A Poem by Robinson Jeffers Compared to a Poem by Ted Hughes

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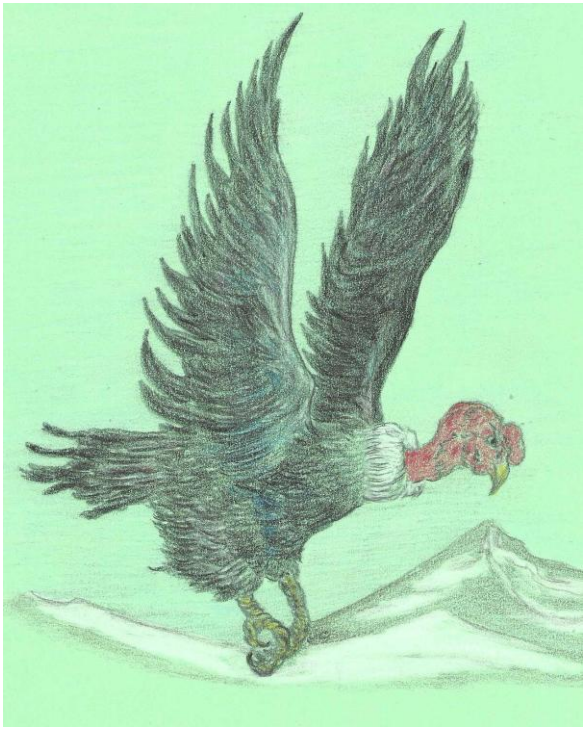

The Condor

My head is bald with cleaving heaven,
And rough my feathers with the grip
Of clashing winds and clouds wind-driven.
But what of that? My wings can dare
All loneliest hanging heights of air;
Above the jagged mountain-lip
Their solemn slant and downward dip
Greet the red sun each morn and even.
The storm knows well their broad expanse,
For they can breast its pulsing power
When even the steadfast planets dance
Dizzily thro' the riotous rack
Of ruined, tattered clouds that scour
O'er heaven. On the tempest's back
I clasp my wings, and like a horse
I rein in, mastering its force.
Then, tiring of the sport, I stretch
Upward above its region, far
As if I strove to climb and fetch
The utmost little silver star.
Then I lean low with a flat wing
Upon the lucid air, and swing
Amid the regions of pure peace.
I reck not of earth below,
But swing, and soar, and never cease,
In circles large and full and slow,
With such a movement, such a grace,
That I forget my ugliness.

Il Condor

Il mio capo è calvo perché fendo il cielo,
E ruvide le penne per la presa
Dei venti in corsa e delle alianti nubi.
E che? Le mie ali sanno sfidare
Le ultime solitarie alture dell'aria;
Sopra il bordo frastagliato del monte
Quei vanni solenni, le punte in basso,
Salutano il sole di sera e di mattina.
La tempesta conosce la loro apertura,
Perché sanno affrontare la sua forza
Quando anche i pianeti costanti danzano
Confusi nella sfrenata corsa
Delle sfilacciate, scorrazzanti nubi
Del cielo. Sul dorso della tempesta
Aggancio le ali, e come un cavallo
La guido, padrone della sua energia.
Poi, stanco del gioco, mi allungo
Sopra la sua regione, lontano,
Come se salissi a prendere
La più piccola stella d'argento.
Poi discendo con l'ali tese
Per l'aria lucida, e mi libro
Nelle regioni della pura pace.
Non mi curo della terra al di sotto,
Mi libro, e salgo, né mai mi fermo,
In cerchi larghi e pieni e lenti,
Con tale moto, con tale grazia,
Che dimentico la mia bruttezza.

[1904]

"The Condor" was published in June 1904 in *The Youth's Companion*, at the time when Jeffers was an undergraduate at Occidental College. It can now be read in the section *Early Poems, (1903-1911)*, in volume 4 of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Tim Hunt, Stanford University Press, 2000.

