

Without Frontiers? Travelling with birds and Emil Nolde

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with comparisons across the cultures, with travel, and with the idea of the exotic. It discusses bird-pictures by a Swedish artist and by the German Expressionist Emil Nolde, and suggests two different routes to the exotic, and questions the place of travel in that experience.

Keywords: exotic, travel, Emil Nolde

Resumo: Este artigo baseia-se na comparação entre culturas, com viagem, e com a ideia de exótico. Reflete sobre as representações de pássaros feitas pelo artista sueco e pelo expressionista alemão Emil Nolde, e sugere 2 caminhos diferentes para o exótico, e questiona o lugar da viagem nesta experiência.

Palavras-chave: exótico, viagem, Emil Nolde

For as long as humans have travelled, birds have been their companions, and the object of their envy. After all, we define birds largely according to their seemingly effortless mode of travel. From birds humans learned the will to fly, and – as the old phrases suggest (‘as the crow flies’) – a sense of direction. Birds have perched in the rigging of the wooden ships, sharing their own journey with the sailors. They have cheered the traveller by revealing the proximity of the nearest coast-line, much in the way that the dove returned to Noah’s Ark holding the evidence that the flood had ended. Long before the extent or the goal of birds’ migration was known, their ability to return each year to the same place has

been seen as a celebration not only of a touchingly human sense of place, but of home-coming from a journey. In the same way, each time a bird lands, changing from a dot in the sky to a discernible species on land, that bird seems to human eyes to come home.

From the way they travel, we must recognize that the birds are pioneers of the Schengen agreement, none of the revisions of which will ever touch them. Frontiers –even ‘natural’ frontiers like mountains and oceans – mean nothing to the birds. They flew across the German-German border unimpeded; not for nothing did the Irish exile mercenaries call themselves the Wild Geese; and even in war-torn Afghanistan the birds ignored the lines between Taliban and other forces.¹ As Brecht nearly remarked: birds change their country more regularly than they change their feathers, or – as he did say – they can be ‘driven from any place where the rains come or shots ring out’ and travel on elsewhere. While the Middle Ages thought of birds as the human soul, and the dove as the Holy Spirit, Brecht saw them as signs of transience, passing with the clouds ‘as they flew from one life into another’.²

Rilke expressed some of these ideas in his *Duino Elegies*. Above all he sensed how what he called the ‘disinheritance’ of mankind from the cycles of nature is shown in our envy of the birds and their harmony with the rest of the world. Why are we not more like migrating birds, he asks,

We are not whole. We do not understand like migrating birds.
Always at the wrong time and late
we force ourselves abruptly onto the winds
from which we fall onto an unwelcoming pond.³

Projecting on to the birds both our human qualities and our personal deficiencies, has marked not only our artistic and literary depictions of birds but also our science, and as a result birds share fully – indeed, it seems at times as if they have initiated – the categories in which human travel is conceived. In a short essay it will not be possible to fill in all of these categories, but I would like briefly to consider two of these categories: the first the belief that one learns from travel, and the second the idea of the exotic.

Two ideas dominated the view that travel is good. The first was manifestly part of

the anthropomorphism which dominated all aspects of zoology until well into the twentieth century: the idea that a bird's adaptation to another species develops itself and its species. In eighteenth century zoology that other species was of course invariably the human species – even though experience might have taught the birds that extermination is the usual fate of those species which encounter humans, and for the Enlightenment ornithologists the contrast was between the 'stagnation' of the species when in the wild and its development when working for man. The most common examples of this belief were the dog and the horse, but birds too (notably falcons, parrots and any other species capable of imitating the human voice) featured in the theory.⁴ The echoes of this idea are omnipresent in nineteenth century Germany, with the tension between the virtues of staying at home (in the words of the Psalm 37 'stay at home and feed yourself honourably'⁵) and the lure of the world outside. Almost all Raabe's novels offer an immediate illustration of this dilemma: none more so than *Stopfkuchen* and *Die Akten des Vogelsangs*. It's the dilemma we shall return to, the tension between the near and the far. And the stagnation theory which we have identified with the first half of the century was mirrored in the second half of the century by the idea of the natural habitat which had developed in environmental zoology and was then taken over into sociological terminology (initially by Tönnies) in the form of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Heimat* (home).⁶

The other notion was that put forward by Buffon in his great *Histoire Naturelle* (1749ff). Discussing the sense of territory in various species, Buffon compared the local knowledge possessed by most quadrupeds with the spatial sense which characterized birds. Most quadrupeds, he argued, know 'their' territory; they mark it out, or it is defined for them by the contours of the country they inhabit: they know one valley, one side of a river, one piece of forest. By contrast, from their elevated position the birds survey huge stretches of country, their minds have the breadth which their eyes take in: they are full of maps. Buffon was not alone in extending the generally accepted fact that it is birds' sight which is their primary sense to include all that phrases such as 'a bird's eye view' imply – vision, and intellectual sovereignty. The birds are certainly presented as those with vision,

imagination and oversight. And all this is possible because they travel: they know what lies in the next valley, across the big river, on the other side of the mountains.

