

Wild Feelings: Love and Violence in Human-Avian Relations

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Abstract

The article explores the relations formed between people and birds in *The Goshawk* by T. H. White (1951), *The Peregrine* by J.A. Baker (1967), and *A Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines (1968/2000). Each book describes passionate, affective human relationships with wild birds and illuminates the process of enlarging ways of being human through being with birds. This enlarging of the human self is enacted through practices of care and love, but also through an identification with and escape into the world of another creature. For the central protagonists in each book, being with wild birds is as much about embracing the more primitive and primal morality of an avian lifeworld as it is about loving feelings toward the birds. The protagonists in each book give vent to their own wild feelings. These are expressions of intense, excessive, sometimes overwhelming emotion, sentiments transgressive of social norms and the human-animal divide.

Keywords

human-avian relations – relational ontology – becoming animal – practices of care – falcons – emotion

In her two essays, “The Body We Care for” and “Responding Bodies,” philosopher Vinciane Despret (2004, 2013) reflected on the conduct of animal behavior studies. She noted how, despite strongly normative ideas of objective

observation and the prescription that the scientist should not influence the behavior of the animal being observed, ethologists unavoidably engaged their bodies in their research. According to Despret (2013), this entangling of the scientist's body in the act of research was certainly evident for the nonhuman animals being studied. They were typically aware of the scientists observing them in all their fleshy materiality and were attuned to the human encounters of which they were a part (Despret, 2013).

As Despret (2013) noted, however, some ethologists, working against the norms of their profession, actively embraced intensely physical forms of connection with the nonhuman animals they were researching. They touched, held, and stroked their animals, bridging the space between human and animal bodies to affect an intense physical relation. For these dissidents, "practices of knowing" were built upon "practices of caring" and the creation of embodied relations with their research subjects (Despret, 2004, p. 130). For Despret, one of the most compelling of these scientific dissidents was the Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1903–1989). She noted how Lorenz, famous for his studies of captive-reared birds, established relationships of care and trust with many of his birds as a precondition of his studies of animal behavior (Despret, 2004). Through his research, Lorenz opened himself up to the worlds of his birds – "being with" them (Despret, 2004, p. 131). This was a passionate, embodied relationship that created what Despret (2013) termed "partial affinities" between Lorenz and his birds (p. 53). He was not seeking to mimic them, but to know them through ways of being with them. For Despret (2004), this constituted "new ways of being human with [the] non-human" (p. 131).

I continue Despret's idea of "being with" to understand the intersubjective, interspecies relations formed between people and birds in three accounts of human-avian relations that were written across the same early-middle decades of the twentieth century while Lorenz was developing his research and living with his birds. They are *The Goshawk* by T. H. White (1951), *The Peregrine* by J. A. Baker (1967), and *Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines (1968/2000). For all their differences, each book describes passionate, affective human relationships with wild birds and illuminates the process of enlarging ways of being human through being with birds. This enlarging of the human self is enacted through practices of care and love, but also through an identification with and escape into the world of another creature. For the central protagonists in each book, being with wild birds is as much about embracing the more primitive and primal morality of an avian lifeworld as it is about loving feelings toward the birds. This is a lifeworld imagined as a space of freedom, danger, and violence; a world that is feral and untamed. In being with these birds, in seeking to escape into their worlds, the protagonists in each of the books give vent

to their own wild feelings. These are expressions of intense, excessive, sometimes overwhelming emotion, sentiments transgressive of social norms and the human-animal divide. They amount to a desire to be with the birds and slip, momentarily, beyond the human.

Understanding these emotions requires a reckoning with the kinds of birds with whom they were associated. Central to *The Goshawk*, *The Peregrine*, and *Kestrel for a Knave* are birds of prey. This attention to raptorial birds is significant. Birds of prey, even falcons kept captive by falconers, could not be domesticated in the same ways as Lorenz's geese and crows. They retained an apparent wildness and untamed power central to their appeal to the books' protagonists. This power and wildness were evident in their capacity for killing and violence. It was this which was at the heart of the wild feelings that they stirred and released. In this sense, running through all three books is a human identification with the visceral power and violence of raptorial birds, which sits alongside feelings of love and care. Being with wild birds involved practices of caring and a simultaneous investment in acts of violence and killing. These complex, ambivalent emotions described in the books matter because they flesh out a central insistence of animal studies and environmental humanities. Namely the importance of attending to the ways in which human life is bound up and entangled with the lives of nonhuman animals. White's, Baker's, and Hines' books capture this relational ontology, mapping the emotional and material attachments made between their human protagonists and a more-than-human world. If this is about the styling of the human in relation to the nonhuman, the books also, in Despret's terms, "give attention" to the lives of other beings and recognize that these "other beings are themselves attentive" (Despret, 2022, p. 5).

