LIVING AS A BIRD

VINCIANE DESPRET

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Translated by Helen Morrison

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Dedication

For Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers

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FIRST CHORD

Counterpoint

> There are more things between heaven and earth (the realm of birds) than our philosophy can easily explain.
>
> Étienne Souriau[1]

It all began with a blackbird. My bedroom window had remained open for the first time for many months, a symbol of victory over the winter. The blackbird's song woke me at dawn. He was singing with all his heart, with all his strength, with all his blackbird talent. From a little further away, probably from a nearby chimney, another bird replied. I could not get back to sleep. This blackbird was singing, as the philosopher Étienne Souriau would say, with all *the enthusiasm* of his body, as animals do when they are utterly absorbed in their play and in the simulation of whatever it is they are acting out.[2] Yet it was not this enthusiasm that kept me awake, nor what an ill-humoured biologist might have called a noisy demonstration of evolutionary success. It was the sustained determination of this blackbird to vary each series of notes. From the second or third call, I was spellbound by what was transforming into an audiophonic novel, each episode of which I greeted with an unspoken 'and what next?' Each sequence differed from the preceding one; each was reinvented as a new and original counterpoint.

From that day on, my window remained open every night. With each successive sleepless episode like the one I experienced that first morning, I rediscovered the same surprise, the same sense of anticipation which prevented me from going back to sleep (or even wishing to do so). The bird sang. But never before had song seemed so close to speech. These were phrases. Recognizable as such. They

caught my ear in exactly the same way as words themselves would do. And yet, in that sustained effort imposed by the urge to avoid repetition, never had song seemed further removed from language. This was speech, but taut with beauty and where every single word mattered. The silence held its breath and I felt it tremble in tune with the song. I had the most clear and intense feeling that, at that moment, the fate of the entire world, or perhaps the existence of beauty itself, rested on the shoulders of this blackbird.

Étienne Souriau referred to the enthusiasm of the body. The composer Bernard Fort told me that certain ornithologists use the word ‘exaltation’ with reference to skylarks.[3] For this blackbird, the word ‘importance’ imposed itself above all else. Something mattered, more than anything else, and nothing else mattered except the act of singing. And whatever it was that mattered was invented in a blackbird’s song, suffusing it completely, transporting it, carrying it onwards, to others, to the other blackbird nearby, to my body straining to hear it, to the furthest limits to which its strength could convey it. Perhaps that feeling I had of a total silence, clearly impossible given the urban environment beyond my window, was evidence that this sense of importance had seized me so powerfully that everything outside that song had ceased to exist. The song had brought me silence. The sense of importance had imposed itself on me.

Perhaps also the song affected me so powerfully because I had recently read *The Companion Species Manifesto* by Donna Haraway.[4] In this extremely beautiful book, the philosopher describes the relationship that she has forged with her dog, Cayenne. She explains how this relationship has had a profound effect on the way she relates to other beings, or, more precisely, to ‘relations of significant otherness’, how it has taught her to become more aware of

the world around her, more closely attuned to it, more curious, and how she hopes that the experiences she has shared with Cayenne will stimulate an appetite for new forms of commitment with other beings who will one day matter in the same way. What Haraway's book *does*, and I was struck by this in the context of my own experience, is to stimulate, encourage and bring into existence, to render attractive, other modes of attention.[5] And to focus attention on these forms of attentiveness. It is a matter not of becoming more sensitive (a rather too convenient hotchpotch of a notion which could just as easily lead to allergies) but of learning *how* to pay attention and becoming capable of doing so. *Paying attention* here with an added sense of being attuned, of 'giving your attention' to other beings and at the same time acknowledging the way other beings are themselves attentive. It is another way of acknowledging importance.

The ethnologist Daniel Fabre would often describe his profession as one which focused attention on whatever prevented people from sleeping. The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro came up with a very similar definition of anthropology, describing it as the study of variations of importance. He writes moreover that, 'if there is something that *de jure* belongs to anthropology, it is not the task of explaining the world of the other but that of multiplying our world.'[6] I believe that many of the ethologists who observe and study animals, following in the footsteps of the naturalists who preceded them and who took this task so much to heart, invite us to follow a similar path: that of becoming aware of, of multiplying '*modes of existence*' – in other words, 'ways of experiencing, of feeling, of making sense, and of granting importance to things'.[7] When the ethologist Marc Bekoff says that each animal is a way of knowing the world, he is saying the same thing. Scientists cannot, of course, dispense with

explanations altogether, but explaining can take many very diverse forms. It can, for example, be a way of reconfiguring complicated stories as the vagaries of life which stubbornly insists on trying out every possible variation, or it can mean trying to seek answers for puzzling problems, the solutions to which have already been invented by this or that animal, but it can also reflect a determination to find a general all-purpose theory to which everything would conform. Put another way, there are explanations which end up multiplying worlds and celebrating the emergence of an infinite number of modes of existence and others which seek to impose order, bringing them back to a few basic principles.

