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B I R D



The Halcyon Tone as Birdsong

Gary Shapiro

Contained in one of Nietzsche's favorite words is the name of a seabird that flits back and forth across the landscapes and seascapes of Mediterranean reality, classical myth, and Nietzsche's imagination. Lexical authorities credit Nietzsche with reintroducing the word "halcyon [*halkyonisch*]" into the German language.¹ That word will recall the "halcyon days," part of the metamorphic complex in the story of Alcyone, who lost her husband Ceyx at sea but was transformed along with him into a pair of seabirds, the female having the extraordinary characteristic of building a floating nest, in which she hatched her eggs during the weeks following the winter solstice, the halcyon days of calm winds and waters arranged by the gods.² The story of the nest is generally accepted in the classical world, for example, by such sober authorities as Aristotle and Plutarch. At least three times, Nietzsche emphasizes that the book he regards as the "greatest gift to mankind"—to modern humans, who, in his view, are in need of deeper contact with the wild animal world—will fall on deaf ears unless one hears a certain tone for which this bird is famed. As he says about *Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*:

Here no "prophet" is speaking, none of those gruesome hybrids of sickness and will to power whom people call founders of religions. Above all, one must *hear* aright

the tone that comes from this mouth, the halcyon tone, lest one should do wretched injustice to the meaning of its wisdom. (EH P 4)³

Nietzsche the musician, the lover of song and opera, with their deployment of the female (human) voice, imagines himself becoming a bird, one renowned for its song throughout the ancient world. The cry of the halcyon (or kingfisher) was said to be remarkably haunting, plaintive, and melancholy, while the halcyon days are bright, calm, and peaceful; Nietzsche writes of “that which is really noble in a work or human being, the moment when their sea is smooth and they have found halcyon self-sufficiency” (BGE 224). His frequent evocations of the halcyon are most obviously associated with the latter, but we may assume that both senses are relevant and that the very *interplay of the two*, as in the myth, is typically at work. The songs of Zarathustra include laments and are often tinged with melancholy. The halcyon has both a spatial/visual aspect and an auditory one. The play between these is evident in several texts where Nietzsche writes of the halcyon element in the music of Mendelssohn and its absence in Wagner.⁴

The refrain, Deleuze and Guattari point out, whether animal or human, is a primordial way of marking territory and making art.⁵ One of Nietzsche’s ways of becoming-animal is to sing the world, something that he attempts both in his own musical compositions (in the narrow sense), in his poetry, and, most to the point here, in the songs of Zarathustra. Might Nietzsche, with his talk of a new lyre, be thinking of Zarathustra (or himself) as a new Orpheus, whose song could charm the beasts and the birds? After the revelation of “The Convalescent,” it is Zarathustra’s chattering (not singing) animals that urge him to speak no more but to fashion new songs with a new lyre. He proceeds to do so in a series of three songs. These songs are sung in response to the terrible thought of recurrence, the thought whose consequence is that I am always becoming another. If Nietzsche expressed this eventually in the “mad” form “I am all the names of history,” he might, as we shall see, have also said “I am all the names of natural history.” The last of the three songs is called “The Seven Seals” in parodic reference to the otherworldly and decidedly anti-animal Christian Revelation. This song celebrates “bird-wisdom” and can be read as alluding to many features of the Alcyone story: freedom from geographical constraints, a magnificently endless world of sea and sky, marriage and maternity, and the supremacy of song. This final strophe in the last song of the cycle culminates in a lyric that aspires to birdsong:

If ever I spread tranquil skies over myself and soared on my own wings into my own skies; if I swam playfully in the deep light-distances, and the bird-wisdom of my freedom came—but bird-wisdom speaks thus: “Behold, there is no above, no below! Throw yourself around, out back, you who are light! Sing! Speak no more! Are not all words made for the grave and heavy? Are not all words lies to those who are light? Sing! Speak no more!” Oh, how should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence?

Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for I love you, O eternity. (Z:3 “The Seven Seals” 1)

For this Zarathustra-Nietzsche-becoming-bird, sea and sky are no longer the formless opposites of the land with its definite contours, but the dimensions open to a flying creature, which finds its home everywhere and nowhere (“no above, no below!”). If the latter was the (non)location of Cusanus’s god, who was still all too spiritual, now it is envisioned in embodied terms as the playground of a bird-sage who moves and sings effortlessly, nomadically, to territorialize, deterritorialize, and reterritorialize itself with its surroundings. Bird-wisdom, insofar as it speaks, does so in order to renounce mere speech for song. The bird’s flight and its song are forms of pure excess. It is not filling a lack or struggling simply to exist; it is overflowing with energy. In the story of Alcyone, the bird’s life is geared to the cycle of the sun, itself the excessive energy source for all animal life and so the object of Zarathustra’s veneration. It is at the sun’s lowest point, the winter solstice, that the halcyon bird helps to celebrate nature’s fecundity and rebirth with its miraculous nesting and hatching of young. Nietzsche was doubtless annoyed that Christianity, with its rejection of animal energy, appropriated this season for its own story of birth. In the sixth of the seven seals, Zarathustra sings “this is my alpha and omega, that all that is heavy and grave should become light; all that is body, dancer; all that is spirit, bird.”

