

16. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 572.
17. Chase, *Walt Whitman Reconsidered*, 56.
18. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*, 70.
19. Folsom, "Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers.'"
20. Compare Carol Zapata Whelan, "Do I Contradict Myself? Progression through Contraries in Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 25–39.

6

Complaints from the Spotted Hawk *Flights and Feathers in Whitman's 1855 Leaves of Grass*

THOMAS C. GANNON

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . he complains
of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

WALT WHITMAN, "Song of Myself" (1855)

[T]o speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and
insouciance of the movements of animals [. . .] is the
flawless triumph of art.

WALT WHITMAN, Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

The final movement of Whitman's "Song of Myself" begins with a "spotted hawk" swooping—and complaining of the poet-persona's delay and verbosity. The bird is imagined saying, "Get on with it," as it were; but on Whitman's way to ultimately positing some atomist immortality—"look for me under your bootsoles" (*LG* 1855, 56)—he must pause to identify himself with this raptor, becoming a near-avian entity who is also untamed and "untranslatable,"

blessed as he is with a “barbaric yawp” as part of his own vocal repertoire. Here is an early instance of a characteristic gesture in Whitman’s poetics, his identification with a bird, through which the poet feels himself empowered to transcend the semiotics of human discourse, to better express the ambiguities inherent in his obsessive themes of life and death, of spirit and matter, of time and eternity. The scope of this essay does not allow me to examine in any detail Whitman’s later “bird” poems: as of yet—in 1855—we have no mourning widower mockingbirds, no threnodic thrushes, no “Dalliance of the Eagles.” But the reader of Whitman will easily recall how Whitman’s perennial engagements with death and life (and sexuality) are seemingly resolved in these poems by way of the image—and sometimes via the very *voice*—of a bird. Yet, even in 1855, Whitman’s “song” receives a good deal of its strength from the strong-winged flights and vocal effusions of another—avian—order of beings.

The close ties between Whitman’s poetics and his animalistic “Nature” may have been obvious to many of his contemporaries, such as the naturalist John Burroughs; however, in recent years Whitman scholarship has tended to laud instead his “fluid” empathy with other—often oppressed—*human* social groups, to the relative denigration of his “kosmic” identification with the environment itself, and with other species. At last, Burroughs’s complaint in 1867 rings all the louder in today’s critical milieu: “If it appears that I am devoting my pages to the exclusive consideration of literature from the point of view of Nature and the spirit of Nature, it is not because I am unaware of other and very important standards and points of view. But these others, at the present day, need no urging, nor even a statement from me. Their claims are not only acknowledged—they tyrannize out of all proportion” (*NWW*, 48).¹ This is even more true today, in this environmental wreck of an era in which nature per se—the real “leaves of grass”—may be deemed the ultimate abject other.

Actually, the last quarter century *has* been replete with tributes to Whitman’s eco-consciousness, epitomized early on by William Rueckert’s thesis that “Song of Myself” offers a “complete ecologi-

cal vision.”² However, besides the question of whether Whitman’s ecological sense is as sound as many of these scholars assert, most previous ecocritical readings center on such generalities as the land, the ecosystem, or nature itself; only sporadically have such endeavors ventured into a concerted discussion of the specific alter-species inhabitants of our hallowed “Mother Earth.” And so the complaint of the spotted hawk might also be of another . . . nature. From the standpoint of *zoöcriticism*, as I would dub my own other-animals critical emphasis, I must wonder, for instance, whether Whitman ever actually gets beyond his own anthropocentric poetics and point of view in his adoption of another animal’s “barbaric yawp,” of a language that transcends the discourses of human culture. In sum, is the *homo*- in Whitman studies indicative not just of his eroticism but of his species? Perhaps a misanthrope like me should be the last person allowed to comment on Whitman, who is, one might easily argue, the ultimate humanist. He is, finally, that person who would most embrace all *people*, in his more general embracement of the world, the “kosmos,” itself.³ But it is this characteristic Whitmanic conflation of the human and the nonhuman that begs one to ask: What is this “Nature” in Whitman, and how does it actually accord with his all-encompassing *nature*? More specifically, and zoöcritically, what are the animal-ethical ramifications of the poet’s use of the “spotted hawk,” feathered flight, and “untranslatable” avian voices as central tropes of his poetic discourse?

Finally, Whitman’s hawks and mockingbirds have a co-plaintiff, no doubt, in the Native American, who is commonly conflated with the bird, and who is *used* in a similar fashion, in the discourse of the wild to which Whitman so often appeals.⁴ Thus, not only may Whitman’s poetics too easily and homocentrically assume the stance of other species, but there is also the facile conflation in his corpus of the Native with Nature, a human othering that can be readily correlated with his co-optative representations of the avian. I would therefore examine Whitman’s all-too-ready pose as both Indian and bird—two birds of a feather, at last.