It is composed of both rhyming couplets and alternate rhymes: if the first sixteen lines are divided into two parts, the structure of *ottava rima* is discernible, although irregular, which creates a pleasant and varied musical sequence; the last twelve lines have a more regular pattern, with two quatrains of alternate rhymes, each followed by a rhyming couplet.

The reader hears a strange, novel voice which expatiates upon the exhilaration of living and moving where only the air is the element; that voice is the condor's, not the poet's, and this makes a possible comparison with a similar poem, Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting", worth considering.

Here is Hughes' poem:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No argument asserts my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

[1959]

Both poems belong to the genre called "dramatic monologue," which was brought to perfection in nineteenth-century English literature by Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning. The reader is confronted with an imaginary speaker addressing an imaginary audience.

What is surprising in these two monologues, as has been hinted above, is that the speakers' voices are not human: the reader is neither invited into the castle of a despotic Renaissance Duke ambiguously confessing to the murder of his young, innocent wife (Browning's *My Last Duchess*), nor into the arid wilderness north of Aleppo where an emaciated Hermit painfully reveals the selfish ambition behind his long life of hard penance (Tennyson's *St Simeon Stylites*).

In fact, the voices belong to two birds of prey, and each of them makes clear that the sphere they inhabit has nothing in common with the petty circumstances that define men's world and men's lives.

The artistic aim of the two poems is that words, that is *human* symbols, be finally able to evoke a dimension which is *inhuman*.

Some readers may find themselves wondering if this is indeed feasible.

Hughes' poem seems to be a celebration of violence and cruelty: the hawk is a machine devoted to "tearing off heads – / The allotment of death." Sitting high in the top of the wood, the powerful bird contemplates Creation as his own property, even when his eyes are closed, the purpose of every creature that crawls or moves or flies below him being to satisfy his insatiable appetite ("Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat."). He is not grateful to nature for what it offers to him: he is indeed its master, and things will never change, because they suit him perfectly.

Readers who object to the poem on the basis of a supposed apology of fascism, fail to see that the hawk does not offer an ideological program, but candidly presents a way of life that has nothing to do with things human: trees reach to heaven for his own convenience, the earth lies at his feet for his inspection, his feathers and his hooked beak and his talons were created to allow him to carry out his mission, the air's buoyancy is to his advantage. He does not need to justify his own existence: "No arguments assert my right". Even the sun shines only for him to see his direct flight.

The hawk seems thus to have effortlessly and indifferently realized one of the oldest dreams of man: his insuppressible yearning to live in beauty and perfection. No doubt or uncertainty ever enters his head, his heart is never restless, unlike so many human hearts: not only has he centered himself in the invariable, he stays there.

The reader begins to see that there is no selfishness in the bird, and no arrogance: these are, in fact, man's typical faults. His life is pure and free because he is *not* human.

In order to be able to enter the bird's head the poet has climbed over the fence that defines and limits our consciousness, and he tells us that out there things are different.

Out there a hawk is a hawk.

Jeffers' poem presents the otherness of the condor. He is the haughty inhabitant of the air, and despises the earth ("I reck not of earth below"). Dancing in the sky while performing unbelievable acts of beauty and suppleness ("My wings can dare / All loneliest hanging heights of air") is natural to him, he can ride storms without experiencing any fear ("On the tempest's back /I clasp my wings, and like a horse /I rein in, mastering its force"), and when his acts of bravery tire him, he soars up to the "utmost little silver star." No human constraint, no sophistry make themselves heard up there, where the power of his perfectly working muscles and feathers measures itself against the sheer force of the uncontrollable elements. The slant and dip of his wings are the culmination of the incessant activity of nature, his movements are always gracious, to such an extent that he loses himself in them, — and forgets his ugliness. (The nobility of "ungainly bodies" will be fully celebrated by Jeffers in "Pelicans", a poem which came out in his collection *The Women at Point Sur*, 1925-1926.)