Hearing Nietzsche’s halcyon tone and understanding Zarathustra’s becoming-bird can help to clarify the vexed topic of Nietzsche’s relation to the feminine. Since Jacques Derrida’s *Spurs* and Luce Irigaray’s *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, the question has been posed with new subtlety to what extent Nietzsche must be thought of as a misogynist. Derrida pointed out that Heidegger managed to overlook the emphasis that Nietzsche gave to “it becomes woman” in his capsule history of philosophy “How the True World Finally Became a Fable.” He suggested that we must read the texts more carefully, attending to the confessions of personal bias (“these are my truths”) as well as to the affirmative dimension of “suppose that truth is a woman” and

the praise of those, including women, whose profundity lies in their realization that we are always dealing with surfaces. Irigaray's love letter takes Nietzsche to task for his narcissism, which expresses itself in his fantastic image of himself as a self-sufficient aerial creature and his avoidance of watery, feminine depths. She sees his or Zarathustra's image of having a child as a masculine attempt to appropriate female powers, asking whether his idea of will and eternal recurrence "are anything more than the dream of one who neither wants to have been born, nor to continue being born, at every instant, of a female other?"⁶ Illuminating as both of these readings are, they remain anthropocentric, failing to recognize the full spectrum of life, which is the context for Nietzsche's discussion of sexuality and gender. He does not simply reduce human beings to the lowest common denominators of the reproductive roles that they share with other animals. Although Nietzsche does sometimes write of procreation as involving the eternal war of the sexes, he tends to portray the female as the stronger antagonist. However, what is omitted in both the anthropocentric and the reductively biologicistic accounts of Nietzsche on sex and gender is the dimension of the animal and of metamorphosis. When we are overtaken by desire, Ovid, Nietzsche, and Deleuze and Guattari combine to claim, we are in a process of becoming-other, typically a becoming-animal. If we read Ovid—one of Nietzsche's favorite writers, who gives him the motto "we seek the forbidden"—in a flatly literal way, we get a series of incredible stories about humans transformed into trees, birds, dogs, and so on. Reading these stories of metamorphosis in a more generous spirit, stories that so frequently focus on the erotic, we can decipher them as narratives of what Deleuze and Guattari call molecular becoming; they are not about the imitation of external form, but internal transformation. As they write, "Unnatural participations or nuptials are the true Nature spanning the kingdoms of nature. . . . Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings. *Sexuality proceeds by way of the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming animal of the human.*"⁷ Desire is not about filling a lack (as a tradition from Plato to Freud would have it) but about becoming something other. Alcyone and Zarathustra become-bird by entering into an alliance with winged creatures.

An authoritative German encyclopedia of classical antiquity informs us that "the name Alcyone was bound up with the idea of faithful married love."⁸ In "The Seven Seals," bird-wisdom presides over Zarathustra's proposed marriage with the "woman" eternity. Might we *hear* the halcyon tone of this text as the song of one who is becoming-woman and becoming-bird, singing of transformation, dislocation, and giving birth? On such a reading,

or hearing, the sexual relation for Nietzsche would not be understood as a deconstructed binary issuing in a perpetual and complex play of “man” and “woman,” the upshot of Derrida’s *Spurs*. Nor would it be resolved into a narcissistic projection that must avoid the watery element, as in Irigaray’s analysis. Rather, taking seriously the animal dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophical rhetoric and poetics would offer a way of hearing his laments and love songs (often one and the same, like ours) as enacting becomings that are both very strange and surprisingly familiar. To hear the halcyon tone of Zarathustra’s songs would be to hear one who is becoming-woman-becoming-bird, a double transformation. Yet we all know the sweet songs of loss, on the radio and in our hearts, the blues, which are the ineluctable flip side of the joyous affirmation of love just discovered. Nietzsche’s attentive reader and Orphic disciple Rilke knows this in the *Duino Elegies*, which places the human between the animal and the angel. In *Zarathustra*, the hymeneal rejoicing of “The Seven Seals” does not eclipse the *Klage* of “The Night Song.” The two deepen one another, because “pain too is a joy; curses too are a blessing.” When Zarathustra chants this in the penultimate chapter of his book, “The Drunken Song,” he is singing a metasong, a song of songs that explains the mutual imbrication of love and loss, “for all joy wants itself, hence it also wants agony.” It is at this point that Zarathustra, after the song competition at his feast and ass festival, becomes the singing teacher, leading the higher men in a round of the “Midnight Song.” It is part of Zarathustra’s becoming-bird, marking his territory with a refrain. The higher men cannot follow him in this becoming, for they are only students of animals (like the scientist who studies the brain of the leech), their masters (the kings with their beasts of burden), or their imitators and pretended equals (like the voluntary beggar). The story of the new Orpheus ends as this singer welcomes the sign—lion and doves—that tells him that a new singing class (“my children”) is on the way.

Notes

1. Hans Schulz, ed., *Deutsches Fremdwörterbuch* (Strassburg, 1913; reprinted Berlin, 1974), 261–262.

2. The story is told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book XI. For more detailed references to the Greek and Roman literature, see Gary Shapiro, *Alcyone: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 109–154.

3. See also EH “Books” Z:6; GM P 8.

4. BGE 245; NCW 10.

5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 310–350; cf. 312: “the bird sings to mark its territory”; 316: “from this standpoint art is not the privilege of human beings.”

6. Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 26.

7. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 241 and 278–279.

8. *Pauly-Wissowa Realenzyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 1, col. 1581.