of the art of austringer and of the goshawk rather than other bird species in marked as queer and marginal, as a transgression of the specific normative code of falconry. Even

15. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 36.
16. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 38.

in the ethically numb world of hunting, hawk appears as a demonized species. Macdonald takes significant notes from her readings of the pre-war writings of a certain Captain Gilbert Blaine:

> 'One cannot feel for a goshawk the same respect and admiration that ones does for a peregrine,' Blaine explained. 'The names usually bestowed upon her are a sufficient index to her character. Such names as 'Vampire,' 'Jezebel,' 'Swastika' or even 'Mrs Glasse' aptly fit her, but would ill become a peregrine.' Goshawks were ruffians: murderous, difficult to tame, sulky, fractious, and foreign. *Bloodthirsty,* wrote nineteenth-century falconer Major Charles Hawkins Fisher, with patent disapproval. *Vile*.[17]

It is not entirely clear why goshawks might bear the name of the author of a famous eighteenth-century cookbook, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. Perhaps the reason consists in the sophisticated techniques of butchery and meat carving included in Mrs Glasse's publication. Nonetheless, it seems that the vile aspect of the goshawk reflects the negative stereotype attributed to women. The hunting literature is vehicular of all sorts of prejudice and abusive valorization projected on the birds of prey: "Like women, goshawks were inexplicable. Sulky. Flighty and hysterical. Their moods were pathological. They were beyond all reason."[18] As the austringer reads extensively the forgotten falconry literature, she is confronted with that negative messages expressed without euphemism or subterfuge precisely in those minor genres of writing. Responding to it by her own experience as an austringer, she deconstructs and re-stories her own queer identity, confronting the prejudice she had internalized. The prejudice is cast by "male" men, all of them with military ranks. Non-heteronormative men, on the other hand, seem to be at the same time those who train goshawks rather than "real," "proper" falcons and those who fall apart from the military ranks.

The trauma and intimate tragedy of T. H. White seem to derive from the same militarized conception of masculinity. First of all, he fails to be a soldier. As he wrote in his private papers, his father used to force him to stand in front of a toy castle as a victim condemned to die and waiting to be executed. This drill did not teach him soldiery braveness in confrontation with death; on the contrary, he was drilled to victimhood. The game marked him with a pervading sense of powerlessness. Yet curiously, White seems to transcend or sublime the condition of a soldier rather than fail to epitomize it quite plainly. As a proof, Macdonald recounts her encounter with a retired U2 pilot who confessed to have read, on his twelve-hour solo missions of espionage, precisely the novels of White: "his deadpan

17. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 23.
18. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 112.

Yeager drawl slipped, was replaced with a shy, childlike enthusiasm. '*The Once and Future King*' […]. I used to take that up, read it on the way out and the way back."[19] Delving deeper in the paradox, Macdonald reaches the conclusion that the quality by which White transcends the "male" condition of a soldier is his ability to overcome loneliness into the self-aware solitude, a virtue that a non-heteronormative marginal is able to bring back into the communitarian life and the sphere of those patriotisms he had apparently disavowed.

Overall, the process of taming the goshawk, one of the most difficult bird species used in falconry, is a daring move right into the heart of darkness, mediating and bringing onto the surface the profound interdependence of the centre and margin, the shared values and eccentricities of a rebellious outcast, the sanity and madness, the norm and transgression. *The Goshawk* proves to be something more than a mundane book about hunting. It describes not an aristocratic social practice, but a true spiritual contest, in which the goshawk incarnates the emotions that in the Jungian psychoanalysis are identified as those of the Shadow. The bloodthirsty bird, extremely hard to tame, epitomizes the darkness. Yet its source lies not in the non-human nature, but rather in the very core of the human soul, and in what the bereaved woman lucidly recognizes as her own silent madness: "It was a madness designed to keep me sane. My mind struggled to build across the gap, make a new and inhabitable world."[20] In other words, it is the essence of her queerness.

