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# Using Animal Retribution Fiction for the Promotion of Environmental Awareness: the Case for a Reinterpretation of Daphne Du Maurier's "The Birds"

Xavier LACHAZETTE

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- 1 When the ancient Greeks practiced ornithomancy, or when later Romans resorted to augury, they believed that seeing certain birds performing certain actions in a framed part of the sky allowed them to tell the future and to predict whether current projects would succeed or fail. The specific species to which the sighted bird belonged, together with other parameters like the number of times it appeared in that imaginary celestial frame and whether it entered it from left or right, helped them to interpret their sightings in seemingly satisfactory ways, as if some divine power had found a reasonably transparent method of communicating portents of good or evil. Hence, in Book XX of *Odyssey*, Amphinomus understands that the planned killing of Odysseus's son Telemachus by himself and the rest of Penelope's suitors is frowned on by the gods when "there came to them a bird on their left, an eagle of lofty flight, clutching a timid dove" (Homer). If we are to believe Aeschylus, it is Prometheus who taught men how to interpret their movements: "I showed them this. And clearly analysed the flight of birds with crookt claws—what ones bring luck, and which are sinister" (Aeschylus 52). As for Cicero's *De Divinatione*, the two-part treatise expounds, then refutes, the power of avian augury (among other divination methods), to which tradition nonetheless attributes key events in Roman history, like the founding of Rome and the giving of the kingdom to Romulus rather than his brother Remus (Cicero 1 107-08).
- 2 The trouble is that, when one sets out to analyse the more recent (fictional) sightings at the centre of Daphne Du Maurier's novella "The Birds", no god offers any interpretive key for the bouts of violence which flocks of birds suddenly mete out to humans across

England. Indeed, in this spine-chilling story, the protagonist spends much more time preparing for or sustaining the attacks than actually watching the birds in flight, and his occasional observations are not of individual animals but rather of many "a sky of birds" (24<sup>1</sup>). Because World War II had been over for just a handful of years when the story appeared in the collection entitled *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Several Long Stories* (1952), one is naturally tempted to construe the novella as symptomatic of the lingering post-war trauma from which millions of Britons must have suffered at the time. On a more personal level, Du Maurier had shown self-censorship for years in trying to espouse the core tenets of a religious movement (Moral Re-Armament) so as to curb in herself and in her private life what she had come to regard as a problematic level of selfishness (Forster 147-96, Lachazette). One might therefore interpret the assault of the story's blood-thirsty birds as pangs of remorse, or as the nagging reminders of the havoc which Du Maurier's assertion of herself as a woman and a "career-minded" writer (Forster 251) may have wreaked by somewhat neglecting her roles as mother and wife.<sup>2</sup> Also, as Alfred Hitchcock fans will remember, the novella's basic premise lends itself to all kinds of rewrites and reinterpretations, seeing that the English director (and his scriptwriters) wove what can be regarded as a striking tale pitting modern female audacity against age-old sexual frustration in his eponymous 1963 film adaptation.

- 3 What I would like to argue is that, in the stark bluntness and disquieting universality of its avian violence, Du Maurier's tale of sudden and unexplained animal retribution can be read today as a commanding metaphor for the environmental emergency that the world currently faces, and for the changes that humanity must waste no time in implementing so as to reduce its footprint on nature, if not to survive at all. The point here will not be that Du Maurier was a conscious precursor of the modern environmental movements of the 1960s, nor that ecology played an important part in her life or fiction, but rather that by creating such a striking piece of metaphorical fiction, she has given environmentalists a strong narrative that they can use to great effect in their awareness-raising efforts. Therese Asplund has already shown that the power of metaphor—that is to say of the figure of speech in which one thing (the tenor) is described in terms of another (the vehicle)—can be harnessed for ecological purposes:

By linking two conceptual domains, the "source" and "target" domains, metaphors let us use what we already know to build an understanding of new subjects. [...] The locus of metaphor is in how we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another; in this way, what is strange and unfamiliar, such as climate change, becomes familiar via this process of metaphorization. (Asplund 2)

- 4 In such a framework, this discussion will analyse today's impending climate crisis in terms of Du Maurier's savage bird attacks. To do so, arguments from various fields of enquiry will be resorted to, namely literary studies, ecology and ecocriticism, animal horror film studies, and discourse analysis linguistics. Since Du Maurier's birds are enigmatic signifiers that point to a variety of signifieds, we will start by examining how far the novella can be viewed as metaphoric of nature's anger at humanity and thirst for revenge. We will then analyse the apocalyptic message carried by the birds by focusing on the way in which Du Maurier undermines her characters' smug feeling of normality or ease, replacing it with uncomfortable or repressed ecological considerations which call attention to man's power of destruction and pollution. Finally, we will inquire into the impact which the novella can be said to have on its

readers, that is whether the stunned sense of fear caused by the fiction paves the way for a resigned form of hopelessness and fatalism, or whether it calls for a heightened degree of respect and creativity in humanity's relationship with the natural world around it.