The blackbird had begun to sing. Something mattered to him, and at that moment nothing else existed except the overriding obligation to allow something to be heard. Was he hailing the end of the winter? Was he singing about the sheer joy of existing, the sense of feeling himself alive once again? Was he offering up praise to the cosmos? Scientists would probably steer clear of such language. But they could nevertheless assert that all the cosmic forces of an emerging spring had converged to provide the blackbird with the preliminary conditions for his metamorphosis.[8] For this is indeed a metamorphosis. This blackbird, who had probably lived through a relatively peaceful winter, albeit a challenging one, punctuated from time to time by a few unconvincing moments of indignation towards his fellow creatures, intent on maintaining a low profile and living a quiet life, is now singing his heart out, perched on the highest and most visible spot he could find. And everything that the blackbird had experienced and felt over the last few months, everything which had, until that moment, given meaning to things and to other creatures, now becomes part of a new importance, one which is urgent and

insistent and which will totally modify his manner of being. He has become territorial.

Notes

1. E. Souriau, *Le Sens artistique des animaux.* Paris: Hachette, 1965, p. 92.

2. Ibid., p. 34.

3. Bernard Fort would moreover give the title ‘Exaltation’ to one of his electroacoustic compositions based on the songs of skylarks: *Le Miroir des oiseaux* (Groupe de Musiques vivantes de Lyon, produced by Chiff-Chaff records).

4. D. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

5. Baptiste Morizot invites us to take a similar direction with his conception of tracking as an art and a culture of attentiveness which encourages us to re-examine the ways in which we cohabit with other species as well as with humans.

6. E. Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014, p. 196.

7. D. Debaise, *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 2. The speculative question which runs through his work, ‘how to grant due importance to the multiplicity of ways of being within nature’, is based on the acknowledgement of the ever-present influence of what Whitehead called the ‘bifurcation of nature’, the effects of which are still being felt, notably in the denial of plural forms of existence within nature. The ‘bifurcation of nature’,

which determines our modern experience of the world, refers to a way of understanding for which our experience reveals only what is apparent, whereas the elements necessary for the process of discovery and understanding are always hidden and must be found elsewhere. As a result, nature ends up divided into two distinct systems.

8. In the work of Louis Bounoure the expression ‘cosmic factors’ recurs repeatedly to indicate, in particular, the lengthening of daylight and the modification in temperatures. L. Bounoure, *L’Instinct sexuel: étude de psychologie animale*. Paris: PUF, 1956.

1
Territories

Unicum arbustum haud alit

Duos erithacos

(A single tree cannot shelter two robins)
Proverb by Zenodotus of Ephesus
(Greek philosopher, third century BC)

Scientists have found themselves genuinely intrigued by this process of metamorphosis. And not just intrigued, but moved at the same time. How can these birds, some of whom have been observed quietly living together through the winter, flying in unison, seeking food together, sometimes squabbling over apparently trivial matters, somehow, at a given moment, adopt a completely different attitude? From that point on, they isolate themselves from other birds, select a particular place and confine themselves to it, singing ceaselessly from one of their chosen promontories. Seemingly no longer able to tolerate the presence of their fellow creatures, they furiously devote all their energy to a frenzy of threats and attacks if any of these dares to cross a line, invisible to our eyes, but which appears to represent a remarkably well-defined border. The strangeness of their behaviour is astonishing enough, but even more striking is the aggressivity, the utter determination and pugnacity of their reactions towards others and, above all, what will later be referred to as the incredible ‘profusion’ of songs and poses – colours, dances, flights, movements of the most extravagant nature, all of them spectacular, all of them elements of a veritable spectacle. And the equally astonishing repetition of the