In developing this argument and reflecting on the ontology of entanglement described in the books, my account distances itself from those working in the field of animal studies who have turned to Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) theory of "becoming animal" to apprehend human-avian relations. As Farrier (2015) shows, Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) work emphasizes the mingling of the human with the animal. This is not about the human mimicry of animals or the identification with them, but rather, as Weinstein (2004) puts it, "becoming some novel hybrid" (p. 306). Halberstam (2020) draws on this understanding of human and animal ontology to interpret both White's, Baker's, and Hines' books as stories about the reaching beyond the human and the creation of novel human/avian hybrids. He frames this through the experience of "becoming feral," the "turning from the human toward the animal," and the wider "epistemology of the ferox" (Halberstam, 2020, p. 77–78). For Halberstam (2020), this is about transgressive, non-genital forms of sexuality

and the way the lure of wildness “disorders desire and desires disorder” (p. 6). In less elaborated terms, Roberto del Valle Alcala (cited in Dobson, 2018) also draws upon Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) to read the central human-avian relationship in Hines’ book as the boy “becoming kestrel” and through this, “shaping a new cartography of subjectivity” (Dobson, 2018, p. 108). Such readings miss, however, the embodied and projective identifications made with avian companions described in these books and the emotional rather than sexual relations involved in them. These identifications, as Freud (1921) reminds us, have their roots in the “earliest expression of an emotional tie with another” and the perceiving of “a common quality” in an external other who is not an object of sexual desire (pp. 60, 65). Identification and object cathexis are, in this regard, different kinds of object relations. Each of the main protagonists in the books are best understood, then, as being bound up in intimate emotional relations with their birds of prey, rather than merging with them in a human/animal assemblage through the transgressions of desire. Furthermore, if White’s, Baker’s, and Hines’ books articulate an account of the surrender of the self to an avian Other for their central protagonists, this is always only ever partial and temporary. The books additionally make clear the power relations which shape interspecies encounters. The human relations with wild birds ultimately involve forms of human control over them or emphasize the way wild birds must function and survive in environments shaped by human action and human violence. These power relations work to reinscribe the boundary between the human and avian into the process of becoming animal. The power relations between human and bird that the books describe also pose ethical questions about the complexity of care and interspecies relations. If care in more-than-human worlds is about making space for the needs of animals, it can also bring with it its own exclusions (Giraud, 2019). As we will see, particularly with T. H. White, care can be controlling and constraining and involve its own form of violence as much as it can be loving and attentive (van Dooren, 2014). In doing so, it can foreclose other ways of being avian. It is to White’s complex, compelling, and ultimately tragic tale of human feelings toward a bird that I now turn.

Falcon Lover

T. H. White (1906–1964) gained an international reputation for his retelling of the Arthurian legend *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) and the associated series *The Once and Future King* (1958). He taught English at Stowe public school between 1932 and 1936 and began to write during his time there. Out of this

came his first success as a writer, *England Have My Bones* (1936). The book evidenced White's compulsion to learn new skills, including how to fly planes and drive fast cars. Asked in later life to say something about himself, he saw this desire to learn things a way of "compensating for my sense of inferiority, my sense of danger, my sense of disaster" (Warner, 1989, p. 24). In the same talk on "The Pleasures of Learning" he had quoted Merlyn the wizard from *The Sword in the Stone*: "The best thing for being sad is to learn something" (Warner, 1989, p. 24). White's biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner noted that so much obsessive learning from White "presupposed a good deal of sadness" (Warner, 1989, p. 24; see also Sly, 2000). Behind Warner's (1989) observation lay White's troubled childhood and his lifelong struggles with his homosexuality and sadistic fantasies. White saw the latter as the product of the beatings he had received while at Cheltenham College. The school's strict discipline and institutionalized punishment had turned him, as he put it, into a "flagellant" (Gallix, 1984, p. 9). White turned to psychoanalysis to help him with his inner demons. Therapy sessions often left him elated. Deploying an avian metaphor, he confessed, "I am so happy that I hop about like a wagtail in the streets. P.A. [psychoanalysis] is the greatest thing in the world" (Warner, 1989, p. 83).

