BALER TWINE: thoughts on ravens, home, and nature poetry

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Ravens have not been common in my experience and so haven't receded into the familiar; every time I encounter one it flies more or less straight out of tricksterhood and the legends of Haida culture. It arrives like a brash postcard from wildness, and the impulse to respond is strong. Mind you, corvids—crows, ravens, jays, magpies—have often struck us this way: as talkers, as folk philosophers and tricksters whose curiosity is mixed with skepticism to produce that particular quality of canniness and mordant humour. Along a wilderness trail you expect ravens to check you out and extract what they can from your food, and to discuss your (sloppy) campcraft hoarsely and at length from the top of a nearby pine. Last winter two, whom I mistook for a blown-away umbrella, appeared on my feeder, covering it completely. On Yellowknife's golf course, I hear, there is a ground rule covering the possibi lity of a raven's stealing your ball. (Should that, I wonder, constitute a penalty or a bonus? Let's say that if a raven steals your ball you have to quit playing and caddy for someone else, but take every opportunity to disrupt play, dropping the club bag as the backswing reaches its zenith, or declaiming lewd limericks based on putter and mashie. O.K., but if you find a raven's feather and wear it in your hat for at least six holes, every golfer must buy you a drink afterward. Then, once you have drunk every drink, you must disrobe entirely, and, climbing to the top of a Red Pine . . . .)

At least that one area of temperament—Droll Zone—is shared with ravens, whereas other wild species, even bears, strike us as requiring a stretch of some distance, and perhaps even metamorphosis, before communication is possible. In his fascinating book, *Ravens in Winter,* Bernd Heinrich details the "altruistic" behaviour of ravens (and incidentally reveals his own devotion

and endurance as an observer), establishing that they will frequently alert one another to the presence of carcasses, research which creates problems for "hard" evolutionary theory. To the rest of us whose acquaintance is more casual, ravens, like otters, seem to venture three-fifths of the way into anthropomorphosis on their own; perhaps this is why, whenever I see one, I feel absurdly gregarious, and often find myself croaking back, hoping it might decide to perch a spell. Yes, there's a kind of reverence in this. I do imagine receiving wisdom from this creature, but not packaged as wisdom. It'll come dressed as talk, palaver. And it will have content, unlike, say, the pure lyric of a white-throated sparrow.

The first time I saw ravens up close was some years ago in Alberta near Blue Ridge, where ten or twelve of them were playing loop-the-loop. (Kindly notice my anthropomorphic gesture here; I'll be analepting back.) There is a high gravel bank on one side of the river, which must have created quite a wind-bounce, because the ravens were soaring at high speed right at the bank, then, just before impact, shooting up into the air thirty feet or so. They would bail out in that characteristic tumble, clownish, deliberate boys-on-a-raft loss of control, flapping and falling to spill the wind, and fly back across the river to do it again: the aerial equivalent to an otter slide.

All this is preamble to my most recent encounter with a raven, the one which is bothering me most, and which will set up the reflections which follow. (I promise to get to nature poetry eventually.) Having recently moved to New Brunswick from southwestern Ontario, I have more opportunity to observe ravens on a regular basis. And in the last few months, for some reason, I have found myself taking drives and walks with raven-watching as an agenda. Why? Perhaps it's all this reading and ruminating I've been doing about the place of our species among others—and the other. Is this mental space priming me to seek out contact with one of the few other creatures I can imagine speaking to me? I mean, this is an itch, an intuition, not a sacred quest or totem animal rite. Anyhow, I was driving a bit south of Gagetown along the St. John River, where there are lots of high places to park and scan the low-lying interval land (areas which are under water

during the spring flood) for large passerines. It was mid-January, quite cold, and clear. Saw a couple of ravens, far off, who were buzzing and bugging one another—romantically? (I imagine a raven relationship, which lasts a lifetime, involves a certain amount of teasing.) Saw some snow buntings, lifting off from roadside gravel like an old black and white 8mm. movie, flickering over a fence into a field. Then, on my way back home, I got my best look at a raven. It was hung up by the roadside at the entrance to a lane, a piece of baler twine around one leg, wings spread. There was a huge shot-gun hole in its back just above the tail, which was missing altogether.

What do you think I should make of this? It won't do to be sentimental here. But this doesn't fall into an ethic of hunting; nor can it be understood from the rational-cum-aesthetic perspective of someone like Audubon, who would shoot individuals of a species in order to have tractable models. Even without the myths which attend this creature, even discounting "the sacred" and setting aside the ancient mariner, this seems very bad. Shooting the raven was one thing: we all know, each of us, that sinister delight in casual brutality and long-distance death. Displaying it was another—controlling its death, as well as taking its life. Displaying it declares that the appropriation is total. A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements; this one is required to function as a sign, a human category—a sign which says simply "we can do this." The raven's being, in Martin Heidegger's terms, was not just used, but used up.

