

The Birds by Tarjei Vesaas and The Heron by Giorgio Bassani: The Identification with the Ornithological Other

by Sara Culeddu

A comparative reading of the novels *The Birds* (*Fuglane*, 1957) by the Norwegian author Tarjei Vesaas and *The Heron* (*L'airone*, 1968) by the Italian Giorgio Bassani rises a question: why do the two main characters – so different from each other, created by two writers so distant from each other in space and with two completely different cultural backgrounds – face the same fate, at the end of a path running through the same stages? The characters of Mattis “the Idiot” and Edgardo Limentani both find themselves in a dramatic condition of exclusion from society and existential collapse. They get to recognize themselves respectively in the images of a woodcock and of a heron. Then a hunter fires and the death of the birds anticipates, *en abyme*, the death of both characters. They both commit suicide.

The question is generated by the relevance of ornithological symbolism in the two novels, made explicit by their titles and the main characters’ relation to the two birds, which turns into identification. The analysis of ornithological symbols is deferred for the moment only to briefly introduce the two main characters.

1. The Characters: Mattis “tust” and Edgardo Limentani

Mattis is a mentally disabled person, in the village he is called “the Idiot”, *tusten*. He cannot commit himself to do any kind of handwork: he is not able to keep concentrated on any manual action of his, his thoughts get tangled each time he tries to focus on his work, every attempt to find a job results in failure and mockery. His sister Hege, who is a little older than him, supports the two of them selling her knitworks.

But this sad reality is not the only one within which the main character finds himself:

his true life, the full and gratifying one, takes place in an inner world of compensation where he dwells in a close relationship with nature, a relationship of communication and understanding. Trees and stones, the water of the lake, the powers of nature, the birds, they are all living creatures that speak to him from all around and inside him: Vesaas brings us into an oneiric dimension of extraordinary clarity, he allows us to enter Mattis' reality and feel what he feels, he makes us able to understand the secret language of nature, to interpret her signs and to be lead to the extreme boundary of this permeation of lives, i.e. death.

In the external, apparent, reality the only important events are Mattis' loss of his sister's love and the accomplishment of his suicidal plan, but following the course of events through Mattis' eyes, we notice that the real, relevant episodes are the flight of the woodcock over his house – an omen of changes, love and happiness – and the bird being killed by a hunter, which is a sign clearly foreboding the character's death.

The oppressed figure of Edgardo Limentani, a middle-aged Jewish landed proprietor defeated by history and life, is the main character of Giorgio Bassani's last novel, *The Heron*, the book that seals the complex unity of the *Novel of Ferrara*. The novel describes a journey towards death, condensing the themes of Judaism and exclusion in an oppressing provincial atmosphere. Edgardo wakes up at four in the morning, gets ready and sets out for hunting in the countryside near Codigoro.

His very slow journey takes him into a barrel along the river, from where he will not fire a shot. There he receives his message: a heron is killed by Limentani's companion and in the bird's death he finds the deadly revelation that will be more strongly restated later on, in front of a taxidermist shop window displaying stuffed birds, a fundamental stage in his advancing towards suicide. Emptiness lies and widens inside the character, interrupted only by ornithological mortuary symbols.

The character is thus reduced to pure matter, to an object in need to merge with the spiritual element par excellence – the bird – whilst the bird's death shows him a way to find an ultimate dwelling place, a glimpse on a world to which it is possible to

belong.

2. Exclusion

The drama of exclusion, to which both Vesaas and Bassani dedicated most of their writing, reveals itself through the pages of these two novels. Even if the reasons for this condition are different and Mattis and Limentani do not suffer from the same kind of social alienation, I find it enlightening to follow the characters' destinies in parallel, as they unfold through the two novels. Both characters attempt to identify with *the other*, once in the form of a bird, the animal other, and then in the form of death: the absolute other.

i. Edgardo Limentani. The glass pane

Bassani is a writer who focuses on difference and exclusion since at the core of his work we find Judaism and homosexuality (e.g. *The Golden Glasses*, 1958). They both qualify, in a definite historical dimension, the different ways of marginalization, the conventional boundaries of normality, the drama of identity that can only be solved by merging with the *other's* world.

The reasons for Limentani's state of melancholy and thus for his condition of social alienation can be found in his social and "racial" belonging. He is a Jew who survived the "final solution", but not discrimination; he is a landowner fighting against the historical circumstances surrounding him. Once he got almost lynched by his peasants and now fear prevents him from setting foot on his own land: he is *de facto* expropriated. The new post-war reality asks him to forget his past identity and to start all over again but Limentani is not able to do so and he does not want to. This brings him to an existential conflict with the social reality around him.

The motive of the glass pane begins to emerge as a continuous diaphragm already in the *Five Stories of Ferrara* (1956) along with the image of the window as a place of division and of contact between the *inside* and the *outside*.

But while in the *Five Stories of Ferrara* the protagonist is a prisoner looking outside and longing to escape, in the “novels in first person”¹ (*The Golden Glasses*, *The Garden of Finzi Contini* [1962], *Behind the Door* [1964]) he identifies with the author, spatially and existentially offended, and from the outside he looks inwards at a denied world trying to enter it. Only the main character in *The Heron*, a novel which goes back to third-person narration, is given the chance to finally enter.