## 1. A striking metaphor for nature's anger

- 5 As Mary Ellen Bellanca argues in her discussion of Du Maurier's "The Birds", one of the most unsettling elements in the story is the sudden realisation that humanity deluded itself when it believed in the "notion of companionable nature" (Bellanca 29), i.e. in the idea that human and non-human animals shared a sort of sacred fellowship or were tied by an unbreakable bond. The birds' newly-acquired monomania—wiping off humans from the face of the earth—thus fiercely debunks the illusory "myth of human-nonhuman kinship" (Buell 203) and explains why Nat Hocken, the protagonist, sickens and feels his stomach turn when given a moment to think of the (to him) utterly unnatural assault he has just survived (11, 32). He is "shocked and horrified" (11) by the sight of their little corpses.

### 1.1 A problematic relationship

- 6 If we are to believe ancient literature, though, humanity's relationship with nature has constantly been of a problematic kind, given its propensity to universally prey on animals and enslave them for its benefit. Already in his fifth-century BC play, Aristophanes' chorus of birds mocked the so-called superiority of humankind by calling the latter an "unfortunate race, whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion of a dream", in opposition to the ethereal quality of winged beings, which remain "ever young and occupied with eternal thoughts". They showed how wary they were of humans when, on hearing that Epops had convened them in the presence of specimens from that hated species, they cried out:

CHORUS: Io! io! forward to the attack, throw yourselves upon the foe, spill his blood; take to your wings and surround them on all sides. Woe to them! let us get to work with our beaks, let us devour them. Nothing can save them from our wrath, neither the mountain forests, nor the clouds that float in the sky, nor the foaming deep. Come, peck, tear to ribbons. Where is the chief of the cohort? Let him engage the right wing. (Aristophanes)

- 7 Nevertheless, those references to devouring the foe, spilling his blood and setting to work on his flesh thanks to the birds' sharp beaks are intended as a jest in a comedy which actually depicts how humans manage to subdue the animal kingdom and turn its strong points to their advantage. One millennium later, as another critic has shown when studying the three kinds of *bao*, or retribution, which he perceives in early medieval Chinese tales, it was also customary to find stories in which fish kill men for angling, or find ways of preventing them from doing so, or appear to them in dreams to raise their awareness of the suffering they inflict on fellow sentient beings (Zhang 97-103).
- 8 One could nevertheless argue that the most horrendous or heart-felt of those revenge-of-nature tales were imagined in the twentieth century, during which humankind plumbed abysmal depths of violence in terms of death toll from armed conflicts, and

tottered on the brink of nuclear self-annihilation. For instance, in 1917, Arthur Machen published *The Terror*, a novella in which one of the causes put forward to explain the sudden separate killing sprees perpetrated by moths especially—but also by pigeons, sheepdogs, sheep, cattle and horses, porpoises, rats and bees—is the "contagion of hate" brought about by WWI, the idea being that "the fury of the whole world at war, the great passion of death that seems driving all humanity to destruction, infected at last these lower creatures, and in place of their native instinct of submission gave them rage and wrath and ravening" (Machen 1463). Likewise in *Animal Farm*, his 1945 fable, George Orwell portrayed the rebellion of an organised community of animals who are so dissatisfied with "the worthless parasitical human beings" (Orwell 28) that they decide to wage war against them, "[t]he only good human being is a dead one" (Orwell 44).

- 9 As for Du Maurier's novella, it is as if after countless generations of birds had passed on to their descendants an unadulterated hatred for humankind, millions of them were finally called upon to visit nature's ever-renewed wrath on its ancient foe. This is clearly Du Maurier's intended meaning when she chooses to close her story on Nat's wondering "how many million years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines" (43). An avid reader of Jung (Forster 276, 278), Du Maurier thus applies to her birds the Swiss psychoanalyst's key concept of the collective unconscious, according to which the conscience of all the individuals of a given species is influenced by "inherited presuppositions" and by "the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings" (Jung 112).
- 10 Lastly, two and a half millennia after Aristophanes' comedy, Maja Milatovic reports in her study of Australian animal horror films an even more impressive array of reproaches laid at the door of humanity. Not only is mankind's "urge to destroy, subdue and dominate" unchanged, but it demonstrates "various forms of disrespect for the natural world" which are the "fatal consequences of human hubris" (Milatovic 84, 76, 77). Man has also become a tourist who consumes commodified wildlife experiences which erase the history of colonised environments and peoples. Those films thus establish a "transgression-retribution dynamic" in mankind's guilt-ridden rapport with nature while "representing and thematising white complicity in the ongoing exploitation and destruction of the land and the wildlife" (Milatovic 86, 91).