routines involved in the process of setting up a territory. In 1920, Henry Eliot Howard described how a male reed bunting, observed from his home in the English countryside of Worcestershire, set about establishing his territory. The bird chose a marshy area planted with small alders and willows. Any of these trees would have provided a suitable perch from which to survey the surrounding area, but the bunting chose one in particular, which would in a sense become the most important spot in the chosen area, the bird's 'headquarters', as Howard would call them. This would be the base from which he would signal his presence by his singing, monitor the movements of his neighbours and go off in search of food. Howard observed a specific routine taking shape around what would become the centre of the bird's territory: the bird would leave the tree, go and perch in a nearby shrub, then on a bulrush a little further away, before returning once more to the tree. These journeys would be repeated in all directions with remarkable regularity. Their endless repetition mapped out the territory and gradually established its limits.

Other descriptions are possible. These would quickly follow, since Howard had clearly opened the floodgates to a whole stream of research in this area and was widely acknowledged by all the scientists working in this field as its genuine founder. His book *Territory in Bird Life*, published in 1920, not only provides meticulously detailed descriptions but also sets out a coherent theory which provides the explanation for these observations. According to Howard, the birds are engaged in securing a territory which will enable them to mate, build a nest, protect their young and find enough food to provide for their brood.

I should point out, first of all, that Howard was not a professional scientist but, rather, a naturalist who was passionate about observing birds, an activity to which he devoted the first hours of each day, before going to work.

But scientists would quickly follow in his footsteps, acknowledging him as the true pioneer of this new field of research. Territory, as Howard understood it, could now be regarded as a valid scientific subject and could be explained in terms of the 'functions' it sustained in relation to the survival of the species. Moreover, in order to signal the arrival of this subject in the scientific domain, ornithologists would refer to a 'pre-territorial' period, indicating any theoretical speculations which preceded Howard. Secondly, it should also be pointed out that Howard was not in fact the first person to have associated territorial behaviour with the functions it could sustain and with the demands of reproduction. Two other writers had done so before him, notably Bernard Altum, the German zoologist who, in 1868, in a book which would not however be translated until considerably later, had developed a detailed theory of territory, and another amateur, Charles Moffat, a journalist with a passion for natural history, whose writings, published in 1903 in the relatively obscure *Irish Naturalist's Journal*, would escape the notice of scientists. If Howard is acknowledged as the true pioneer of research in this area, it is first of all because he was the first writer, among those *read* by English and American ornithologists, to propose a detailed and coherent theory in a domain hitherto dominated by a great many speculative hypotheses.[1] In addition, Howard was responsible for the growing popularity of a new method focusing on the *life stories* of individual birds. This is significant in that it was a matter not just of telling the story of birds but of becoming familiar with their 'lives'. We should not forget that, until then, many ornithologists and amateurs studied birds largely by killing them or by taking their eggs to form collections or to draw up categories.

What scientists refer to as the 'pre-territorial period' in relation to the theory of territory therefore indicates the

fact that any observations tended to be relatively fragmentary in nature and lacked any real theoretical structure. The proverb from Zenodotus cited as an epigraph to this chapter, for example, would be revived at a later stage in connection with the theory that robins like solitude. Before Zenodotus, Aristotle had observed, in his *Historia animalium*, that animals, and, more specifically, eagles, defend the area which constitutes their feeding ground. He also observed the fact that, in certain areas, where food was in short supply, only one pair of ravens would be found.

For others, territory would first of all be associated with rivalry between males over females. The defended area would either enable the male to ensure exclusive access to any female who settled there, and would therefore amount to a problem of jealousy, or it would provide him with a ‘stage’ on which to sing and perform displays in order to attract a potential partner. This would be one of Moffat’s theories. In such a case, territory counts not as a space but as a behavioural whole.

Not surprisingly, the hypothesis of the robin’s love of solitude failed to gain a place in any scientific writings. The theory arguing that a territory enables a bird to guarantee exclusive access to the resources necessary to its survival would, by contrast, long be considered a pertinent one and would gain favour with a great many ornithologists. The argument that territory is associated with a problem of competition around females would, however, dominate the pre-territorial scene for a considerable time (and was notably favoured by Darwin). Controversial as it was, it would not be completely abandoned and would recur frequently, in one form or another, in scientific writings – no doubt encouraged by the attraction certain scientists have for the high drama often involved in competition and in others (sometimes involving the same people) because of a