Bassani’s characters evolve through his novels as they move from the periphery to the centre, and Edgardo Limentani, amongst them all, is the only one who finally really sees things in front of himself. There is only a pane of glass between them. He can lean his forehead on the glass, he can steadily set his eyes on what is on the other side and find the strength to break the diaphragm.

The events of the day depicted in the book push Limentani progressively closer to the glass, and then to the objects behind it: the tavern’s window (showing a group of men playing cards) and the taxidermist’s window are symbolic places that attract him in his afternoon wanderings. The character is now willing to enter a life which is no longer the one of “common” people, but a still and unreal dimension, where each thing has a perfect placing and a space of its own, where everything fittingly belongs. For Limentani death means the breaking of the glass panel in order to finally get inside, at the end of a day dominated by feelings of isolation and the absurdity of his circumstances. He sees extraordinary beauty in that static world, and the thought of entering it represents for him the joy of recovering a “global self”, the original completeness that has been lost. The recovery is first suggested and then made possible by birds, mythological messengers of gods and companion of journeys in the afterworld.

ii. Mattis. The belonging to nature

Mattis too is marginalized, mainly on a social level. His most relevant conflict is with “de skarpe” that is “the smart”, the “normal”, the ones that condemn him to stay

outside with their “swift” and “sharp thoughts”. Mattis is an outsider of society, since he is neither brilliant nor strong or beautiful. Yet, if we consider nature as the scenery of his life, with its landscapes, its creatures, its signs, then Mattis does not only perfectly fit in there, but he is also an integral part of it, of a world where there are no boundaries between oneself and the surroundings, where outside and inside are meaningless coordinates.

Just as Limentani finally arrives beyond the diaphragm and breaks it, touching the glass and entering “the other side”, Mattis defends himself against marginalization, seeking refuge in a reality of total integration. From this springs a magical vision of the world according to which a deep and secret connection ties creatures, phenomena, thoughts and words to one another: one’s action invades the other’s destiny with its shadow or with its light.

The dichotomy between *nature* and *culture* creeps in the novel’s plot, opposing “the natural man” Mattis to the others. This dichotomy is perceived and exaggerated by the main character, who transforms it into images: inside his own universe he perceives the tension between friendly and positive powers (the birds, the stones, the island, water) and the dangerous and potentially hostile ones, incarnated in the lightning. This symbol, to Mattis’ mind, represents culture, the world of rational people, bearers of dangerousness, suffering and death (standing both for exclusion and also for real death, as we will see), a world ruled by intentionality and consequentiality. Hege does her knitting “like a lightning” and the lumberjack she falls in love with, Jørgen, whom Mattis considers a rival, holds an axe which is “lightning-like”: this means that their actions come as natural consequences of their will, and they are able to carry out their work and to accomplish their projects. But Mattis calls “lightning” also the activity of thinking, and all the meanings he ascribes to this phenomenon are merged in his mind in a confused totality that threatens and attracts him at the same time.

If he could control the lightning – that is thought, productive ability, and everything he is afraid of – then maybe he would achieve a place in the world of “common

people”, finally integrated in culture’s domain. This is his temptation and his ruin. The planning of *lynplanen* (the lightning-plan) has to be seen as an approach to the cultural world to which he does not belong. It requires the commitment of his own life to nature: he will sail over the lake on his little boat, old and unreliable, he will cause his wreck and since he cannot swim, it will be up to nature itself to decide if he will survive clinging to an oar (a man-made tool, associated to culture) or if he will drown (being water a symbol of the unconscious, the undefined, and of all the unknown that nature has in store for mankind, but a primeval symbol of life as well).

The plan is a test for belonging: if it succeeds then Mattis will have been able to think like smart people do, thus becoming one of them. As he foreshadows the plan, in his mind lightning-related terms recur frequently and Mattis underlines that he is all alone with the smart now, there is no woodcock with him, the bird that represents friendship and protection to him (“Hege and Jørgen and me, he thought. The woodcock wasn’t included this time, it was somewhere else”²). Mattis is out of place between the “skarpe”, but is there a place where he truly belongs?

The Lightning plan has been interpreted as an attempt to verify nature’s solidarity, and the failure of this test, leading to death, as a sign for the fact that Mattis is a complete outsider, outside culture but also betrayed by nature: according to this interpretation the commitment of Mattis’ life to nature is a demonstration of belonging but also the statement of a new conflict. According to E. Johns³ Mattis’ tragedy consists of his “double failure”, the one inside his own natural universe and the one with “de skarpe”.

To my mind, instead, the drowning of the main character represents the further statement of his belonging to nature. He is forced to perish because, while adopting a *modus operandi* that is not his own, he is trying to think like common people and he gets lost within culture’s *other*. On the other hand, the lake receiving him symbolizes the return of Mattis to himself. Nature is the place that gives Mattis’ image back to him: he relates to it as to himself. Only the bird, i.e. the emblem of the whole natural universe in the novel, gives him a clear message of self-acceptance and of identity, *Du*

er du, tells him the woodcock, “You are you”.

Thus, the character’s death is once more a symbol for a final access to the inside, just like it was for Edgardo Limentani: for them both suicide is the statement of a failure (whit regard to the “common” life), but at the same time it represents an integration, an achievement of their own ideal state (of immobility for Limentani, of nature for Mattis). Then, it is not by chance that Mattis’ last cry sounds like a bird’s song: we are on the edge of metamorphosis.