## 1.2 Nature as commander-in-chief

- 11 That Du Maurier wrote her story in the winter of 1951–52, a mere handful of years after the end of World War II, may therefore be symptomatic of a personal resurgence of long pent-up anger with humanity's folly and of her fear of what its unlimited power of destruction could do to civilisation. Already in January 1944, as Forster notes, Du Maurier was "shocked and shaken by the reality" of "her first sight of what war could do" when a demining operation went wrong minutes away from Menabilly, her Cornish home, and a "horribly injured" soldier was brought to her on a stretcher, bleeding heavily, while she stood, helpless, waiting for the ambulance. Her rather paradisiacal isolation at Menabilly was thus unable to hold at bay the destructive aftermath of the raging conflict, and she felt "a return of the overwhelming fear that had gripped her at the start of the war" (Forster 183-84). In the novella, one is struck by the fact that her masterfully crafted tale of animal retribution unrelentingly builds up tension from a

tiny initial incident, a "something [that] brushed his hand, jabbing at his knuckles, grazing the skin" (9). In fact, not content with "brushing" Nat's hand, the unspecified little bird has actually drawn blood. We are thus directly reminded of the role played by the human hand in the vital distinction between legs and hands propounded by Snowball, the young pig who assumes command of the rebels in *Animal Farm*:

"A bird's wing, comrades," he said, "is an organ of propulsion and not of manipulation. It should therefore be regarded as a leg. The distinguishing mark of Man is the HAND, the instrument with which he does all his mischief." (Orwell 34<sup>3</sup>)

12 To their utter relief, birds thus learn that the farm community will not hold their bipedal nature against them—as they staunchly do mankind's—because their wings must also be counted as legs. Conversely, in Du Maurier's story, Nat's wounded hand on the night of the first attack marks him out as deserving to die on account of his belonging to the abominable race of manipulators and self-proclaimed Lords of the Creation.

13 From that point on, the narrative focuses exclusively on each "battle of the birds" (14) sustained by Nat and his unnamed wife, and on their preparations in order to try and make it to the next ebb tide. The full-scale war that the birds declare on them is rendered throughout by an impressive array of military terms: the birds are "like a mighty fleet at anchor" (16); they spread out "in huge formation across the sky" or divide into "sections" with specific "missions" (21); they are assigned "targets" (24), etc. Needless to say, those attacks put Nat in mind of the air-raids and bombings which England's West Country endured during World War II, together with the boarding up and the shelter construction he engaged in when his mother's home in Plymouth proved unsafe (18). More impressively still, the birds are likened to *kamikaze* pilots or "death-and-glory boys" (36) with "no thought for themselves" (25), who "flung themselves to death against propeller and fuselage" (30) or "crashed, broken and bruised, on the ground" (25).

14 One of the most frightening characteristics of those birds is the tense silence in which they not only lie in wait but also carry out their sorties. Indeed, even though hundreds of thousands of them suddenly turn up in that corner of the country, Du Maurier never makes use of a cacophony of jarring bird calls to achieve her unsettling effect. Contrary to what one might have expected—contrary also to the effect achieved by Hitchcock right from the opening credits of his adaptation through the use of a mixture of genuinely recorded bird noises and electronically engineered sounds—, Du Maurier steeps her novella in a forbidding and foreboding mood of coldly resolute hush. For instance, the following quote:

The gulls had risen. They were circling, hundreds of them, thousands of them, lifting their wings against the wind. It was the gulls that made the darkening of the sky. And they were silent. They made not a sound. They just went on soaring and circling, rising, falling, trying their strength against the wind. (20–21)

15 strangely contrasts with a few lines from her essay "A Winter's Afternoon, Kilmarnock", in which she describes animal life in a crater-pocked field (evocatively dubbed "Passchendaele") situated near her own home, in much the same setting as in the novella under study:

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the birds appear. Oyster catchers, with their panic call and rapid wingbeat; curlews, more mysterious, aloof, the whistling cry surely portending sorrow [...]. Be that as it may, the pheasant's call and the pigeon's flutter are alike absent this afternoon; the only thing to stir except the trees

themselves is a ragged crow, who launches himself from a dead branch at my approach and croaks his way to Passchendaele. (140-41)

- 16 Such a contrast reveals Du Maurier's intention in her novella, in the sense that the silence of its birds must be construed as the winged soldiers' expectant anticipation of, and eagerness to carry out, their commander-in-chief's orders. Indeed, on several occasions, the reader is told that the birds are waiting on some "message" (8) or "signal", as if "some decision had yet to be given" or "the order was not clear" (23). In other words, though the avian hosts could prove to be the downfall of the whole human race, they are actually sent by higher powers whose identity remains cloaked in mystery, and the motivation for whose destructive designs is never spelled out. Nonetheless, Nat serves as the story's internal focaliser, and his gut feeling is clearly that the sea and the wind are the vengeful driving forces behind all of these occurrences. As the text indicates in passing anthropomorphic terms, however silent and unmoved the birds stay, he can hear "the vicious sea drumming on the rocks" (20). Moreover, he is sensitive enough to marine mood swings to feel that it has become "fiercer now with the tide" (11) while his intuition lets him understand that "[t]here was some law the birds obeyed, and it was all to do with the east wind and the tide" (31). By taking advantage of the two ebb-tide periods that make up any given day, he alone in his community (as far as we know) saves himself and his family from complete annihilation.
- 17 Writing as she does in the very early 1950s, Du Maurier can be supposed to be contributing her topical share to the list of mankind's foibles and follies by focusing on the dehumanising influence which the all too recent worldwide conflict has had on it. As the story shows, all the machines with which he surrounds himself like so many metal extensions of his fleshy self—farmer Harry Trigg's tractor and firearms, the RAF's planes, or the navy's machine-guns, for instance—prove pathetically inefficient in the context of an avian attack. Thus, on the first night, Nat owes his life to nothing more than a blanket which "became a weapon of defence" (10); later on, he throws away as useless the hoe which he had formerly deemed "the only possible tool, and light enough to carry" (21). This doffing of all the trappings of a belligerent civilisation acts as a prelude to a series of sudden inversions which leave him at the mercy of mere "little stabbing beaks sharp as a pointed fork" (10): no more the apex predator, but the top prey, of his ecosystem, he has no choice but to cage himself in his embattled home for protection. It is no wonder, then, that a contemporary newspaper reviewer asserted that Du Maurier's theme in her story was "the defeat of mechanical civilisation" (Johns).