One activity that fit White's obsession with learning new skills and which spoke to his inner turmoil was the training of hawks. Spurred on by a passage in a book on falconry, White gave up his teaching job and rented a laborer's cottage on the edge of the Stowe estate, writing to the celebrated German falconer Renz Waller for a young goshawk to train. White's account of his life in the cottage and the traumatic story of the ultimately failed attempt to train the bird he called "Gos" was written up from his daily records of the training of the bird. With the telling working title of "A Sort of Mania," it became *The Goshawk*, published in 1951 (Gallix, 1984, p. 72).

The Goshawk is written in a diary format, mixing the events of days or groups of days with wider reflections on falconry, the modern world, and White's own emotional states. The book is a painful read as White battles to train his hawk, withstanding weeks of sleeplessness, physical discomfort, and small successes mixed with failures. Nonetheless, *The Goshawk* is rich in its reflections on White's relationship with Gos. Halberstam (2020) tellingly describes it as a "memoir and love story," and the book certainly documents the great patience, love, and care for the bird essential to the "manning" or training process (pp. 92–93). This emerges most clearly in White's account of the early stages of training Gos. A recurring problem for White was that the bird would regularly struggle while being held on his gloved fist, moving from a state of apparent contentment to one, as he put it, of "rage and terror." This resulted in the bird "bating": "[T]he leashed hawk leaps from the fist in a wild bid for freedom and

hangs upside down by his jesses ... like a chicken being decapitated, revolving, struggling, in danger of damaging his primaries (White, 1951, p. 15).

White had to respond to the distressed bird with quiet care and love, lifting him back onto the fist with “gentleness and patience, only to have it bate again, once, twice, 20, 50 times, all night” (White, 1951, p. 15). White saw the training process as a battle with Gos and reflected on the shifting relations between falconer and bird in the power play of training. As the days of what White called “attack and counterattack” unfolded, he wondered whether he was the master or whether it was Gos that was in charge. White pityingly compared himself to a butler, waiting on his master and adopting the butler’s “distant gaze” (White, 1951, p. 56). He conceded that he had been subjugated to the bird’s “brutality.” This was a bird, as White (1951) noted, in whose “talons there was death [and which] could slay a rabbit in its grip by merely crushing its skull” (p. 134).

Part of the complex emotional dynamics of their relationship was Gos’s shifting disposition. The powerful bird could switch from being a fierce predator one moment to being a comic child the next, “funny and silly little Gos” (White, 1951, p. 74). Drying himself after his first bath, the fluffed-up hawk turned into a music hall character: “t[T]he princeling ... the infant Tarquin had suddenly become a charlady at Margate,” hitching up her skirts. Sometimes these shifts in the positions occupied by Gos were abrupt. The bird could go from being “a homicidal maniac” to placidly enjoying being stroked. In this switch of mood, White (1951) noted, “we were in love again” (p. 75).

The feelings and routines of care that White expended upon Gos prompted him to see himself as the bird’s mother and nursemaid. The effort and worry occasioned by the training of the hawk over weeks was like “a mother nourishing a child inside her” (White, 1951, p. 37). Like the relationship between mother and child, it formed a permanent bond with the bird. Man and bird became, for White (1951), “linked by a mind’s cord” (p. 118). White’s sense of himself as occupying this maternal role was reinforced in *The Goshawk* by the domestic routines that filled White’s life during Gos’s training. He painted the house, made bookshelves and a table, scrubbed floors, cleaned grates, and shot rabbits and pigeons for Gos. In performing this labor, White was not just the bird’s nursemaid, but his “slave, butcher ... and flunky”. As he dismally put it, “What clothes it wore were made by me, what house it had was swept out and kept sweet by me, what food it ate was killed and eviscerated and hacked into pieces and served by me (White, 1951, p. 92).

White’s devotion to the bird’s training and their intense relationship also consumed White’s imagination, hopes, and fears. He felt, as a result, he “had gone half-bird” through his investment in the bird’s manning (White, 1951, p. 92). But for all his love and devotion toward Gos, for all his concerted mothering,

White's attempt at training failed. While flying Gos on a creance the bird broke free and flew away. White searched frantically, briefly seeing him again before he disappeared for good. A dark image overcame White. He pictured Gos hanging dead, his jesses caught in the branches of a tree, his feathers matted and body putrefying. The heartbroken White sought consolation in his garden and surrounded himself with other wild animals who needed to be cared for. Extending his mothering and nursemaid role, he confessed that these were all animals who had to be fed, like the young badgers whom he gave warm milk and sugar out of an old Champagne bottle (White, 1951).