3. In front of the mirror

In both novels an identity crisis precedes the meeting of the bird and the identification with it and its fate. A difficult relationship with oneself and a troublesome existential condition are all precondition of the conclusive epiphany. Both Vesaas and Bassani felt the need to put their protagonists in front of a mirror, dramatizing their identity crisis by means of the conflict established between them and their own image.⁴

When Mattis meets his reflected image he does not recognize himself, and he does not identify with it:

Now he was looking at Mattis, sort of.

Oh gosh! said a voice inside him. A silent little cry he couldn’t really explain.

‘Not much to look at’, he mumbled.

[...] It sounded depressing.

[...] The mirror was not particularly good either, it distorted the image [...]

The face opposite him was thin and full of thought. Pale, but a pair of eyes pulled at him and wouldn’t let go.

He felt like saying to the person in front of him: Where on earth do you come from!

Why did you come?

There would be no reply.

But it was to be found in those eyes – eyes which were not his, but came from far off and had looked through night and day. It came nearer, it lit up. Than it was gone again and all was black.

He thought quickly: Mattis the Simpleton.

Simple Simon.⁵

The bird and the mirror are both thresholds: their appearance is a sign of the possibility to enter another reality: the bird is a means of transport through flight (a sort of ferryman, which is the only way Mattis finds himself able to carry on) and the mirror an emblematic figure that we can trace back to the usual “door motif”. Even if it has been working already in ancient mythologies as a revealer of identity, the mirror implies as well the idea of illusion, as though it could reflect an untrue reality, different and disquieting.

In the passage from *The Birds* cited above, the role of the mirror as an entrance into another dimension, oneiric and delirious, but at the same time revealing the deep “self”, is made even more explicit by the assertion that the mirror “distorted the images”. The distorting mirror exaggerates the feeling of unreality until it saturates the scene, it forces the character to look at another person and makes it impossible for him to recognise himself in those eyes that saw “beyond day and night”.

Mattis gets frightened and seeks shelter in the objective reality, the only one he can rely on, the one belonging to the “smart people” who call him “simpleton”: for the moment that is the only identity he knows, since the woodcock will fly over his house only a few hours later.

Before the oneiric dimension fills the scene, evoked by the character’s questions on an existential ground, there is a moment of lucid and objective observation where he is deluded by his own aspect: the discomfort caused by diversity is reflected in the

difficulty to accept his own body. The same night Mattis dreams about being different, brawny and self confident. It is the woodcock's gift.

Edgardo Limentani experiences the same depressing feelings as he looks at the reflection of his own body, along with the sense of extraneousness and the need to be “deleted”: from the lack of adherence to his own image springs the sense of the absurd.

Meanwhile he examined himself in the mirror. That face was his; and yet, he stood there, staring at it, as if it, too, didn't belong to him, as if it were the face of another. Minutely, distrustfully, he checked every detail of it: the bald, convex forehead; the three horizontal, parallel lines that furrowed the brow almost from temple to temple; the blue, washed-out eyes; the sparse eyebrows, exaggeratedly arched, which gave his whole face a perennially hesitant and puzzled expression; [...] How base and disagreeable his face was, too, he said to himself, how *absurd* it was!⁶

...

And since the glass, though so clean it was almost invisible, reflected something of his own image (barely a shadow, true, but still irksome), in order to erase it completely, this faint residual shade, [...] he moved closer, until he was almost touching the window with his forehead.⁷

Edgardo faces the day in a split condition of mind, he begins to look at himself as from the outside: he sees his own body leaving him, he watches it as it moves. He observes his own features with the same meticulousness with which he observes the world around him and he describes the objects surrounding him with maniacal precision (which is typical of a melancholic character, as Anna Dolfi suggests): on the one side objects get a particular relevance and become characters, subjects, on the other side it seems to be the character who gradually comes to consider himself as an “object amidst objects”. His body, his reflection and his own “self” share a progressive fading away:

From the end of the little room, the vertical mirror of the straw-colored wardrobe reflected the image of himself, standing, beside the door: a distant image, barely hinted, as if it were about to dissolve.⁸

Both Limentani and Mattis do not recognize themselves in their own reflected

images. Still both of them find their identity in two creatures of the sky, respectively a heron and a woodcock.

4. The landscape

In the relationship between the characters and the landscape surrounding them, but most of all between them and the birds, we witness a real dissolution of the boundary between the self and the other, between subject and object: this implies the surfacing of the narcissistic theme. The two novels exemplify the relationship between ornithological figures and the problems of identity, illustrating a literary *topos* which connects the animal theme to the narcissistic arrest that underlies a difficult relationship with objects (the reason for the need of identification with the *other*).

But while the Narcissus-like characters of the literary tradition before the twentieth century interpreted the myth according to a subjective point of view, that can be summarized in the formula “I am the other”, during the twentieth century the myth’s interpretation undergoes a change of direction.⁹ Driven by the illusion that the reflection is another individual, the self gets lost in it (“Je est un autre”, as Rimbaud wrote) and the subject disintegrates in the objective reality. Interior and exterior landscapes mingle with each other and affect each other.