## 2. The use of literature in environmental awareness raising

- 18 Now that representations of humanity's troubled relationship with its environment have been analysed in various works, now also that the anger of nature as a whole—i.e. not simply the birds—has been established in Du Maurier's novella, we will wonder in what sense and to what extent the apocalyptic discourse of that piece of fiction can be said to serve the purposes of today's looming environmental crisis.



## 2.1 The necessity and difficulty of representing ecological emergency

- 19 Convincing people that they need to act now in order to alter or abate the course of an announced ecological emergency of unprecedented proportions is no mean task. As Nat quickly realises when Jim, the local farmer's cowman, shows no interest whatsoever in the story of his previous night's encounter with birds on the rampage, communicating one's personal experience often proves impossible to achieve: "You had to endure something yourself before it touched you." (15) Moreover, it is interesting to note how frequently the subject of humanity's complacency keeps recurring in discussions about Hitchcock's adaptation of the novella. Such an idea is indeed present in Du Maurier's story, as when Nat calls the exchange to report large bird formations, only to find the operator utterly uninterested in his piece of news. "'She's another,' thought Nat, 'she doesn't care. Maybe she's had to answer calls all day. She hopes to go to the pictures tonight. She'll squeeze some fellow's hand and point up at the sky and say 'Look at all them birds!' She doesn't care.'" (22) Nevertheless, as far as Hitchcock is concerned, from a personal condemnation of "people like Melanie"—the female protagonist in his film version—for tending "to behave without any kind of responsibility, and to ignore the more serious aspects of life" (Counts 26), the director seems to have evolved a much more general theory which he applied to 1960s America, but whose validity can be extended to the current period:

Hitchcock said that his film was about complacency, reflecting the fact that ordinary men and women go about their lives seemingly unaware that catastrophe may be imminent. The film was conceived during the period of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Bel Air Fire, the Missouri Floods and the overshadowing threat of nuclear war. Hitchcock said he wanted to stir people out of their apathy and make them sit up and take notice of the danger all around them. (Moral 15)

- 20 Nor is it easy to combat the level of scepticism with which whistle-blowers can be met, as proven by the recent debates around the use of, and nuances between, key terms such as "climate change" or "climate crisis" on the one hand, or such as "climate sceptics", "climate doubters" and "climate deniers" on the other hand (Readfearn).
- 21 Compounded with this is the difficulty of conveying to ordinary citizens of all nations and world-scale industrialists alike the urgent need to change their habits and consent to sacrifices for the common weal of humanity. As the three editors of a recent study penetratingly ask,
- how can we convert into images and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Gregersdotter, Höglund, and Hällén 3)
- 22 One of the issues with which promoters of environmentalism thus meet is the slowness and complexity of the natural processes involved in any climate crisis, especially in Western nations where consumerism, attention span deficit and instant gratification habits have become predominant. To use Rob Nixon's excellent phraseology, the "slow violence" with which environmental catastrophes unravel—catastrophes like climate change, pesticide drift, polar cap thawing, plastic pollution, deforestation, to name but

a few—is easily brushed aside or even hardly perceived by a mind which associates violence with actions or events that are "immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and [...] erupting into instant sensational visibility" (Nixon 2).

- 23 One way of addressing this mismatch between the functioning of the human brain and the radical human paradigm shift demanded by imminent environmental catastrophes is to resort to the apocalyptic rhetoric which some critics see as the clarion call needed to raise people's consciousness—or rather as the severe electric shock required to jolt humanity into immediate action. For instance, ecocritics like Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard salute what they regard as an apocalyptic tone in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* because they believe that it helps provide "a 'powerful master metaphor' influencing government policy, galvanizing environmental activism, and [...] shaping all manner of popular narratives about impending environmental crisis" (quoted in Soles 527). But as we will see later on, such a discourse has its limits and is far from getting unanimous support.