White's mothering of other animals could not, however, assuage his sense of loneliness and the feelings of loss he experienced with Gos. This was, in part, because these feelings were bound up with the guilt he felt about having subjected the bird to an enforced captivity and his culpability in his death. White vacillated between guilt and sadness and fantasizing about Gos somehow having survived and being free: "I hoped he would snap his jesses safely, the ungovernable barbarian, and live a long, happy life in the wild wood. ... He deserved to be free, but I wanted him still (White, 1951, p. 147).

White recognized the contradiction between wishing Gos to be free and at the same time wanting to possess him. This containing and controlling of Gos was a form of power over, if not direct violence toward, the bird. Part of what White wanted to possess in relation to the bird was his capacity for violence. Throughout the book, White referred to Gos through a series of militaristic and violent metaphors. Love and violence co-existed for White in his feelings for Gos. And if love could be controlling and containing as well caring and nurturing, the hawk's capacity for violence was thrilling for White. Being with Gos, the "homicidal maniac" in whose "talons there was death," allowed White to identify with these emotions and to safely express his own sadism and cruelties. It is not only, then, that *The Goshawk* reveals "the violent modern world in which humans and other animals interact" (Huggan, 2020, p. 225). If the book does indeed speak to the legacy and threat of human war, it is the violence of nonhuman animals, and the appeal of that violence to White, that is more important.

Falcon Companion

The complex emotional relationship forged by White with Gos and the solace and escape this offered him found echoes in the story of "Kes" and her owner Billy Caspar in Barry Hines' (1939–2016) *A Kestrel for a Knave*. The story of Kes, like that of Gos, has a tragic ending, with the young kestrel dead in a dustbin by

the end of the story. But at its heart is the relationship between a troubled, misunderstood schoolboy, Billy Caspar – a “lonely misfit” as Hines later described him – and his trained kestrel and the solace and joy Billy finds in his training and flying of the bird (Hines, 1968/2000, p. 203). The book draws upon the real-life training of a young kestrel by Hines’ younger brother Richard. Richard Hines was not only obsessed with falcons and falconry as a young man, but a close reader of T.H. White’s *The Goshawk*. He shared these enthusiasms with his older brother, who himself had also been drawn to falconry through reading *The Goshawk* (B. Hines, 1968/2000; R. Hines, 2016). *Kestrel for a Knave* is set in a Northern working-class mining town based upon Hoyland Common near Barnsley where Hines grew up. Hoyland Common was a semi-rural community, with the mine and town surrounded by woods and fields. The area was one in which, as Hines (1968/2000) powerfully noted, “the miners walked to work across meadows, with skylarks singing overhead, before crowding into the cage at the pit top and plunging into the darkness” (p. 200).

This juxtaposition of industry and the countryside informs the landscapes of *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Billy moves between the grey streets where he lives with his mother and brother to the open country and woodlands nearby. He straddles these two worlds, moving with ease and attentiveness through the fields and woodlands on the outskirts of town. If the setting of *A Kestrel for a Knave* is very different from White’s rural idyll in *The Goshawk*, the storytelling of each book is also radically different. While *The Goshawk* follows the relentless style of a diary in unfolding its tale, *A Kestrel for a Knave* spans one day, with flashbacks to earlier episodes. Billy’s family life with his mother and brother is shown as disorganized and violent, with Billy subject to bullying from his brother. In a household without a father and with a neglectful mother, the book presents an unromantic depiction of working-class life and is distanced from those fictions that have foregrounded working-class solidarity and the culture of traditional labor (Forrest & Vice, 2018). The injuries of class, however, are central to *A Kestrel for a Knave*, with its most withering attacks focused on the damage done to working-class children by selective education and secondary modern schooling. The cruelties and brutalities of this education are shown in Billy’s experiences of school, and the novel sets out clearly to show how the system of education is designed to fail working-class pupils, preparing them only for low-skilled jobs.