Mattis’ magical outlook makes him feel as an integral part of nature and affects his entire outlook: he feels surrounded by an indefinable beauty and he understands the enigma hidden in it. Nature is the mirror of his feelings and the objectifying of the subject makes him able to say goodbye to the landscape and to himself at the same time. (“In the full light of the moon he seemed to become a lifeless being alongside his own shadow, part of a secret game moon and shadows were playing”¹⁰).

In a similar way, in *The Heron* the landscape turns grey as the main character’s mood does: the air is thickened by a silent fog that follows him during the whole trip¹¹ and clears away only during moments of revelation. It becomes a symbol for an obscured state of mind, reluctant to receive nature’s messages.

Endless countryside landscapes swallowed by the void, by darkness and by the fog, are compared to darkened oppressive interiors, images of the underground and of semi-clandestine places where things appear to be aged, blurred, dull. Everything begins to look different to the protagonist when he finds himself distant enough from life, then instead of projecting his own self onto objects and landscapes, he merges with them. Thus, once the self is let go into the other (in the stuffed birds, in the immobility of death), in the merging of the subject with the landscape we do not recognize any form of introjection: in its place there is a typical twentieth-century phenomenon that A. Noferi calls “anti-narcissism”, as Limentani is ready to be pervaded by the beauty of what is all around him.

...In any case, the birds, too, were alive, with a life that no longer ran any risk of deteriorating; polished to a high gloss; but made beautiful, above all, surely more beautiful, and by a great deal, than when they were breathing and the blood ran swiftly through their veins: only he, perhaps, he thought, was able really to understand it, the perfection of this beauty of theirs, final and imperishable, to appreciate it fully.¹²

5. Ornithological symbolism

In the two novels birds are described as creatures in flesh; descriptions of their characteristics and habits display a deep scientific accuracy: the reader gets the impression of dealing with a realistic novel. The narrative technique of free indirect speech, however, introduces the reader to a sort of monologue which takes place solely inside the main character and imposes his point of view. This reconsideration of the events through a strictly personal and even hallucinated point of view lets the novel slip into symbolism.

In the eyes of the main character the bird turns from a simple creature of the natural world into a revealer of identity and of fate: the protagonist’s inner journey makes it possible for the creature of the sky to show itself in all of its mythological and emblematical potential.

i. The woodcock

Vesaas and Mattis are at work on the construction of the bird's symbol through the whole novel. If we think of the novel as constructed by a series of dichotomies, the "bird" should be seen as opposite to the "lightning": on the one hand the poetic burst, beauty, love and the will to live, on the other hand desertion, isolation, the fall and the drive to death.¹³

This dichotomy, however, makes it impossible for us to catch the woodcock's main function, i.e. to stand in for the main character, to be his alter ego. It symbolizes Mattis' deepest nature, his spiritual and poetical potential, but also his frailty, which will be the reason for his being crushed by the events.

According to an anthropological analysis aimed at discovering the analogies between Mattis' perception of nature and the one of ancient religions, the woodcock can be interpreted as an "individual totem"¹⁴: the totemic pattern implies that the totem's animal features are cast over the person connected to it. Thus, it is indicative that Mattis' totemic animal is the woodcock, a shy animal, discreet and "hunted". It works as a medium, a connection between man and nature, revealing its secrets in an unknown language that only Mattis understands. And this communication with the bird gives Mattis his identity.

You are you, a voice inside him seemed to be saying, at least that was what it sounded like to him.

It was spoken in the language of birds. Written in their writing.¹⁵

The relationship between a man and a totemic animal in the context of an "individual totemism" implies trust, mystical experience, emotional bond, veneration and a common descent, i.e. a blood tie; between the man and the totemic animal there is supposed to be a physical and psychological resemblance and they often share an identical and parallel destiny. "When the individual totem dies, its human partner dies too".¹⁶ Thus the totem animal works as a sort of another self, as a double.

Whilst in *The Heron* the meeting with the bird and the revelation of identity happen during the same scene, in *The Birds* the acknowledgement of this relation, even if suggested to the reader since the first pages, reaches very slowly the character's mind. When the woodcock comes it imposes itself to Mattis' heart rather as an incarnation of all his desires, that can be summarized in the will to change. The novel is a journey towards a correspondence between man and bird that gets tighter and tighter. From the point of view of this relationship, the story concentrates around three episodes: the meeting with the woodcock, its killing, the main character's death. Through this stages the bond between the two creatures tightens until total merging.

Signs of this development are supplied to the reader since the first pages of the novel. Even before the actual meeting, Mattis is already connected to birds through "the eyes", instruments and objects of poetry that are extraordinarily important not only for *The Birds*' main character's imagination, but also for Edgardo Limentani's one. The image that suddenly crosses Mattis' mind in the beginning of the novel amazes him just like the reader: *You my beak against rock*. It is not just a question of a flash of identification in advance (Mattis has not seen the woodcock yet), it is a line of poetry, suggesting the creative talent of Mattis, of which he himself is not aware, and it is a premonition as well, since the killed bird will be buried under a rock.

A relationship of mutual understanding, communication and exchange – almost a love affair – commences between Mattis and the woodcock since their first meeting. The perfect formula for this kind of union is pronounced many times by the character: "Me and the woodcock, sort of! That's the whole thing"¹⁷ or even more sweetly: "You, my woodcockest bird"¹⁸ and it makes him feel protected and protecting at the same time. The evening after the flight of the woodcock over his house Mattis feels the boundaries fading between him and the bird, he experiments a sort of "mystical" union with the winged creature that also becomes "physical" when Mattis' sickness foretells that the woodcock is in danger. After a while the bird is shot to death by a hunter.