## 2.2 Du Maurier's signal contribution to environmentalism

- 24 If the assumption is correct that the major obstacles to the furtherance of environmentalism reside in imaginatively getting across unpalatable ideas, in rooting out complacency or self-centredness, and in trying to lower the level of scepticism or denial of the general population, Du Maurier's novella should be enlisted in its support, as those are indeed some of its key characteristics. That she wrote it in the winter of 1951-52, long before the mainstream emergence of some of the dramatic ecological issues now facing us, is quite irrelevant in the sense that it is both the power of metaphor and the adaptivity of literary texts that are discussed here, not forgetting the fact that the brand new threat of nuclear holocaust must have caused acute pangs of anxiety to many individuals right after the Second World War.
- 25 For one thing, as is often the case in Du Maurier's shorter fiction, the defamiliarisation of the reader is undertaken right from the first few paragraphs. A strange mixture of normal and abnormal happenings is described, taking readers by surprise until they find themselves incapable of deciding which side wins the day. Not only is the sudden onslaught of winter, mentioned in the introductory line, of a rather disquieting nature, but Nat's ornithological explanations of what a "normal" autumn should look like are intriguing. If we are to believe him, non-migratory birds not only follow instinctive rhythms and rituals, but they also obey "impulses", "drives" and "urges" (8-9) that they themselves cannot comprehend. The mood which Nat anthropocentrically projects onto them is one of sadness and gloom, as if the fear of death dictated their every movement, bringing them nothing but restlessness and exhaustion. Likewise, though the "strange partnership" (8) between black jackdaws and white gulls is presented as a yearly occurrence, that very phrase heralds the supernatural element that will become central to the story—a supernatural element which does not reside in its murderous avian assaults on humans, as those are sometimes reported to happen (on a far smaller scale), but in the banding together and collective task distribution of thirty or so distinct species of birds which neither typically cooperate with one another, nor usually share the same territory.
- 26 Moreover, as the shadow of destruction and death gradually extends, we are told, to London and the rest of the country, a National Emergency is rapidly proclaimed,

though the population is clearly advised not to expect too much of the measures taken "as these are not easy to effect immediately, owing to the unforeseen and unparalleled nature of the present crisis" (28). The safeguarding of each individual is thus a matter of personal "planning against emergency" (31) rather than of governmental interventionism. As soon becomes apparent, though, when the entire Hocken family pay a flying visit to Nat's employer to ask for food supplies and other staples, no survivor is to be found to tell the story of the previous night's attacks. Later on, when the RAF's botched or injudicious operations fail, the only solution left appears to Nat to be the contamination of the soil and the annihilation of all traces of animal life, as part of a last-ditch attempt to fix the problem by resorting to mustard gas:

"They'll have to be ruthless," he thought. "Where the trouble's worst they'll have to risk more lives, if they use gas. All the stock, and the soil—all contaminated. As long as everyone doesn't panic. That's the trouble. People panicking, losing their heads. The BBC was right to warn us of that." (30-31)

- 27 In evoking the possibility of such a drastic antidote to her characters' dire predicament, Du Maurier is historically correct, in the sense that mustard gas had indeed been used in various conflicts since the First World War. Nonetheless, Nat's contention that the population will "be warned first, of course" if the authorities "try spraying with gas, mustard gas" (30) sounds unduly optimistic when one remembers the unflattering light in which Rachel Carson would portray the agricultural chemical industry on both sides of the Atlantic a decade later, in *Silent Spring*. Speaking not of mustard gas in wartime but of potentially lethal arsenic compounds sprayed in peacetime by English authorities at precisely the time Du Maurier had been writing her novella, Carson ironically remarked:

In England this latter practice developed about 1951 as a result of a shortage of sulphuric acid, formerly used to burn off the potato vines. The Ministry of Agriculture considered it necessary to give warning of the hazard of going into the arsenic-sprayed fields, but the warning was not understood by the cattle (nor, we must assume, by the wild animals and birds) and reports of cattle poisoned by the arsenic sprays came with monotonous regularity. (Carson 48)

- 28 That such a warning was automatically given to farmers is to be doubted, as one fails to see why farmers should willingly risk the lives of their livestock if they were cautioned about the true lethality of the chemical compounds sprayed over their fields. Even though Du Maurier penned her novella at a time when ecological issues had not entered mainstream consciousness as potently as they would over the next decades, one is thus forced to acknowledge that she had a knack for capturing the burgeoning attention to the environment that marked post-WW2 Britain. As one critic argues, the story "resembles the 'catastrophist' fiction, including Frank Baker's *The Birds*, which appeared between the world wars and 'became more and more popular after 1945,' according to Brian Stableford" (Bellanca 32). One may assume that the memory of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a mere six years before, could but loom large at the back of the writer's mind—especially if one considers that Britain had launched its own nuclear programme during the Second World War and subsequently detonated its first bomb off the north-western coast of Australia on 3 October 1952, thus becoming the third country to wield the most dangerous of human weapons at the very moment when Du Maurier's story was appearing on its own in *Good Housekeeping*<sup>4</sup>. And as the same critic notes, even though no direct allusions are to be found in it to nuclear weapons, textual references to the Russians, to contamination, or to Nat's shelter building during the previous war, added to potent images of the characters'

huddling in bunker-like homes in subsistence survival mode, certainly gesture towards an atomic context, as if the story's precocious, hard winter was in effect what is termed a "nuclear winter" (Bellanca 32-33).