Studying White's writings, the bereaved woman discovers the complexity and ambivalence of a fellow tormented soul responding to the same call of the wilderness: "He is a wicked man. A free man. A man who is cast out, the man who fell. *Feral. Ferox. Fairy.*"[21] Just like in the imaginary logic of the Middle Ages, the concept of 'fairy' serves as a bridge between the human world and the forces beyond. In the contemporary way of thinking, the same intermediary role seems to be connected to gender ambivalence and queer sublimation of the usual, heteronormative attitudes and modes of being.

For a woman feeling that everything (human relations, job, even the house to live in) slips out of her grip, the bird of prey epitomizes the lacking quality resumed in one verb: "Seize."[22] At the same time, it opens access to the primordial time of beginnings and its elemental energies. She sees the goshawk as a living dinosaur: "There was a distinct, prehistoric scent to her feathers; it caught in my

19. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 32.
20. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 16.
21. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 132.
22. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 18.

nose, peppery, rusty as storm-rain."[23] The relation with the bird opens a path of connection with the pre-human time of purely animal life. The primordial power inscribed in the bird is thus experienced as a way of connection with the universality of life rather than distinction from it or an illusory sensation of belonging to an exclusive elite (as a representative of a species and as a member of a social group) endowed with dominance and control. Paradoxically, the way to empowerment passes also through the confrontation with a primordial fear, deeper and more elemental than human anxiety. The connection is conditioned by the necessity of complete erasure and depletion of the human ego in confrontation with the non-human partner:

> Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready to flight. I don't look at her. I mustn't. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there*.[24]

The bird is fearful, yet lives beyond human anxiety. It epitomizes an ideal of insensibility or non-human ataraxia: "solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life."[25] This is why, on the fantasy pages written by White, the medieval story of Merlin who transforms his disciple Wart into various animals, including the bird merlin, is so compelling. Becoming-bird is lived as a liberation.

The crucial element making falconry so attractive for the queer subject is the interplay of separation, loss, and return. As an element of the traditional training process, the bird is initially restrained by a sort of leash that in the specialized terminology is called *creance*. Only after being trained to return, over and over again, to the lure presented by the falconer, the bird is released to fly unrestrained. This training aiming at creating the habit of returning to the lure is the only element of domestication of the wild animal. The hawk, even bred in captivity, may very easily pass to the feral state. The risk of losing the bird is thus very high at any stage of the outdoor hunting expedition. A manned bird of prey is not tame in the same sense as a dog, a horse or any other domesticated animal. This is why this peculiar relationship is much more demanding and, in a way, much more intimate than other kinds of interspecies relationships, where domination and submission play a crucial role. As Helen Macdonald explains it, "hawks aren't

23. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 19.
24. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 66–67.
25. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 85.

social animals like dogs or horses; they understand neither coercion nor punishment. The only way to tame them is through positive reinforcement with gifts of food."[26] The bird soaring into the air remains constantly beyond the reach of human power and control. The manning does not reduce the hawk to the role of a living tool permitting to catch the prey desired by man. The non-human hunting partner remains an independent, uncontrollable subject, a permanent source of incertitude as well as complex affects such as hope and trust that are constantly in the centre of the austringer's experience.

In her incessant wandering between falconry literature and the psychoanalysis in which White was hoping to find a cure, Macdonald reads about the case of a child obsessed with ropes and strings, analysed by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. Allegedly, the examined boy used to tie the familiar objects with strings. As the conclusion from the therapy, his gesture was interpreted as an attempt at exorcizing the fear of abandonment by his mother. Similarly, the austringer tries to deal with her bereavement, "to hold on to something that had already flown away."[27] This is why her relationship with the hawk, the use of *creance,* and the experience of progressively letting the bird fly unrestrained over longer and longer distances may acquire a therapeutic value. The return of the bird, as Macdonald confesses, is a great soothing experience: "there was nothing that was such a salve to my grieving heart."[28] At the stage of confidence and trust, the identification with the bird becomes almost total: "It was hard, now, to distinguish between my heart and the hawk at all. […] I felt incomplete unless the hawk was sitting on my hand: we were parts of each other."[29] Overall, the austringer manages to instate a better, happier world, or at least an illusion of it; a world of harmony and plenitude in which nothing is missing and nothing requires to be tighten with ropes. Those happy dreams contrast with those narrated in White's notebook. Instead of sharing his obsessive visions of women with penises, she sleeps soundly, dreaming "of creances, of lines and knots, of skeins of wool, skeins of geese flying south."[30]