[...] he jumped forward and picked up the warm bird that was filled with lead, smoothed its ruffled feathers and saw its dark eye.

The bird was looking at him.

No, no, don't think like that. Mustn't. This bird's dead.

Dead, why dead?

It looked at me first.¹⁹

When the hunter kills the woodcock, it is the messenger that dies, the partner in conversation (the possibility to communicate), friendship and love, but also Mattis' identical being, the other self. The look that the bird addresses to Mattis is the last message just before its death, a new revelation of identity that the character will assimilate little by little. From now on the novel gets crowded with "eyes", "eyelids", "looks" and "stones", death symbols that creep through the pages. Life is not expressible for him, what happens to him is placed outside of language, it is up to meeting mute looks to transfigure this "inexpressible". Mattis is beginning to understand that the buried bird represents his impossibility to live. Stones and eyelids are not able to delete the look of the dying creature and the message, transmitted through the eyes, resonate inside him.

ii. The heron

Looks are the means of communication that also the heron uses to bring its message to Edgardo Limentani. During the course of the events, the importance of sight as a means of perception is taken away by visions and hallucination. The two novels share the relevance of sight and vision symbolized by "the eyes", but most of all they share an oneiric atmosphere pervading them from beginning to end and reaching its peaks of unreality each time the birds appear. Their appearance opens the main characters' mind to other possible dimensions, it is the threshold of visionary receptivity, getting ready to receive the message. But it is also the departure for a journey inside the self,

into the unconscious, a deep descent.

When the heron appears for the first time in Bassani's novel, the main character observing it is already seeing himself somehow. The bird's arrival causes the start of a progressive detachment from historical concreteness, in view of an elsewhere that soon will be the pacifying reign of death. It is not by chance that the character ends up almost in a state of trance.

After staring at the long, dense ranks of the decoys, set at intervals in front of the blind, he had dozed off. He had slept, yes. Perhaps he had even dreamed.²⁰

...

Nothing, any longer, appeared real to him. [...]...Real and unreal; seen and imagined; near and far: all things became mixed and confused among themselves. Even normal time, the time of minutes and hours, no longer existed, counted for nothing.²¹

In this atmosphere, which keeps getting more and more ethereal and inconsistent, between reality and dream, emphasized by the suspension of time, stands out the possible overcoming of concrete reality. Many signs and visions are produced to support and counterpoint the more compact and vast symbolism of the heron. First a flock of ducks passing by "in haste, like someone hurrying, a bit late, to a specific appointment"²² from which two individuals come off to go back:

[...] all of a sudden, however, they had dived, headlong, dropping at full speed, their dark beaks open, wide, and their little round eyes also widened, bloodshot; and he had found them on top of him in a flash: suddenly large, enormous. They hadn't attacked him. Grazing his head, they had gone on. But a moment later, *bang-bang*, two shots.²³

Then they skim over the character, perhaps leaving him a shred of a message.

A pair of widgeons have the same part, and also a long line of coots coming as messengers of death to Limentani, who stares at them motionless, almost dreaming, absorbed into visions that could be the only means to understand a metaphysical suggestion.

Where the other birds failed, potential emissaries that do not manage to deliver their message, the heron succeeds, the only true interlocutor: its action as a messenger is delayed by the author on purpose²⁴, as it is for its rationed appearances, its importance only gradually unveiled. The first time it appears it is not recognized, but then “it came forward, now, closer and closer, showing itself to him – and his heart, meanwhile, had begun to beat hard against the bone of his sternum – whit extraordinary, almost intolerable evidence”²⁵ looking for an encounter.

Then the sixth chapter opens, i.e. the last chapter of the second part, totally dedicated to the heron, upon whose image are concentrated meanings, symbols and expectations. The dying bird is presented in such a manner that clears the way for reciprocal recognition and actual merging between Limentani and itself. In this way it is realized what G. Oddo De Stefanis defines as the “metaphorical projection” of Limentani’s existence “into the heron’s flight and death”.²⁶ The birds realizes it is hurt, yet “it still tried to get its bearing, to recognize, if not the places, at least the nature of the objects surrounding it”²⁷: this condition corresponds to Limentani’s inner state, who in turn “looked at it, full of anxiety, identifying with it completely”. During this moment of identification he feels like “For him, *too*, the reason of many things was obscure.”²⁸: this “too” implies that also the heron is supposed to feel the same way, asking itself the same metaphysical question about the meaning or the purpose of existence.

The bird’s epiphany does not only presume the question about identity, the “who am I?” expressed in the two novels through an identity crisis²⁹, but also a question about the meaning of things, about the reasons that are never found by the two main characters. “Why?” is also Mattis’ forbidden question, the one he does not want to ask and that no one answers to anyway.

So does the heron face its last flight and its feelings reach the reader through Limentani’s interpretation: as a matter of fact it is he projecting his own story onto the metaphorical presence of the bird, that tells us about its/his last search for “a

further opportunity to escape, perhaps even salvation, or perhaps, if not definitive salvation, the almost certain guarantee of staying alive at least until tomorrow.” It is as if Limentani by this time is speaking to himself and after a while this identification will be expressed with an image that represents the first emersion of the suicidal plan.