- 29 Lastly, two linguistic studies of the metaphors commonly used in recent articles or publications on climate change indirectly demonstrate how relevant Du Maurier's novella could prove to the raising of public awareness about the climate crisis ahead of us and, by implication, militate in favour of its inclusion into the canon of any Environmental Humanities course. On the one hand, in her study of climate discourse in non-scientific Swedish farm magazines, Asplund stresses the different modes in which scientists and non-scientists (to which category we here assume the average fiction reader to belong) tend to process climate-related information. As she explains,

People arguably differ in how they learn about abstract, complex phenomena. While scientists are said to learn via analytic thinking, non-scientists are said to learn from personal experience. Non-scientists typically rely more on readily accessible associative and affective processing of climate-related information. These immediate associations are often mediated through a range of linguistic devices or "discursive figures", for example, analogies, distinctions, stories, metaphors, and prototypical examples, to make the unknown more familiar and graspable. (Asplund 2)

- 30 As it turns out, she identifies three master metaphors in Swedish farm magazine coverage of this issue, namely "greenhouse, game, and war metaphors", in this last case on account of "climate change being depicted as a 'threat' that will 'hit' the Earth and result in 'loss' and 'death' [while] magazine readers are encouraged to 'combat', 'eliminate', 'save', and 'be saved'" (Asplund 3-5).
- 31 On the other hand, on top of the same conclusion that CLIMATE CHANGE IS WAR<sup>5</sup> metaphors prevail (along with CLIMATE CHANGE IS A DISEASE) not only in four British or American newspapers—*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*, between 2014 and 2017—but also in a corpus of Earth Negotiation Bulletins, published in the wake of the 2015 COP 21 conference, Caroline Peynaud finds that THE EARTH AS A HOUSE is one of the four most frequent metaphors in her press corpus.
- 32 For all those reasons, Du Maurier's story of a family pathetically entrenched in their HOUSE to sustain the WAR which thirty or so species of birds brutally start waging on humanity in the wake of a sudden disruption of the climate is not only strangely visionary but also a fictional weapon which Environmental Humanities specialists could use in their classes, seeing that the powerful metaphors at the core of the narrative are precisely those that have lately been in common parlance.

### 3. A call to action and creativity

- 33 Now that the intrinsic power of Du Maurier's novella has been described, it remains to be seen in more detail what impact such a grim and ghastly tale can be expected to have on today's readers. In order to do so, one can argue that a direct analogy exists between apocalyptic, catastrophist or alarmist fiction, to which Du Maurier's story can be said to pertain, and what are variously called nature-strikes-back, nature-on-a-rampage, revenge-of-nature, or revolt-of-nature films, among other monikers.

### 3.1 The limits to the efficacy of apocalyptic metaphors

- 34 As critics of the latter genres have shown, one of the dangers surrounding such works is that a metonymic shift is apt to take place:

Films that centre on the animal revenge theme can be seen as counterfactual stories in which the future, geographically remote, and scientifically convoluted repercussions of the slow violence of climate change are replaced by the metonym of animal violence directed at the human body. (Nixon 3)

- 35 In other words, due to the immediate physical risk run by on-screen characters, a viewer may be tempted to relate more acutely to their fictional plight than to the ultimately backgrounded ecological issues which caused it in the first place but which find themselves more or less eclipsed by their metaphorical replacements, be they monsters, landslides, giant spiders, sharks, octopuses, or armies of birds. In that sense, using animal retribution or revenge-of-nature plots to make manifest our planet's predicament is faulty in itself, and Bellanca is certainly justified in claiming that, as far as birds are concerned, such a widespread cinematic scenario "not only 'effaces' real animals but also perpetrates an ecological scandal by imagining those animals as a danger to human existence, when for over a century the situation has been the other way around" (Bellanca 27). As the reading of any UN report proves these days, the rate of species extinction is unprecedented and accelerating, so that the world is much more likely to witness the veracity of Rachel Carson's "silent spring" metaphor than an animal takeover of the planet.
- 36 In other cases, as Jennifer Schell argues in an article about an animal horror film where frogs take centre stage, it is only superficially that natural disaster films can be said to respond to environmental apprehensions and to promote personal responsibility in rising to the challenge. What characterises those works, in her eyes, is rather the tendency "to contain discursive paradoxes that serve to undermine the environmental and social movements they purportedly support" (Schell 60). By claiming that ecosystems come with natural self-checking mechanisms, for instance, the film she studies "ultimately endorses the noninterventionist approach of leaving nature to its own devices" while it implies that legal action and environmental reforms are simply a waste of time (Schell 60).
- 37 Lastly, praising the birds' reasoning powers, like Nat at the start of yet another attack, admiring as he does their persistence ("You'd think they'd tire of the game, but not a bit of it", 35), is just as ambivalent. True, because of this unexpected stress placed on the intrinsic value of other forms of life, Nat's adoption of a biocentric viewpoint at such a dramatic moment in the narrative deserves the reader's utmost respect, but will certainly not allay his or her fears. Rather, his admiration points precisely to another inherent limit to the awareness-raising power of apocalyptic metaphors, namely their fearmongering potential, that is to say their propensity to engender paralysis or to cause one of the new forms of emotional helplessness now termed "solastalgia" or "eco-anxiety", among other names.<sup>6</sup> Not every reader today has in them the makings of a Greta Thunberg, who was able to transform "millions of vague, middle-of-the-night anxieties into a worldwide movement calling for urgent change", as a *Time* article recently put it (Alter, Haynes, and Worland). Not every reader today can manage to channel their anger into creative and action-packed ways of demanding global change,

as Thunberg is reported to have done when she addressed journalists in the following fashion after her transatlantic boat recently docked at the port of Lisbon, Portugal:

Taking her place in front of a bank of television cameras and reporters, she went on. "People are underestimating the force of angry kids," she said. "We are angry and frustrated, and that is because of good reason. If they want us to stop being angry then maybe they should stop making us angry." When she was done speaking, the crowd erupted in cheers.

