

TOM GANNON
AN ESSAY ON EAGLES

*He will appear, may you behold him!
An eagle for the eagle nation will appear.
May you behold!*

—Nicholas Black Elk¹

*Someone must speak for them. I do not see a delegation
for the four-footed. I see no seat for the eagles.*

—Chief Oren Lyons²

I went on a “Big Day” this spring. That’s when a birder runs him/herself ragged from sunrise to sunset, through as many habitats as possible, to identify as many species as possible. My no-longer-nimble body hadn’t come close to my record of 56 birds in years, but on that day, I had 55 species by—my Lord, it was only 3:00 p.m.! This would be a piece of cake, I thought. But no, the late-afternoon doldrums set in over Avian Land (also known as the southeast corner of South Dakota, in this case), and by 5:30, I was about to admit defeat. Then, after practically wading through the dense underbrush of a riverside park of cottonwoods and birches, I looked up through a hole in the trees and saw a pair of Bald Eagles—species number 56!—doing a “dalliance” high above the Missouri River, performing contrapuntal flips and loops around each other... Well, Walt Whitman has already described it better, in “The Dalliance of the Eagles” (1880):

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,
Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,
Till o’er the river pois’d, the twain yet one, a moment’s lull,

A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse flight,
She hers, he his, pursuing.³

One might well smile at the quaint word “amorous” in the context of such an incredible description of the energy and vigor of the preliminaries of copulation, of a natural act presumably free of any Hallmark sentiments. And philosophical notions of how dyads can become monads, or whether the Many or Two are somehow indeed the One—all this is set aside in the face of life and nature in action and flux, presented here as a quickening vibrant string of present participles. I even wondered that moment, in fact, how much I was seeing an actual pair of eagles in actual flight, and to what extent that vision had been conditioned by this verbal flight of Whitmanic effusion.

Be that as it may, my master birder knowledge did intuit that one of the eagles had certainly said to the mate, “Not today, honey, I have a headache.” But the other had remonstrated, “But, dear, Tom Gannon needs to tie his Big Day record, and you know how much he has done for our cause. I mean, nearly five people have read at least some parts of his Ph.D. dissertation!” Despite the hint of sarcasm that I discerned in this eagle’s voice, I was flattered by all this nonetheless, as I watched their thousand-foot-high courtship flight disappear quickly downwind and down-river; and as I sauntered out of the deeper woods nearly drunk with elation, I derived from that vision the courage to—to carry on, to continue my Big Day to nightfall, shattering my old record by two species.

But “in our dejection do we sink as low,” as Wordsworth said: I soon rediscovered that feeling of “never-again” nostalgia that I had first felt when I reread a particular edition of Keats’ selected poems. “I’ll never read this (entire) book again,” I had thought (still in my 20’s), and a warm, electric swell of self-pity arose from my gut and spine, establishing a prototype for many a later response to “final” things. I’ll probably never break this record again, either: indeed, I had almost wished, when stuck on species number 55, not to break the old one, as sort of a tribute to my youth. And now I scarce even believe in the “game” anymore, this rather vacuous intellectual exercise of listing birds, and in the very process, othering them, rendering them dead names and numbers on a taxonomic list. It was as if the synchronicity of the eagles dancing their way into number 56 on my Big Day list was a necessary

epiphany, a scolding from "nature" that the number meant nothing, and the bird was all.

As with my own dallying eagles and Whitman's poem, my lifelong interest in both words and birds has created many inevitable associations of specific bird sightings and literary analogues. Thus I cannot watch a grackle strutting across the lawn without thinking of Wallace Stevens' "blackbird" poem; nor could I appreciate my first Hermit Thrush without interminable lyrical eruptions into consciousness from Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." A more synchronistic "words and birds" pairing occurred when I was writing my animal-rights Ph.D. dissertation—and reading Gary Snyder. "It Pleases" (1973) offers one of Snyder's better meldings of politics and aesthetics, a great scene of an eagle or hawk—or heaven forbid, a vulture—soaring above the Capitol in Washington, D.C.:

Far above the dome
Of the capitol—
 It's true!
A large bird soars
Against white cloud,
Wings arced,
Sailing easy in this
humid Southern sun-blurred
 breeze—
 the dark-suited policeman
 watches tourist cars—

And the center,
The center of power is nothing!
Nothing here.
Old white stone domes,
Strangely quiet people,
Earth-sky-bird patterns
 idly interlacing

The world does what it pleases.⁴

The "center of power" may be read as the realm of human politics, and the poem itself as Snyder's characteristic condemnation thereof. But that "power"

is more truly the natural world that the bird represents. The "policeman" and politicians have no idea of the true strength of flight—and true power of nature—*above* them; and alas, the true "center of power is nothing! / Nothing here," inside the granite walls of human legislation and policy-making. But the raptor and the real world of "Earth-sky-bird patterns" go on, and the "world does what it pleases"—"above" a human society of smug and blind anthropocentrism (and at last, then, to the vast detriment of that realm). There is even the intimation, in the "Old white stone domes," that all this urban extravagance, too, will return to the "pattern" of pre-civilization, if you will, as in several of Wordsworth's poems in which humankind's architectural endeavors "return" to nature, despite all human volition to the contrary.

And just so did I watch in wonder a Bald Eagle above the University of Iowa's "golden dome," at the very time I was deliberating upon this poem—and then regarded in greater wonder the scores of students and faculty aiming their empty eyes at the narrow strip of sidewalk in front of them, as the bird flew overhead. Truly, the "center of power" is "nothing here," too, in a Midwestern academic setting well aware of "Ecology" with a capital "E," all too ready to read and laud Aldo Leopold and other nature writers as "one of our own"—but still largely blithely unconscious of a natural world breathing and flapping outside the windows of their cloistered, bookish lives.

"If It Flies, It Dies." So runs the mantra of a local group of "good ol' boys," who recently boasted of their motto to me in a South Dakota bar. They speak with pride of shooting Red-Tailed Hawks on a regular basis, because there are "too damned many of 'em." They also sheepishly recoil from their initial boast of also shooting Bald Eagles, possibly from some vague recollection of the patriotic iconography of the aftermath of "9/11." But their attitude towards other species is clear, and indeed, this attitude is much more common—no doubt *the* attitude of the vast majority of Americans—than some of us in the "cloistered academia" referred to above might want to acknowledge. But perhaps our own "eyes-on-the-sidewalk" dissociation from actual birds is just as lamentable a symptom of a general loss of relationship to the "wild," and to the earth, and to—ultimately—reality.

In contrast, the climactic epiphany of Lame Deer's vision quest offers a Lakota worldview that today's ecologically minded might quote fondly and yet still consider quaintly antiquated: a "voice" says to him, "We are the fowl people, the winged ones, the eagles and the owls. We are a nation and you