The queer appropriation of the male practice of falconry bears characteristically female traces. One of such traces is the maternal affect of the austringer at the moment of the first successful kill made by the trained hawk. She could simply be glad that the bird caught a pheasant that makes an excellent meal. Nonetheless, rather than rejoicing in the newly acquired dimension of power and control,

26. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 67.
27. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 49.
28. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 135.
29. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 135.
30. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 143.

the childless woman comes as close to the joy of maternity as she has ever been. She experiences a profound satisfaction, because she makes the young hawk live up to its predator destiny. She is glad about her role of facilitator, fostering the development and self-fulfilment of a being that is other than herself: "The hawk […] becomes a child. It shakes me to the core. She is a child. A baby hawk that's just worked out who she is. What she is for. I reach down and start, unconsciously as a mother helping a child with her dinner, plucking the pheasant with the hawk. For the hawk."[31] Surprisingly, she discovers the same experience of mothering in White's testimony: "Through the hawk, White could become a mother, a 'man who for two months had made that bird, almost like a mother nourishing her child inside her, for the subconsciousness of the bird and the man became really linked by a mind's cord.'"[32]

Paradoxically, the whole process of becoming *feral*, *ferox*, *fairy*, that has been presented in such bold terms as an embodied experience, has also everything to do with an intensely lived experience of literacy. Macdonald approaches written texts of all sorts with the extreme mindfulness and acuteness of perception that she has acquired during her hunting expeditions. In spite of the directness of her relationship with the hawk, the austringer is aware of the bookish factor in her becoming-bird:

> I'd turned myself into a hawk – taken all the traits of goshawks in the books and made them my own. I was nervous, highly strung, paranoid, prone to fits of terror and rage; I ate greedily or didn't eat at all; I fled from society, hid from everything; found myself drifting into strange states where I wasn't certain who or what I was.[33]

Certainly, having read White's *The Sword in the Stone* is there for something, even if the adult experience goes far beyond the childish sensibility. Nonetheless, there is some culminating point in this double, bookish and hawkish, frenzy. Just like Cervantes's Don Quijote, the bereaved woman reaches the point in which she rediscovers the gap between books and life. From that point on, she glosses on the futility of her identification with the hawk, deconstructing the illusions transmitted by both ethnological accounts of shamanism and European literature, such as the tale of Merlin and his young disciple transformed into a bird. At the end of the process, she rediscovers her own untransgressable condition of being human and the necessity of the return from the wilderness to the community of fellow human beings. The urge is fulfilled in the banal form of a Christmas

31. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 184.
32. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 114.
33. Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*, 212.

party spent with her family. Nonetheless, the adventure of the austringer remains transformative; it is, in a way, an initiation. Overall, the adventure ends by the recovery of a home, a self-domestication of the queer woman, a great return from the wilderness to 'normalcy,' the normative world of human society. The transformation of the bird might be narrated in parallel terms of maturation and completed cyclicity. At the closure of the narration, the bird is placed in the foster care of a falconer friend for the period of moult. Mabel progressively loses her juvenile plumage and gets her adult feathers.