### 3.2 The need to imaginatively recreate a form of proximity to nature

- 38 Those are indeed serious limitations, but a one-size-fits-all approach to the impact of sudden violence metaphors, or to anything else for that matter, is no doubt unfair, seeing that just as many critics will be found to praise how efficiently the proverbial wake-up call actually works in other cases. In his *An Inconvenient Truth* presentation, for instance, former Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize Al Gore makes the point that if a frog jumps into boiling water, it will jump right out again, whereas if the same animal leaps into a pot of lukewarm water slowly brought to a boil, it will just sit there and not move. Gore concludes his analogy with the following words,

Our collective nervous system is like that frog's nervous system. It takes a sudden jolt sometimes before we become aware of a danger. If it seems gradual, even if it really is happening quickly, we're capable of just sitting there and not responding. (Guggenheim 66:26)

- 39 Besides, more practically speaking, a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2007 makes the case that taking the moral high ground when speaking of ecological issues is bound to fail because the common run of people need to be "drawn emotionally to an issue" rather than just act "through civic duty" (Ereaut and Segnit 15). What these authors advocate is to make the environmental debate "meaningful to individuals" and to learn from "locally-organized initiatives [which] benefit from using the rich, imaginative and playful language of popular culture, media and everyday discourse, rather than the discourses of politics, campaigning and the public sector" (Ereaut and Segnit 15).
- 40 As it happens, Du Maurier's novella provides an excellent example of what popular culture has to offer, whether one takes sides with the partisans of the apocalyptic metaphor or with the backers of the richly creative, locally-grown discourse. Indeed, her protagonist reads like a firm believer in the limits to economic growth and like the epitome of the ecologically-minded human being of the future. A manual worker who enjoys watching the birds and performing his solitary outdoor tasks, like mending gates and building up banks, he never grumbles about his wartime disability. Far from minding the smallness of the bedrooms, windows and garden of his old cottage (9, 11, 34, 38), he is grateful that they provide much stronger protection against the birds than the new council houses: "Heaven help them up the lane in the new council houses" (34). He soon adapts to the necessity of satisfying a few basic needs only. Not one to cling to the idea of human exceptionalism, he is saved by the conviction that animals possess agency and that nature follows a logical pattern of its own. Whereas the first line of the narrative boldly mentions that the wind suddenly changed "on December the third", familiar calendar days are soon lost sight of at the Hocken cottage in favour of the more unusual and irregular successions of six-hour periods known as tides,



because Nat alone has understood that, for some unknown reason, the bird attacks are timed with them.

- 41 All in all, Nat proves that humans can end up seeing what is staring them in the face if they try long enough. The question is, though, as the rather grim cliffhanger ending of the novella ambiguously points out, how much time do they have left?
- 42 "The Birds" therefore ticks off the four criteria which Lawrence Buell earmarked for deciding whether a given narrative can qualify as eco-fiction (Buell 11). Indeed, by foregrounding the anger which animates not only the eponymous animals but the whole of nature, forcing humans on the brink of avian annihilation to look around them and into themselves for much-needed explanations, Daphne Du Maurier powerfully shows that "human history is implicated in natural history" (criterion 1), while the tension building up as the birds learn how to mount increasingly effective attacks undeniably gives the reader a sense of the environment "as a process rather than as a constant or a given" (criterion 4). Moreover, by defamiliarising protagonists and readers alike, and destroying their complacency, the narrative also demonstrates that "the human interest is not [...] the only legitimate interest" (criterion 2), thereby arousing environmental issues which have grown infinitely more distressing seven decades later, though they must have lain (rather uncomfortably) dormant at that time. Lastly, that "[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation" (criterion 3) is self-evident in the Trigg farm episode, for instance, when it turns out that, though all three humans have been killed off, not one of the farm animals has been injured in the savage attack.
- 43 The point here is not that Du Maurier was an environmental activist, nor that in "The Birds" she consciously set out to write an ecological tale, even though, as has been argued, the new nuclear threat to which she and her contemporaries had to learn to adapt can be supposed to underlie the story's premise to some extent. As shown by an entertaining passage from "A Winter's Afternoon, Kilmarth", her attitude to pollution, for example, could depend on whether the local Cornish china clay industry was at stake and whether any tourists, whom she cordially hated, were involved:
- now that the wind has shifted a few points west it brings the welcome sound of industry, power plants at work, engines whining, men hammering, chimneys pouring out great plumes of smoke, white and curling like the sea. Pollution? Nonsense, the sight is glorious! Later the remaining ships at anchor will dock in turn, load up with china clay, and plough back across the Channel to their home-port destination. The white waste from the clay, regretted by some, scatters a filmy dust upon the working sheds, and the bay itself has all the froth and dazzle of a milk churn spilt into a turbulent pool. Tourists may seek the golden sands of holiday brochures if they like, but to swim in such a sea is ecstasy—I have tried it, and I know! (Du Maurier 140)
- 44 Rather, the point is that in depicting a protagonist who desperately (but belatedly) endeavours to drive away danger from his *oikos*, the Greek term for *house* which serves as prefix for the word *ecology*, Du Maurier penned a powerful and truly *eco*-logical tale which metaphorises humanity's sincere but pathetically faulty love for the planet it inhabits. As such, "The Birds" stands as a powerful *eco*-narrative that deserves inclusion into the body of works most likely to raise awareness about the environmental issues facing humanity in the coming decade—and as a striking mirror image to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, one in which the silence does not stem from the