Set against this backdrop, Billy’s interest in falconry and his relationship with Kes allows Hines (1968/2000) to reveal Billy’s potential, his ability to master the complex nomenclature of falconry and to excel in ways that he had not been able to do at school. Like *The Goshawk*, it is a story about the pleasures of learning. In a central scene, supported by the sympathetic schoolteacher

Mr. Farthing, Billy takes charge of the class and explains the terminology of falconry to a rapt classroom of his peers. Impressed by Billy's expertise, Mr. Farthing meets Billy after school and watches him demonstrate his falconry skills. Billy's mastery of the art and his connection with the bird is evident to the teacher, with Billy thrillingly working with the bird to make her stoop after the lure (Hines, 1968/2000). Billy's ease and connection with the bird allows him to find a new kind of expression of himself. In mastering the skills of training and flying a falcon, Billy, the bored and distracted schoolboy, becomes the teacher to the young bird, just as he had briefly become teacher to his schoolmates. And like White before him, Billy invests time, love, and care in Kes's training. Echoing a scene in *The Goshawk*, Billy patiently, carefully, and lovingly lifts Kes back onto his fist after she has "bated" (Hines, 1968/2000, p. 61). His care and attention are also evident in the way Billy shoots sparrows to feed to Kes, gently holding the food on his fist while Kes eviscerates it and gobbles it down. Like White, Billy's love for the bird is part of a wider connection with and feeling for wild animals. He tells Mr. Farthing that he has kept "stacks of animals – young foxes, magpies, jackdaws, jays." For Billy, however, Kes is not a pet. It is Kes's residual wildness and fierce nature that thrills Billy. As he forcefully tells Mr. Farthing, "it's not a pet, sir, hawks are not pets. ... Is it heck tame, it's trained that all. It's fierce, an' its wild, and' it's not bothered about anybody, not even about me right. And that's why it's great" (Hines, 1968/2000, p. 146).

The producer of the film *Kes*, Tony Garnett, saw this line as Billy "talking about his own class ... as a statement about working people" (Garnett, 2018, p. vii). Halberstam (2020) develops this class-based reading of Billy's assertion, suggesting it speaks of "working-class defiance in the face of post-war English respectability" (p. 88). But we may also read it as being about Billy recognizing the separateness of Kes and her lifeworld and thrilling at being connected to her more-than-human world. If Billy identifies with the independence and wildness and violence of the kestrel's life, he does not want to dominate her and own her in any proprietorial sense. Unlike White, Billy embraces the alterity of Kes, the separate and distinctive lifeworld of the bird with whom he can connect, if only partially and temporarily. It is about an enlarging of Billy's self through a part of him being with Kes.

Falcon Hunter

The desire to be with a bird and to see in them qualities which allow both the simultaneous enlarging and decentering of human experience is illustrated in J. A. Baker's celebrated book *The Peregrine*. Published in 1967, it won the

prestigious Duff Cooper Memorial Prize and was well received in the press and broadcasting. For John Moore, who had reviewed the original manuscript for the publisher Collins, the book was “something quite exceptional in the way of nature writing” (Moore, 1966). Baker’s book documents an unnamed narrator’s pursuit of wintering peregrine falcons in the English lowlands. Presented in the form of a diary spanning one year of watching, the book offers sustained observations on the life of these wintering falcons and other bird species found in this corner of the British countryside. It draws heavily upon Baker’s own field notes accumulated across ten winters of watching. Although *The Peregrine* contains no place names to identify the landscapes it describes, the book is based upon Baker’s exploration, usually by bike, of the fields, lanes, and woodland of mid-Essex (Baker, 2011).

Much of the power of Baker’s book stemmed from his deep attachment to this landscape. The book, however, also laments declining bird populations and a changing countryside, shot through with images of death and dying wildlife and the destructive power of human society. As Baker (1967) powerfully records early in the book, in an elegiac reflection on the likely disappearance of the falcons whom he was observing so closely, “few peregrines are left ... many die on their backs ... withered and burnt away by the filthy insidious pollen of farm chemicals” (p. 32). Because of passages like this, Farrier (2015) has suggested that *The Peregrine* can be placed within a body of writing exploring multispecies relationships in the era of mass species extinction (Van Dooren, 2014). In fact, he goes so far as to claim that *The Peregrine* is an “incipient extinction narrative” (Farrier, 2015, p. 743). Farrier’s contention, however, seems to overplay the precise narratives of loss in *The Peregrine*. Baker may have felt that the peregrines he was watching were heading for extinction in Britain, but the threats to the birds were the product of both the severe winter of 1962–1963 and its effects on British wildlife, and the growing recognition of the effects of organochlorine chemicals upon birdlife. Baker’s book, in this sense, is better thought of as a dialogue with Rachel Carson and the specific concatenation of forces which drove environmental change in the post-war decades, rather than a precursor to the current era of mass species extinction. Ultimately, the peregrines of Baker’s English lowlands did not disappear and in the years since the publication of *The Peregrine* have seen their populations recover and thrive.