[...] it fooled itself to such a degree [...], it was wrong to such a degree, obviously, poor stupid animal, that if he hadn't felt that shooting at it would seem, to him, shooting in a sense at himself, he would have fired at once. Then, at least, it would be all over.³⁰

Once the hunt is over, with Limentani not having fired a shot, the protagonist returns towards Codigoro with his car's boot full of dead birds and the feeling of being run after. The winged creatures' task has not been accomplished yet, they will be able to deliver the message they are entrusted with only from beyond this world.

After a while, Limentani enters the dreamlike and nightmarish dimension that pushes his understanding one step forward:

Before its eyes, from loss of blood, had become hooded, the heron must have felt much as he felt now: hemmed in on all sides, without the slightest possibility of escape. With this difference, however, to his disadvantage: that he was alive, quite alive; that he hadn't lost so much as one drop of blood; and that he could have faced the dog, assuming that at some point one might come toward him, only like this: his eyes open, wide.³¹

When the delirium reaches its peak so does the identification with the bird, and this happens in *The Birds* too. In an instant of insanity Mattis eats a toxic mushroom and at the climax of hallucination, on amanita, he gets the full consciousness of merging with the woodcock: he has a vision of his destiny where he is flying with the woodcock over the house where his sister is sleeping. And when Jørgen and Hege will live together as a couple, then he and the bird will be locked out of love and life, there will be no difference between who is lying under a stone and who is not, between who lives and who is dead.

Yes, how different he felt in mind and body, light and airy, somehow. He was both here and not here. He sailed above the tree-tops with the greatest ease. The first thing he thought of, quite automatically, was the woodcock. [...] 'It was the woodcock and me, you see! And now he's lying under the stone – but

that doesn't make any difference, he's flying over the house, sort of, *sort of*, d'you see! Me and the woodcock, sort of. We fly across here, sort of. We'll fly across here the whole time! Just you try –'³²

In a similar state of mind, Limentani is able to receive the revelation about his fate. If he had been looking at himself in the figure and the destiny of the heron, it is only in front of the taxidermist's shop window that the birds will speak to him without restraint about his death, showing him a world to which he finally feels he belongs.

It is once more the heron that brings Limentani in front of the taxidermist's shop, since the main character knows that being stuffed is the only possible destiny for the bird, since herons are not good to eat. So the main character, following the heron's fate, is going to meet his own.

Beyond the glass: silence, absolute stillness, peace.

One by one, he looked at the stuffed animals, magnificent, all of them, in their death, more alive than if they were alive. [...]...In any case, the birds, too, were alive, with a life that no longer ran any risk of deteriorating; polished to a high gloss; but made beautiful, above all, surely more beautiful, and by a great deal, than when they were breathing and the blood ran swiftly through their veins: only he, perhaps, he thought, was able really to understand it, the perfection of this beauty of theirs, final and imperishable, to appreciate it fully. [...]he felt slowly approaching, within him, vague as yet, but rich in mysterious promises, a secret thought that would free him, save him. [...]now, in the car, after having decided what he had decided, it was even easier for him to identify with the stuffed animals in Cimini's shop in Codigoro. [...]How stupid it became, life, this much-vaunted life, how ridiculous and grotesque, he said to himself, when you saw it from inside the window of a taxidermist's!³³

The unity of birds and death tightly bound to each other is maybe the strongest image of ornithological symbolism. It is just in the moment of death that the bond between Mattis and the woodcock tightens, as he invokes himself and at the same time his *alter ego*, his love, his companion, his last hope.

'Mattis!' he shouted in his confusion and utter helplessness. Across the desolate water his cry sounded like the call of a strange bird. How big or small that bird was, you couldn't really tell.³⁴

7. Mythical birds

These two novels from the twentieth century possess definitely realistic features, yet they also let the cores of ornithological symbolism emerge: the winged being is the primeval creature that, coming from the other world, reaches ours to bring us a message about destiny and death. Since death appears like salvation, the bird has also the function of liberator of souls. Moreover it delivers its tragic message through its own death, sealing its tie with obscurity's domain³⁵. Most of all, the bird becomes a fellow traveller for the descending journey represented in both novels: it is a journey with a specific spatial dimension defined by features of descent, if not of fall. The bird becomes the image and the means of this “reverse flight”: struck by the hunter's shot, the woodcock and the heron splendidly illustrate what Bachelard³⁶ defined as the illness of aerial imagination, i.e. the fall.

¹ A. Dolfi, *Giorgio Bassani. Una scrittura della malinconia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2003, p. 32.

² Tarjei Vesaas, *The Birds*, translated from the Norwegian by Torbjørn Støverud and Michael Barnes, London, Peter Owen LTD, 1968, pp. 205-206; “Hege og Jørgen og eg, tenkte han. Rugda var ikkje med i dette, ho var annenstad”, Tarjei Vesaas, *Fuglane*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1957, p. 187.

³ E. Johns, *Fuglemannen Mattis. Forsøk på en ny lese måte av Tarjei Vesaas «Fuglane»*, NLÅ, 1979, p. 125.

⁴ And also their own names: Mattis renames himself Per in order to take on a new personality when he meets two girls who don't know him; Limentani on the other hand is overwhelmed by the sense of the absurd that springs from his name. (G. Bassani, *The Heron*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver, Lowe & Brydone, London, 1970, p. 32).