disappearance of the birds, but from their quiet assurance that they are bound to take over in the end.

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## NOTES

1. Parenthetical page references to the novella are to the following edition: Daphne Du Maurier, *The Birds and Other Stories*. Arrow, 1992.
2. In that sense, Du Maurier's inner conflict can be pronounced a clear case of "maternal ambivalence", defined by Barbara Almond as the "guilt and shame about the quality of their

mothering or their avoidance of motherhood" from which many of her patients suffer (*The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, U of California P, 2010, xii).

3. Whether Du Maurier read *Animal Farm* between its release (1945) and the winter of 1951–52 when she wrote "The Birds" cannot be asserted. She read extensively, though, and the glowing reviews that Orwell's fable received certainly put it in the spotlight right from publication.

4. In the wake of the international sensation created by Du Maurier's fifth novel, *Rebecca*, in 1938, women's magazines started to print the writer's latest (long or short) fiction more than ever before. *Woman's Own* published most of Du Maurier's production in Britain (though not "The Birds", it seems) while in the United States, on top of "The Birds", *Good Housekeeping* carried installments of *The Glass-Blowers* (February to April 1963) and *The Flight of the Falcon* (February to May 1965), for instance. Interestingly, *Good Housekeeping's* October 1952 issue published "The Birds" with the preliminary statement that "The Editors present this, not as the most popular, but perhaps as the Most Distinguished Short Story of the Year" (pp. 54-55). Such a warning is in keeping with the feminist-inclined agenda which some mainstream women's magazines pursued in one way or another, for example by refusing to refrain from addressing certain, allegedly unfeminine, issues in their columns.

5. Discourse analysis linguists traditionally use uppercase letters to quote the names of the metaphors under study.

6. Galway et al. define solastagia as "the distress caused by the unwelcome transformation of cherished landscapes resulting in cumulative mental, emotional, and spiritual health impacts" (11). In the same article, the authors mention and/or define related concepts, such as "eco-anxiety", "ecological grief", "nature-deficit disorder" and "eco-paralysis" (6-7).

## ABSTRACTS

In the search for effective means of representing and conveying the urgency of the environmental crisis facing humanity in the coming decade, not all images hit the mark with the same forcefulness. Al Gore's phrase "An Inconvenient Truth", for instance, strikes one's imagination far less than the "house on fire" metaphor popularized by French President Jacques Chirac and Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. Another powerful image is to be found in Daphne Du Maurier's allegorical novella "The Birds" (1952), which focuses on a small Cornish community's fight for survival when organised hosts of winged creatures take to killing humans in the wake of a sudden climate change. Not only is that story visionary in its suggestion that self-sufficiency and degrowth are more viable or sustainable than current economic systems, but it offers us today a striking metaphor for the catastrophic backlash that humanity needs to avoid. Du Maurier thus creates a frightful tale of animal retribution in which preys are suddenly turned into predators, and human beings need to face the implacable anger they have aroused if they wish to prevent a sort of *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson) in reverse.

Quand on cherche un moyen efficace de représenter et de communiquer l'urgence de la crise environnementale à laquelle l'humanité va être confrontée dans la décennie qui s'annonce, il apparaît que toutes les images ne se valent pas en termes de puissance évocatrice. Ainsi, la « vérité qui dérange » d'Al Gore saisit beaucoup moins l'imaginaire que la métaphore de la

« maison qui brûle », popularisée par Jacques Chirac et la militante suédoise Greta Thunberg. Une autre image puissante se trouve dans la nouvelle allégorique de Daphne du Maurier, « Les oiseaux » (1952), qui met en scène le combat pour la survie d'une petite communauté cornouaillaise attaquée par des armées de volatiles meurtriers à la suite d'un brusque changement climatique. Non seulement cette nouvelle est visionnaire dans sa démonstration que l'autosuffisance et la décroissance sont plus viables que les systèmes économiques actuels, mais elle nous offre aujourd'hui une métaphore saisissante des catastrophes naturelles auxquelles l'humanité va être confrontée. Du Maurier crée ainsi un récit effrayant de vengeance animale, où les proies se muent en prédateurs et où l'humanité doit faire face à la colère implacable qu'elle a suscitée si elle veut empêcher une sorte de *Printemps silencieux* (Rachel Carson) à rebours. Daphne du Maurier, oiseaux, vengeance animale, métaphore, urgence environnementale

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Daphne Du Maurier, birds, animal retribution, metaphor, environmental emergency

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