Thoughts of the exotic have always been closely attached to birds. From the parrots which the Dutch East India Company brought back to Holland to the birds of paradise – from the enormous Roc which helped Sinbad to the tiny humming-birds: real and imaginary birds have played a significant part in human visions of the exotic. Like the science of geography, the science of ornithology was unthinkable without this exotic pull, even though both disciplines did everything they could to rein in the exotic and to close in the boundaries of the unknown.

One can see this clearly in the earliest encyclopaedias of birds. The compilers were torn between detailing – not without an element of national pride – the birds of their locality while at the same time trying to do justice to the thousands of birds coming into Europe. These birds were the real-life equivalents of the travellers' tales. The nationalist tones of many of the early books, shown in part in the nomenclature used to designate the various species, were only occasionally mitigated by the awareness of the richness of bird-life in far away countries – and in admiration for the size of exotic birds (such as the cassowary or the ostrich).

For ornithology the exotic amounted to a genuine threat. Just as the botanists – knowing at the time of the Ancients only some five hundred species, yet by the mid-eighteenth century confronting some twenty thousand – so the bird-collectors were scared at the vast numbers of birds living in continents which Europeans had hardly started to explore. Specialisms came into being – for East Indian avifauna, then North American, then Australian and Oceanic. Bird artists, from Edward Lear to the German masters Johann Friedrich Naumann and Josef Wolf, became expert in reconstructing from often incomplete skins the life-habits and characteristic positions of the living birds. It was this process which led to the early view that birds of paradise did not possess legs, and that, rather than eating, they lived off the air. The need for reconstruction meant that the pursuit of the exotic became for at least a hundred years close to archaeology, driven by the imagination to link relics of the distant into a complete picture. Meanwhile the more scientific

ornithologists, such as Buffon, could only groan: ‘How can we collect them all?’ and fear for the future of their fledgling subject.

If the birds’ ability to travel fascinated and disquieted those who watched them, the lure of the exotic turned many artists and writers to become travellers too, and in conclusion I wish to tell the story of one such artist and to commend for consideration a painting which brings together birds and travel.⁷

The picture is by Emil Nolde.⁸ Those who know his flower paintings have a sense of the distance Expressionists like Nolde travelled from the Impressionism of Max Liebermann. But I want here to look at a more concrete type of travelling by Nolde, and to look at his picture *Tropenwald* (1914).

In Portugal it’s hard not to be condescending about Germans who travel. If Camões could open his masterpiece with the exhortation ‘Let us hear no more then of Ulysses and Aeneas and their long journeyings’,⁹ how then of poor Heine, with his journey across the Harz, or – more adventurously – to Helgoland. When they did finally set sail, the Germans found most of the world already occupied, and about the most exotic places they found were the Bismarck Archipelago and the Kaiser Wilhelm Islands. Nolde – in common with Max Pechstein, who spent the summer of 1914 on Palau – longed to emulate Paul Gauguin’s pioneering trip to Tahiti, and he ended up in the German colony in the last weeks before the outbreak of the European war. His diary records the ups and downs of the journey and relates in detail a trip to the island of Manus, in what now is called Papua New Guinea. Having had the misfortune to time his journey so badly, Nolde lost many of his paintings in the course of what became a nightmare journey home, but fortunately for those interested in exotic travel and birds, *Tropenwald* has survived.

I like in this picture that it portrays some of the first exotic birds which Europe ever got to know. The red and blue parrots brought in by the Dutch East India Company are here seen flying across a no less colourful jungle. But the birds are not the centre of attention, nor is there reason to think that the eye which observes the jungle is anything but a tired European eye, seeking release into the world of primitive life, dreaming the innocence of pre-consciousness. A Freudian dream, no less than *Death in Venice* had been, three years

earlier, but without the anxiety. Vitalism is clearly the key to this picture, and here it lacks the overtones of the sinister or the violent which it had for Thomas Mann. The birds are clearly symbols of life as they head across the clearing, hardly different from the medieval idea of birds as human souls, delighting in their flight and their separation from what Hamlet called 'this too too solid flesh'. It seems to be the picture by a happy traveller, a picture that draws tourists on ever longer-haul flights to discover a happy self which the strains of the office and the stock-market have caused to be repressed. And when Nolde said of his journey that it enabled him 'to break out of the fetters in which the realists have enclosed us', he sounded like a travel brochure for artists.¹⁰