As well as the sense of loss and lamentation that it carries, the narrative of *The Peregrine* is notable for the way it frames the narrator-watcher’s pursuit of wintering peregrines. Central to this is the metaphor of the “hawk-hunt,” an odd phrase for a birdwatcher like Baker to use. In these framing pages he talks less of watching, seeing, or recording peregrines than of hunting them as if he were engaged in a non-lethal version of field sports. While his narrator is not

using peregrines to hunt other birds, he shares with the falconer the pleasures of the pursuit and the chase. This gives an intensity to his encounters with wild birds, heightening the senses of the “hunter.” “Hawk-hunting sharpens vision,” the narrator suggests: “Pouring away behind the moving bird, the land flows out from the eye in deltas of piercing color” (Baker, 1967, p. 30).

In framing the account of his pursuit of peregrines this way, Baker defines his quest for the birds as a process in which he seeks to enter into the falcons’ lifeworld, to begin to see the landscapes which bind him to the birds, to become one with the bird, to become himself part hawk. In this sense, Baker’s pursuit of peregrines fits squarely with the ecology of hunting. As Howell (2019) observes, hunting is not simply about “bloodlust,” but about the “hunter becoming partly animal” and understanding the animal’s perspectives and ways of being in the world (p. 459). The narrative of *The Peregrine*, in this regard, is not so much a testing of the narrator’s self, but an act of imaginative transformation, the hunter projecting the human into the avian. This is most evident in the entry for 30th November in Baker’s fictional year. Coming across the body of a wood pigeon killed by a peregrine, the narrator mimics the predator’s behavior:

I found myself crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movement of the hawk, as in some primitive ritual: the hunter becomes the thing he hunts. (Baker, 1967, p. 92)

Elsewhere in the book, the narrator picks up a dead gull, smelling the freshly killed flesh as if to experience how the hawk would sense it (Baker, 1967).

The recording and documenting of peregrine kills forms a central theme in the narrative of *The Peregrine*. Emotive, sustained descriptions of killing are central to the visceral identification with the lifeworld of the birds rendered so strongly in the book. These descriptions also bring Baker’s narrative close to the fascination with and pleasure in kills evident within the culture of falconry. In “Beginnings,” the narrator prepares the reader for what is to come: “I shall try to make plain the bloodiness of killing,” he warns (Baker, 1967, p. 92). The section titled “Peregrine” explains how the physiognomy of the bird is adapted to the “pursuit and killing of birds in flight” (Baker, 1967, p. 41). The narrator explains at some length and in detail the peregrine’s stoop: “[T]he stoop is a means of increasing the speed at which the hawk makes contact with the prey. The momentum of the stoop ... enables him to kill birds twice as heavy as himself” (Baker, 1967, pp. 33–34). The power of the stoop and its effects upon the peregrine’s prey are conjured most powerfully in the description of a killing of a partridge from February 10th:

[H]is speed increased and he dropped vertically down ... he fell sheer ... heart-shaped, like a heart in flames. ... The partridge in the snow beneath looked up at the black heart dilating down upon him. ... And for the partridge there was the sun suddenly shut out ... the blazing knives driving in, the terrible white face descending. ... And then the back-breaking agony beginning ... till the merciful needle of the hawk's beak notched in the straining neck and jerked the shuddering life away. And for the hawk ... there was the rip and tear of choking feathers and the hot blood dripping from the beak and the rage dying slowly to a small hard core within. (Baker, 1967, p. 124)

The passage pivots twice, moving from describing the point of view of the stooping peregrine to the deadly power of the peregrine from the perspective of the partridge to the viewpoint of the peregrine again as they rip into the body of their victim. In these shifts of perspective, the reader moves between predator and prey, finally being invited to identify with the peregrine. This identification is underlined by the confession made by the narrator. He speaks of the vicarious pleasure he experiences in watching this kill, the "memory of that sabering fall from the sky," the "guiltless hunter who kills only through his familiar" (Baker, 1967, p. 124–125).