Conclusion

In the groundbreaking essay *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben sketched quite a perturbing vision of an eschatological interspecies community devouring meat during the banquet of the end of the world. Taking for the starting point a thirteenth-century miniature from the Hebrew Bible conserved in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, he rose the problem of human and predatory animal commensalism, the importance of the trans-species community of meat eaters. The most striking feature of the commented miniature, illustrating the theme of the eschatological feast of the righteous in Ezekiel's vision, is the fact that the "reminder" of humanity who are alive on the last day of history are endowed with animal heads. According to the rabbinic tradition, on the table set for the feast there are various kinds of meat that the righteous can eat, no matter if the food is kosher or not. It is all about the final consumption of the monstrous creatures of the beginnings, Behemoth and Leviathan, who had been expressly reserved by God, as we can read in Baruch's Revelation (29,4), for this eschatological banquet.[34] The final moments of human history are reserved for the task of regaining the animal, "feral" condition. It is the utter fulfilment of the destiny of man as a carnivore and a predator. At the same time, the eschatological vision implies theriocephaly, replacing the human head with the animal one. For it is the head, containing the face expressing the emotions, the mouth that produces speech, and the brain as a location of human volition and capacity for coordinated action, what distinguishes humans from other creatures. The head contains the energy-consuming, ever-hungry brain, the source of both our cultural sophistication and our appetite for meat.

The miniature analysed by Agamben presents a synthesis of predators feeding jointly and merging into one, hybrid form. The meat feast of the end of the world

34. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21–23.

appears as the fulfilment and, at the same time, as a redemption of that primordial voracious and bloodthirsty community from which man tried in vain to break apart. The end of mankind is thus a return to the beginning: eschatological humanity recovers and redeems what is the most archaic in man, the primordial power of the hawk seen as a living dinosaur. This feasting and feeding, free from ritual restrictions (making no distinction between kosher and non-kosher foods), marks the obliteration of the border separating humanity from the rest of creation. Certainly, what differentiates man from the animal is the existence of a cultural norm. The humanity of the end of the world regains its pre-cultural, and thus pre-normative state.

In a way, the eschatological merging of human and non-human predator, analysed by Agamben, is fulfilled in the relation between the queer subject and the hawk. Nonetheless, the final choice that Macdonald presents in her book is that of a secular, human feast, epitomized by the banal celebration of a Christmas party at home. Perhaps, after all, the name "Mrs Glasse," evoking a vulgar cooking housewife, befits the hawk and the austringer alike. It is curious to observe that a highly specific, liminal experience of becoming-bird as a peculiar way of being-in-time and being-in-the-world has, firstly, a paradoxical articulation with literature. The austringer that merges with the acute senses of the predatory bird is at the same time an extremely sensitive, almost hyper-competent reader. Even if the austringer, in the trance of her becoming-bird, denies any connection with the past and delves in the "thirty-second" time perspective of a predator catching her prey, the interplay with collective identity shared through writing comes to the fore. The book speaks, in a subtle, allusive way, of the British history in the twentieth and the twenty-first century, evoking the sky that is for aircraft, not just for hawks. The bloodthirstiness evoked is not that of animal predators, but also that of sadistic society and traumatic intraspecies relationships that crippled the queer subjects. At the bottom line, what makes Macdonald's story so compelling is her double competence as austringer and reader applied to a very real circumstance of contemporary life – the bereavement conjugated with love deception, childlessness, lack of professional inscription that might anchor the queer woman in social life. What emerges at the close of the transformative adventure is longing for a human home.

The manning of a hawk never leads to a complete domestication; similarly incomplete is the domestication of the austringer. Returning from the wilderness and recovering her social functioning, the queer subject seems determined to maintain a trace of her feral condition. The queer rewriting of an archaic, predominantly male tradition, performed by Macdonald stepping on the traces of T. H. White, transforms falconry into an inner, almost spiritual practice, quite independent of hunting as a sport unfitting the ethics of our times.

Overall, Helen Macdonald's book exhales a vague scent of nostalgia nurtured by the queer subject in relation to the by-gone, traditional and conservative ways of life, epitomized by the imperial elite inhabiting rural mansions. "Men in tweed" left behind a troubling legacy of all those well-informed and well-opinionated books about hunting the austringer used to read already as an eight-year-old girl. Nonetheless, the contemporary queer reader knows that this nostalgia is anchored in something irretrievably gone, just like the old hope of getting "cured" of one's queerness thanks to psychoanalysis and the habit of keeping a diary of one's dreams. Beyond the range of conservative longings, the queer condition is to remain forever, certainly not to heal. The only concession to the 'normalcy' that remains available consists in indulging periodically in that all-too-British pleasure of coming home for Christmas.

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