However, I would like to suggest that the picture is not free. It does not escape from its own premises. The picture is only superficially exotic, it has not left Germany behind. The scene reveals that Nolde's visit permitted only a kind of seeing which is sanctioned by power and which cannot grasp other dimensions of what it sees. In the paradise of Manus – an island less 'civilized' than the others – Nolde records in his diary how one piece of art came into being. An islander has come out of the jungle:

With an expression of superiority, his spear in his hand, he gazed at me. I drew him and painted. To my right hand lay my cocked revolver, and behind me, covering my back, stood my wife, grasping her own revolver, the safety catch released, like mine.

In a short prose piece – entitled *The Silence of the Sirens*, written in the winter of 1917/18 – Kafka follows through the story of Odysseus and the Sirens. We recall that the Sirens' song is so beautiful that those who hear it turn from the course they are steering through life and are lost for ever. Odysseus stuffs his and his men's ears with wax so that they should not hear it, but simply work at their oars oblivious of the temptation, while Odysseus himself binds himself to the mast, so that even if he should wish to desert ship, he cannot do so. Adorno and Horkheimer interpret the song of the Sirens as that voice of the primitive, pre-rational world (*Tropenwald*, in other words) which post-Enlightenment human beings are not allowed to hear, and which, should they respond to it, will cause their civilized world to collapse like a house of cards. By binding himself to the mast, however,

Odysseus turns the experience of the Sirens' song into a mere aesthetic experience, by pre-determining his response to the song he hopes to enjoy its without running the risk it represents. Like Nolde, surrounded by modern firearms, transported to Manu on a German gun-boat, Odysseus experiences the Sirens' song, 'like a concert'. But to this interpretation Kafka adds another element: namely, 'the weapon of the Sirens, still more terrible than their song, namely their silence'. Why should they sing if civilized travellers do not wish to hear them? Odysseus saw their beauty, but he could not hear their song, because they refused to sing. So he lied about it.¹¹

This is the context in which we can understand *Tropenwald*, especially in the footnote which Kafka's wonderful text adds to that discussion. For not only does Odysseus turn the Sirens into a concert, and Nolde produces another piece of Western art, in which it is precisely the desire to escape which prevents the escape from the world of civilization and reason: the Sirens don't sing. What might the islander have looked like if he had not had two revolvers trained upon him? How can we see otherness, when we build cages of power and knowledge round it? Why should the Sirens sing when the ears do not wish to understand. A caged bird – it used to be said – does not sing.

NOTES

¹ Cf. the delightful bird-watcher's view of military service in Afghanistan: Norbert Scheuer: *Die Sprache der Vögel*. München: Beck, 2015.

² Quotations from Brecht's celebrated poem *Die Liebenden*.

³ 'Wir sind nicht einig. Sind nicht wie die Zug-/ vögel verständigt. Überholt und spät, so drängen wir uns plötzlich Winden auf / und fallen ein auf teilnahmslosen Teich. Rilke: *4. Duineser Elegie*

⁴ Heinrich Rudolf Schinz: *Naturgeschichte und Abbildungen der Menschen und der Säugethiere [...] Zürich: Honegger, n.d. (1832), p.11f.*

⁵ In the Lutheran version "Bleibe im Lande und nähre dich redlich". The Authorized Version seems not to recognize the idea, and encourages the reader to "dwell in the land and follow after faithfulness".

⁶ Very instructive on these take-overs: Lynn Nyhart (2009), *Modern Nature. The Rise of the Biological Perspective in Germany*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-34.

⁷ I fear copyright problems mean that I must direct my readers to a web-site. Googling Emil Nolde Tropenwald will soon produce the picture I am discussing here.

⁸ Emil Nolde (1867–1956) a German-Danish painter and printmaker, Expressionist, member of Die Brücke, known for his vigorous brushwork and expressive choice of colors. Golden yellows and deep reds appear frequently in his work.

⁹ It has long puzzled me that Camões does not mention any birds anywhere in his epic work. Are birds less important in Portuguese culture than in those of other European cultures?

¹⁰ Magdalene Moeller (ed.) (2002), *Emil Nolde: Expedition in die Südsee*, München: Hirmer.

¹¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1972), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming, New York, Seabury. Franz Kafka (1965), *Erzählungen*, Frankfurt a.M.. Fischer.