So I cut it down. Its wings were large and eloquent, and not like anything I could think of, certainly not like blown-away umbrellas. The feathers, including the lavish neck-flounce, were still very glossy and fine. Its eyes were sphincters of nothing. And where did I get that notion that black was "merely" the absence of colour?

Now I'd like to freeze me there, standing by the road with a dead raven on a piece of baler twine, wondering what to do with it, while we consider some of the reading and reflection I mentioned. We might think of this as climbing a ladder of o's into a thought-balloon above my head, where a small flock of issues awaits. To reduce the cacophony, I'll try voicing these one at a

time, but let's keep in mind that this is not a necessary or logical progression.

Matériel

What happened to the raven is I think an example of one pole of our relations to material existence, which I have come to call "matériel." In its limited sense matériel is military equipment; in a slightly larger sense it is any equipment owned by an institution. But I'm taking the term to apply even more widely to any instance of second-order appropriation, where the first appropriation is the making of tool, or the address to things in the mode of utility, the mind-set which Heidegger calls "standing reserve." To make things into tools in the first place, we remove them from autonomous existence and conscript them as servants, determining their immediate futures. To make tools into matériel we engage in a further appropriation. This second appropriation of matter may be the colonization of its death, as in the case of the raven, the nuclear test site, the corpse hung on a gibbet or public crucifixion. On the other hand, matérielization could be a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition, their return to elements. We inflict our rage for immortality on things, marooning them on static islands; and then, frequently enough, we condemn them as pollutants. Why are the fixed smiles on Barbie Dolls and Fisher Price toys so pathetic?

Wilderness

By "wilderness" I want to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations. That tools retain a vestige of wilderness is especially evident when we think of their existence in time and eventual graduation from utility: breakdown. To what *degree* do we own our houses, hammers, dogs? Beyond that line lies wilderness. We probably experience its presence most often in the negative as dry rot in the basement, a splintered handle, or shit on the carpet. But there is also the sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism. The coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art,

we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind's categories to glimpse some thing's autonomy—its rawness, its *duende,* its alien being.

Home

Omphalos, Ithaca, genesis and telos: "home" is so interwoven with 'human' that it tends to function, in most humanistic art, as the fundamental and unquestioned category, underlying all other motives, even romantic love. One way to set it, a little, at a distance, is to come at it from the vantage point of the phenomenology of the other. Home, we may say, is the action of the inner life finding outer form; it is the settling of self into the world. As such, it makes the first appropriation, the fundamental move that possesses the other; the hand grasps the thing and removes it from its element, relieving it of its autonomy and anonymity: the thing is both owned and named. In Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, this grasping is a signal event, for his account of consciousness does not begin with a stable I but with the other, out of which "I" coagulates through a process of recollection and representation. The self is "made of" the other, and is not a pre-existing container in which the other is registered. "Home," in such a mode of thinking, is an important development because it substantiates the self (even a name, John Berger points out, is a home in a minimal sense) and separates it from the world. It establishes the *place* where representation and recollection occur, and breaks the plenum of experience.

Before the establishment of home, the hand related to things sensuously through the caress, but it is with the "primordial grasp," as Levinas calls it, that possession, including knowledge, begins. Home makes possible the possession of the world, the rendering of the other as one's interior.

It might seem that home is the moment of passage from ontological to epistemological dwelling, the place where knowledge as power begins. But this needs to be balanced with our intuitive sense that home is also the site of our appreciation of the material world, where we lavish attention on its details, where we collaborate with it. In fact, it often seems that home, far from being just a concretization of self, is the place where it pours itself out into the world, interiority opening itself to material expression. To

make a home is to establish identity with a primordial grasp, yes; but it is also, in some measure, to give it away with an extended palm. We might try to sum up the paradox of home-making by saying that inner life *takes place:* it both *claims* place and acts to *become* a place among others. It turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness.

Inside humanistic thinking, as well, it is often useful to construe home as a crossing place, an intersection of axes. John Berger, developing an idea of Mircea Eliade's, sees home as the place where, at least until our century, the world could be founded and made sense of, the heart of the real.

> Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead in the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestial journeys.