The last line is indeed memorable. The beauty that the condor creates in the air makes the apparent lack of beauty in his body utterly irrelevant: one might say that a metamorphosis is at work here, thanks to which the performer is splendidly transformed into the performance. In the same way as a dancer becomes one with his dance, so the condor becomes one with the purity and lightness and clarity of the air. The concluding lines of W. B. Yeats' "Among School Children", included in his book *The Tower*, published in 1928, come to mind at this point, with their enigmatic question:

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Yeats' dream of bridging the gulf between *doing* and *knowing*, which has repeatedly proved impossible to man, is actually the natural condition of the condor, — and of the hawk.

Far from being examples of *hubris*, then, the two birds incarnate man's fundamental longing, his aspiration to discover the axis which is the root of himself and of the universe. Confucius discussed this topic in depth with his disciples, and they recorded his words of wisdom in the pages of *Chung Yung*, known in English as *The Unwobbling Pivot*.

Ezra Pound, who was fascinated by that treatise, offered Western readers his translation:

> [The man of breed] stands firm in the middle of what whirls without leaning on anything either to one side or the other, his energy is admirably rectificative; … The man of breed pivots himself on the unchanging and has faith.

Clearly, both poems partake of beauty, and both are thought-provoking: now the time seems ripe to consider the readers' doubt mentioned above.

In spite of their philosophical import, in fact, the two poems seem to be liable to the criticism summarized by John Ruskin in the phrase "pathetic fallacy", which he first used in his book *Modern Painters* in 1856. According to Ruskin a writer is pathetically fallacious when he ascribes human feelings to Nature. To illustrate his point Ruskin quotes the following lines from Coleridge's *Christabel*:

> The one red leaf, the last of its clan
> That dances as often as dance it can.

Such passages are, in his view, "morbid," however beautiful they may be, because they apply not to the "true appearances of things to us," but to the "extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion or contemplative fancy."

It is common knowledge that language is unknown to birds, beasts, and flowers: yet the two poets make a condor and a hawk think in words, the very symbols that only humans resort to when they want to convey their thoughts, or give vent to their emotions, or tell their lies. Writing dramatic monologues whose object is to reveal the inner workings of animal brains, may thus be compared to the specious effort of a mind trying to imagine a wooden stone, or the son of a barren woman, — a contradiction in terms.

When Jeffers later articulated and preached the austere doctrine that earned him so much bitter criticism and misunderstanding, *i.e.* Inhumanism, he abandoned such literary choices that threatened to reach a logical impasse. He decided to no longer concentrate upon sentimental communion with the natural world, and to show his readers, instead, how unapproachable hurt hawks really are, very dangerous even when they are mortally wounded; and to celebrate the indifferent and solid beauty of a majestic rock wall "in the pathless gorge of Ventana Creek"; and to evoke the passionate bodies of the living flame in the sun:

> They are animals, as we are. There are many other chemistries
> of animal life
> Besides the slow oxidation of carbohydrates and amino-acids.
> ("Animals")

This is the world which is beyond the reach of humans: hopefully they will neither colonize nor ruin it; hopefully they will learn to respond to it with awe and respect, and this is the true meaning of Inhumanism, a philosophical attitude that may allow the most unquiet inhabitant of this planet to cultivate nobler ends.

In a letter to a friend in 1992, Hughes remembered that writing "Hawk Roosting" had been one of the best moments in his life, and that poem was rightly received with high acclaim, as an example of a new way of writing poetry.

Very likely, Jeffers' "Condor" went unnoticed, and it is still seldom read, let alone appreciated, although its images and rhythms may stay in the memory of readers with affinity for many days, after they have placed the book back on its shelf. Indeed, it is a remarkable achievement by a very promising young poet.

Finally, as far as chronology is concerned, it seems right and proper not to forget, before leaving the two birds to their awesome solitude, that Robinson Jeffers' Condor acrobatically and beautifully circled in the highest skies fifty-five years before Ted Hughes' Hawk sat in the top of the wood, when John Robinson Jeffers was seventeen years old.