⁵ T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, pp. 15-16; “No såg han på Mattis liksom. / Nei nei, sa det i han. Eit lite stumt rop som han ikkje gjorde nærare greie for. / - Ikkje mykje å sjå på, mumla han.[...] / Det lydde nedslåande. [...] / Spegelglasets var heller ikkje godt, det forvrengde biletet. [...] / Fortenkt og tunt va andletet midt imot han. Bleikt. Men eit par auge drog han til seg og ville ikkje sleppe han. / Han hadde hug å seia til denna framfor seg: / Kvar i all verda kjem du frå! / Kvifor kom du? / Han ville ikkje få svar. / Men det stod i auga der – auga som ikkje var hans, men eit par langfarande som hadde sett gjennom natt og dag. Det kom nærare. Det lyste opp. I same stund var det òg slutt og svart. / Han tenkte stutt: / Mattis tust. / Tusten.”, T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, pp. 13-14.

⁶ G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 6; “Intanto si osservava allo specchio. Quel viso era il suo; e tuttavia lui stava lì, a fissarlo, come se fosse di un altro, come se neanche il proprio viso gli appartenesse. Minuzioso e diffidente ne controllava tutti i particolari: la fronte calva, convessa; le tre rughe



orizzontali e parallele che la solcavano quasi da tempia a tempia; gli occhi azzurri, slavati; le sopracciglia rade, troppo arcuate, tali da conferire alla fisionomia nel suo insieme un'espressione perennemente incerta e perplessa; [...] Come era meschino e antipatico anche il suo viso, come era *assurdo!*", G. Bassani, *L'airone*, p. 706

[7](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 157; "E allora siccome la lastra, quantunque così tersa da risultare pressoché invisibile, gli rimandava qualcosa della sua immagine (appena un'ombra, è vero, però fastidiosa), allo scopo di cancellarla completamente, questa lieve ombra residua, [...] si avvicinò ancora di più, fin quasi a toccare il vetro con la fronte.", G. Bassani, *L'airone*, p. 834.

[8](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 117; "Dal fondo della stanzetta la specchiera verticale dell'armadio color paglierino gli rimandava l'immagine di se stesso in piedi, a fianco della porta: un'immagine lontana, appena accennata, quasi fosse in procinto di dissolversi", G. Bassani, *L'airone*, p. 800.

[9](#) A. Noferi, *Soggetto e oggetto nel testo poetico. Studi sulla relazione oggettuale*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1997, p. 130.

[10](#) T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, pp. 217-218; "Midt i måneskinet vart han som ein livslaus attmed sin egen skugge, innblanda i hemmelege skuggespel og månespel", T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, p. 198.

[11](#) And even precedes the departure. We observe Limentani as he gets ready to leave (first chapter, part I) and prepares to take a warm bath: "In the meanwhile the room had filled, little by little, with a thick, tepid fog.", G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 10; "La stanza si era riempita nel frattempo di una nebbia fitta e tiepida", *L'airone*, p. 710.

[12](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 158; "...Vivi ad ogni modo anche gli uccelli di una vita che non correva più nessun rischio di deteriorarsi, tirati a lucido, ma soprattutto diventati di gran lunga più belli di quando respiravano e il sangue correva veloce nelle loro vene, lui solo, forse – pensava – era in grado di *capirla* davvero la perfezione di quella loro bellezza finale e non deperibile, di apprezzarla sino in fondo.", G. Bassani, *L'airone*, p. 835.

[13](#) S. Wiland, *Veier til verket. Om Fuglane av Tarjei Vesaas*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1997, p. 37.

[14](#) E. Johns, *Fuglemannen Mattis*, p. 128; Johns is referring in his turn to F. Herrmann's *Symbolik in den Religionen der Naturvölker* (vol. IX in *Symbolik der Religionen*), Stuttgart, 1961.

[15](#) T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, p. 75 "Du er du, var det som det sa i han, slik hørde i alle fall han det. Det var sagt på fuglespråk. Sagt med fugleskrift.", T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, p. 70.

[16](#) "Når individualtotem dør, dør også dets menneskelige partner", E. Johns, *Fuglemannen Mattis*, p. 129.

[17](#) T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, p. 195; "Eg og rugda liksom! Det er alt samen", T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, p. 177.

[18](#) T. Vesaas, *The birds*, p. 175; "Du min rugdaste fugl", T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, p. 158.

[19](#) T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, p. 82; "[...]han gjorde eit hopp og tok opp den varme fuglen med blyet i seg, glatta på dei lurvete fjørene og såg det svarte auga. / Fuglen såg på han. / Nei nei, ikkje tenke slik. Det må ein ikkje. Fuglen her er død. / Død, kvifor skal han vera det? / Han så på meg først.", T. Vesaas,



Fuglane, p. 76.

[20](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 82; “A forza di fissare la lunga e fitta schiera dei richiami collocati in profondità davanti alla botte si era assopito. Aveva dormito, forse aveva perfino sognato.” *L’airone*, p. 771.

[21](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 85; “Niente più gli appariva come reale. [...] ...Vero e non vero, visto e immaginato, vicino e lontano: tutte le cose si mescolavano, si confondevano fra di loro. Perfino il tempo normale, quello dei minuti e delle ore, non c’era più, non contava più.”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 774.