When the human project becomes inscribed on and in the world, the right angle appears, this sign of intersecting axes, the twofold which is at once paradoxical (and so gestures to multiplicity) and reductive (the simplification of a manifold to a polarity). Human dwelling is essentially *constructed,* carpentered. In the wilderness one's vision is enriched by abundant curvilinear forms, but it is also threatened by them. There is a genuine relief and assurance in the taut lines of the tent, the crisp angles of a bridge, a road, even—if mildly lost—a power-line cut. As Paul Shepard has observed, our strong preference for landforms that seem to mimic our architecture is reflected in their designation as parks ("National Monuments" is the significant American term), a sort of canonization of selected sites that approximate the terms of human, angled, dwelling. There are plenty of mythological reasons for having cemeteries full of crosses and tombstones, but we should also be alive to the pure propriety of the visual gesture: the dead are leaving the constructed world of right angles, and their exit is crowded with them—joints, ledgers, sills, doorways into dissolution. Not to mention the pathos of the coffin

itself: the last room, delivered with its body into process. With this gesture, we relinquish the notion of home, along with that peculiarly, though not exclusively, human idea of an existence apart from wilderness.

Poetic Attention and the Aeolian Harp

Admitting that you are a nature poet, nowadays, may make you seem something of a fool, as though you'd owned up to being a Sunday painter at, say, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. There are some valid reasons for this. By this time "nature" has been so lavishly oversold that the word immediately invokes several kinds of vacuous piety, ranging from Rin-Tin-Tinism to knee-jerk environmental concerns. "Nature," with its secular term, "the environment," constitutes that portion of television that is not news, weather, serial drama, sports, or sitcoms, a sort of documentary melodrama which fuses spectacle with sentimentality. It has been, as someone quipped, Lorne Greened.

The first indicator of one's status as nature poet is that one does not invoke language right off when talking about poetry, but acknowledges some extra-linguistic condition as the poem's input, output, or both. A second indicator may be actual content, front lawn to back country, but this, if one uses my peculiar notion of wilderness, becomes a dubious signal, since the poet may be focused on the wildness in a car, a coat hanger, or even language itself, as much as Kluane Park. (She might, in point of fact, be focused on Kluane Park as a tool.) My own reasons for failing to postmodernize are merely empirical: before, under, and through the wonderful terrible wrestling with words and music there is a state of mind which I'm calling "poetic attention." I'm calling it that, though even as I name it I can feel the falsity (and in some way the transgression) of nomination: it's a sort of readiness, a species of longing which is without the desire to possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about. To me, this is a form of knowing which counters the "primordial grasp" in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause. Even after linguistic composition has begun, and the air is thick with the problematics of reference, this kind of knowing remains in touch with perception. The nature poet may (should, in fact) resort to the field guide or library, but will keep

coming, back, figuratively speaking, to the trail—to the grain of the experience, the particular angle of expression in a face, and O.K., to the raven on the baler twine.

There is, for this nature poet, at any rate, an important distinction between poetic attention and romantic inspiration. The romantic poet (or tourist, for that matter) desires to be spoken *to*, inspired by the other, so that perception travels into language (or slide show) without a palpable break. The paradigm for this ideal relation is the aeolian harp, which is simply the larynx of natural phenomena, "Sensations sweet/ felt in the blood, and felt along the heart/ And passing even into my purer mind." Or it may be that poetry itself is seen as natural, as in Neruda's

> And it was at that age . . . Poetry arrived in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where it came from, from winter or a river.

Wonderful: we want to believe this graceful act of personification and animism; why should it not be true, as music, or as fairytale is? Aeolian harpism relieves us of our loneliness as a species, reconnects us to the natural world, restores a coherent reality. It also, not incidentally, converts natural energy into imaginative power, so that Romanticism, which begins in the contemplation of nature, ends in the celebration of the creative imagination in and for itself. No wonder it is so compelling, whether we find it in Wordsworth, Neruda, or Levertov: it speaks directly to a deep and almost irresistible desire for unity. But poetic attention is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness; it leads to a work which is not a *vestige* of the other, but a *translation* of it.

Objection and response

Enter the ambassador from post-structural theory. "Well, this is all very well, Mr. Nature Poet, standing by the roadside, outfitted no doubt by L. L. Bean, happily twirling your dead raven, but it's a fact that you're going to crash into language in about .05 seconds, and that your perception is already saturated with it. This parade of perceptual innocence is simply a new twist on the old notion of romantic inspiration, designed to sneak a transcendental signified back into the game. Before you ever came upon

the dead raven your head was filled with myths and soft ecology, a whole library of assumptions about the "natural" world, as you yourself acknowledged in your charming anecdotal introduction. The individual who stands and stares at the dead raven or live warbler, ontologically applauding, is always already made of linguistic and cultural categories, loosely strung together, in your case, with the mental equivalent of baler twine. The nature poet, like anyone else, is 'locked in a tower of words' as Dylan Thomas puts it; imagining otherwise is romantic mysticism. Need I go on?"