Baker's *The Peregrine* also links the aerial prowess of the birds to the sense of power and freedom that they embody. Loving the bird's mobility and strength is about, in part, loving and identifying with their capacity for killing. Much of the book's narrative is absorbed by the desire to merge with the lifeworld of the peregrine, to see the world as he does in all his feral power and to break free from human constraints. This desire to pass through the walls separating human from avian is expressed powerfully at the very end of the book. The narrator, sensing that he would find the peregrine whom he had been pursuing, comes, almost mystically, upon the bird. Crawling unseen below a sea-wall, he straightens and peers over the top. The peregrine is there, five yards away perched on a bush. The bird sees Baker, but counter to their natural fear of humans, does not fly away. Bird and man look at each other, joined in a moment of mutual recognition. As Baker puts it, "I know he will not fly now. I climb over the wall and stand before him. And he sleeps" (Baker, 1967, p. 169). Both bird and Baker are at peace. The quest is over and Baker, the narrator, can be with the bird, become part of their world. He is temporarily free of the human world; one with the world of the peregrine.

This sense of freedom projected onto the bird echoes in both Hines' and White's stories. Like Baker, White was explicit about how the relationship with a falcon could release in him not only "pure joy," but feeling, for the first time in

his life, “absolutely free,” “as free as a hawk” (White, 1951, pp. 38–39). For White, the sense of freedom may have been linked to his troubled relationship to his own sexuality and the difficulties he found in forming close human relationships. It was also about the freedom to express his own violent feelings. For Baker there was, perhaps, the same release of violent emotions and an aggression toward other people that was wrapped up in his misanthropic disposition. Baker’s projection onto the wild falcons the qualities of freedom and abandonment and his narrators’ identification with these attributes certainly speaks to a desire to break free from the constraints of human existence and the world of social convention and obligation; to cross over, however temporarily, into a nonhuman world. It is a tale fueled by misanthropy, by an embrace of the clarifying power of violence, killing, and blood, and driven by an imagined flight from the old self into a new one, by the salvation granted by being with the peregrines.

Conclusion

If *The Peregrine* opens up the process of being with the avian as a compensation for human pain and isolation, and as a vehicle for expressing violent feelings, it is an account of being with birds that finds echoes in the other tales of birds of prey and their human companions which I have discussed, *The Goshawk* and *A Kestrel for a Knave*. As we saw, both White and Hines presented their characters’ relationships with birds of prey as providing comfort and solace from the inner and outer troubles of their lives. Training a falcon fostered a close and intense relationship with a wild bird, one which opened the possibility of playing the role of master, carer, lover, teacher, mother, companion, and servant of the bird. Among these positions, it was the maternal role which seemed especially strong for White. He understood intense, physically close, and nurturing relations to be the prerogative of mothers and not fathers. It drew him onto the terrain of the maternal as an imagined and even fantasized space and to see himself as occupying the maternal role (Bar Haim, 2021).

But there was more at work in White’s dyadic relationship with Gos. The bird’s latent power and capacity for violence heightened White’s own emotional states. He took pleasure in his killing and wished himself to become a wild and feral thing like Gos. Like Baker, White was seeking escape from the traumas of the world and his own demons. His narrative also revealed the ambivalent mixture of care, love, and violence that could co-exist in avian-human relations. Billy Caspar’s escape was more limited but rooted in his experience of class and the constraints placed upon his life chances by his circumstances.

Like White, Billy acquired new skills and learned new things that enabled him to accomplish more than he had been able to do at school. The companionship with Kes enlarged his experience, allowing him to express himself in new ways and opening him up to elements of the bird's lifeworld. For Billy there was also an excitement not just in the beauty of the bird, but an investment in her fierceness and capacity for violence. *Kestrel for a Knave* thus shared with *The Goshawk* and Baker's account of the obsessive watching of peregrines another set of more vicarious and wild emotions: that of the electrifying effect of the birds' own visceral power upon their human companions and watcher and the expression of violent human feelings. In this regard, all three books draw from and elaborate upon a complex set of emotional responses to birds of prey. These are not just about the tender emotions of the human heart, but its darker, more troubling workings. As such, the books offer compelling insights into the emotional dynamics of being with birds and the partial affinities that can be forged between the human and the avian.

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