[22](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 82; “in fretta come chi corre un po’ in ritardo a un appuntamento ben preciso”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 772.

[23](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 84; “all’improvviso si erano buttate giù a capofitto e lui se le era trovate addosso: improvvisamente grandi, enormi. Non lo avevano aggredito. Sfiandolo erano passate oltre. Ma un istante dopo, *pam-pam*, due spari”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 773.

[24](#) L. Fava Guzzetta, *Tempo, storia, parola. Una scrittura al rallentatore: L’airone di Giorgio Bassani*, in *Percorsi di scrittura del Novecento letterario italiano*, Roma, GEI, 1993, pp. 231-260.

[25](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 86; “avanti, adesso, sempre più avanti, mostrandogli con straordinaria, quasi insopportabile evidenza”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 775.

[26](#) G. Oddo De Stefanis, *Bassani entro il cerchio delle sue mura*, Ravenna, Longo, 1981, p. 224.

[27](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 87; “cercava tuttavia di raccapazzarsi, di riconoscere almeno gli oggetti intorno”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 776.

[28](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 88; “lo guardava pieno di ansia, immedesimandosi totalmente”; “anche a lui sfuggiva il perché di tante cose”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 777.

[29](#) And also through impersonality and the narrative use of the third person, which could symbolize the character’s fear of saying: “I”.

[30](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 91; “Si illudeva a un punto tale [...] si illudeva a un punto tale, era chiaro, povero stupido, che se a pensare di sparargli non gli fosse sembrato, a lui, di star sparando in un certo senso a se stesso, gli avrebbe tirato immediatamente. E così se non altro sarebbe finita.”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 780.

[31](#) G. Bassani, *The Heron*, p. 145; “Prima che a furia di perdere sangue gli occhi gli si velassero, l’airone aveva dovuto sentirsi all’incirca come lui adesso: chiuso da ogni parte, senza la minima possibilità di sortita. Con questa differenza, però, a suo svantaggio: che lui era vivo, ben vivo, che non aveva perduto neanche una goccia di sangue, e che la cagna, ammesso che a un dato punto potesse venirgliene incontro una, non sarebbe stato in grado di affrontarla altro che così, ad occhi aperti, spalancati.”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, p. 823

[32](#) T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, p. 194; “Ja så ukjennelse som han var i skallen og kroppen, lett og flygende på ein måte. Han kjende seg å vera både her og andre stader på same tid. Opp over skogtoppane var han som ingen ting. Det første som han fall inn, var av seg sjøl rugdetrekket. [...] « – Det var rugda og eg,



skjønar du! Og ho ligg under steinen no – men det hjelper ikke, ho fer over huset liksom, *liksom*, skjønar du? Eg og rugda liksom. Vi fer over her liksom. Vi skal fara over hele tida! De kan berre prøve – ».”, T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, pp. 175-176.

33 G. Bassani, *The Heron*, pp. 157-160; “Di là dal vetro il silenzio, l’immobilità assoluta, la pace. Guardava ad una ad una le bestie imbalsamate, magnifiche nella loro morte, più vive che se fossero vive. [...] Vivi ad ogni modo anche gli uccelli di una vita che non correva più nessun rischio di deteriorarsi, tirati a lucido, ma soprattutto diventati di gran lunga più belli di quando respiravano e il sangue correva veloce nelle loro vene, lui solo, forse – pensava – era in grado di *capirla* davvero la perfezione di quella loro bellezza finale e non deperibile, di apprezzarla sino in fondo. [...] sentiva lentamente farsi strada dentro se stesso, ancora confuso eppure ricco di misteriose promesse, un pensiero segreto che lo liberava, che lo salvava. [...] Adesso, in macchina, dopo aver deciso quello che aveva deciso, gli riusciva anche più facile immedesimarsi negli animali imbalsamati del negozio. [...] Come diventava stupida, ridicola, grottesca, la vita, la famosa vita, a guardarla dall’interno di una vetrina di imbalsamatore!”, G. Bassani, *L’airone*, pp. 834, 835, 836, 837.

34 T. Vesaas, *The Birds*, p. 224; “– Mattis! Tulla han og ropte i, av si djupe rådløyse, på det aude vatnet let det som eit framandt fugleskrik. Kor stor eller liten den fuglen kunne vera, høyrdest ikkje.”, T. Vesaas, *Fuglane*, p. 205.

35 In myths, religions and literature, birds also have a tight connection to poetry, word and writing. According to this we could attempt to read *The Birds* and *The Heron* also as novels about artistic expression. Vesaas’ novel, offered to the reader through Mattis’ thoughts and feelings, and thus perceived through a bird-like, pre-grammatical, non-discursive and a-logical language, allows for its interpretation as a speculation about language and poetry. *The Heron*, in turn, is a long interior monologue within which silence becomes eloquent and turns into language.

36 G. Bachelard, *L’air et les songes. Essay sur l’imagination du mouvement*, Librairie Jose Corti, Paris, 1959.

Sara Culeddu is a PhD student at the University of Trento where she is working on a project on ornithological figures in modern Nordic literature in relation to ancient mythologies. Graduated at the University of Florence in Nordic Languages and Literature with a final dissertation in Comparative Literary Studies, she studied at the University of Bergen and Oslo.