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether non-linguistic experience is possible (whether there may be an element of wilderness in perception), let me acknowledge the force of this objection. Given the unique relation of language to our species, how can our perception, as well as our writing, *not* be a restructuring of the world? Nature poetry's paradoxical situation is, I think, roughly analogous to home-making. Being language, it cannot avoid the primordial grasp, but this occurs simultaneously with the extended palm, the openness in knowing that I've been calling poetic attention. And that experience suggests strongly that, although it cannot be spoken, radical other- ness exists. In fact, nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully. It performs the translation which is at the heart of being human, the simultaneous grasp and gift of home-making. And the persistence of poetic attention during the act of composition is akin to the translator's attention to the original, all the while she performs upon it a delicate and dangerous transformation. Our epistemological dilemma is not resolved, as by aeolian harpism, but ritualized and explored.

The ambassador from post-structuralism has also done us a service by pointing out that the step-by step model of perception-translation is too simple and naive. Language *is* already there in poetic attention; like an athlete at her limit, language is experiencing its speechlessness and the consequent need to stretch *itself* to be adequate to this form of knowing. Part of the excitement inside this species of meditative act is linguistic; it's the excitement of a tool which has hatched the illicit desire to behave like an animal.

One word more on post-structural thought: in its problematization of terms like "nature" and "natural" (that is, in their

reduction to disguised categories of language and culture) it provides a salutary check on romantic innocence, a positive reminder of the fact of the frame. But—and here I indulge in intuition based on tone and style—its skepticism nurtures its excess, secretly worships a nihilistic impulse as surely as Romanticism worshipped the creative imagination in the guise of nature. It is, no less than Romanticism, an ideology, a politics, and an erotics, despite protestations to the contrary. In the realm of ideas, as in human relations, we do well to suspect any basic drive that presents itself simply as method or a form of rationalism. That is, to be blunt, it is as dangerous to act as though we were not a part of nature as it is to act as though we were not a part of culture; and the intellectual and political distortions produced by these contrary ideologies are greatly to be feared.

Imagine: a trail made of moments rather than minutes, wild bits of time which resist elapsing according to a schedule. Pauses. Each one bell-shaped, into which you step as an applicant for the position of tongue. Or: each pause is designed as the unbuilt dwelling of that moment—a cabin, a stanza, a gazebo, a frame—a room which the trail accepts as a fiction or wish. This is the point of anthropomorphic play, the erotic hinge of translation. When ownership is set aside, appropriation can turn inside out, an opening, a way of going up to something with a gift from home. Growths on this stump remind you that the Japanese call certain fungi "tree ears"; the red pine around them are a ceremonial parade for Moustache Day; you see ravens playing on the Athabaska River and think "boys on a raft." Anthropomorphic play, along this trail, is a gift to the other from the dwelling you will never build there. How? A slight deformation of human categories, an extra metaphorical stretch and silliness of language as it moves toward the other, dreaming its body. There is danger in this gift, because language, in this poetic mode, compromises its nature, dismantling itself in a gesture toward wilderness. "The inverse of language," says Emmanuel Levinas, "is like a laughter that seeks to destroy language, a laughter infinitely reverberated." Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that

flirts with its destruction. Language wears tree ears and a false moustache for the moment. For whom? For the moment.

Meanwhile I am still standing by the roadside dangling a dead raven, wondering what to do. When we were kids, dead birds were a fine opportunity for funerals; we'd bury them in shoe boxes and get in on this death business, fool around with the magic of ritual—candles, solemnity, shredded pansies. The sparrow, needless to say, had become the excuse for the sentimental carnival we cooked up; we didn't need romantic poets to tell us about converting natural into imaginative energy. Might some more chaste and adult ritual work here? Although I am reluctant to dismiss the value of ritual gestures—especially those grown within a culture that lives more comfortably on the hinge of translation—no such act suggests itself to me at this place and time. It is January, remember, so even a quick burial would be tough work; I don't have a shovel with me; and I'm feeling conspicuous. There are hunters' rites that balance an overt act of appropriation with one of homage to the slain animal. But I doubt if these work with matériel, where the death-and-reduction comes thoughtlessly, from long distance, *delivered,* in the significant parlance of military strategists. There is no ritual imaginable which would, right now, set in balance our relation to Pacific atolls blown up in hydrogen bomb tests, or to clear-cut forests, or to the ecosphere itself. Just find a hollow for the raven where no one is likely to find it; cover it with brush so that it may decompose in private; drive away; think; read. There is imaginative work to be done.