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HOW, WHEN AND WHY THE SO-CALLED CHIRPING OF  
BIRDS POINTED OUT THE HARMONY OF THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.  
(W. Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3 Scene 5)

*The chirping and harmony of the world in Leo Spitzer (1944)*

As well known to scholars of stylistic criticism and historical semantics, the theme of my paper is absolutely not original; however, it has to be discussed because it needs a historiographical clarification. Leo Spitzer presented a first systematic analysis of the meaning of the singing of birds in western culture and poetry in an essay appeared in *Traditio*, 1944<sup>2</sup>. The essay was actually not dedicated to chirping but to the history of the word *Stimmung*. The understanding of the word *Stimmung* is very important in order to represent the history of European culture, from Sappho to us: in fact it denotes the experience of harmony and the experience of the human being in harmony, essential to the European soul. The birds and the chirping were the ideal companions of the man discovering himself and the meaning of the universe living in harmony and for this harmony. According to Spitzer, this psychological and cosmic harmony was well represented in the experience of chirping birds and its description.

We must be careful with circumstances<sup>3</sup>. This great essay on the harmony of the world and the chirping of birds was published in

1. I thank my friend and colleague Rosella Tinaburri to have read and to have made it improved. Responsibility for the mistakes and unclear points is mine, of course.

2. L. Spitzer, *The Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*, Baltimore, 1963, first edition in *Traditio* 2 (1944), 409-64 and *Traditio* 3 (1945), 307-64.

3. Cf. G. Contini, «"Tombeau" de Leo Spitzer», *Paragone*, 13 (1961) 5-12, but I read it in Id., *Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938-1968)*, Torino 1970, 651-60.

1944; it was written in English. Spitzer had taught Romance Philology at Marburg and Cologne, but in 1934 was forced into exile by the Nazis and, as an exiled Jew, he was able to teach first in Istanbul until 1936 (when he was succeeded by Erich Auerbach), then at Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore. A reference to Novalis with an anti-Enlightenment sense, in the conclusion of the first part of the text, with the indication of a historical task for «the young students to come» to keep alive the memory of the authentic European tradition (recognizing something sacred and harmonious in life and in language), testify the dramatic aspects of the experience of Spitzer and the militant character of its investigation<sup>4</sup>. Seventy years later we have to admit that – although Nazis were defeated, *Deo gratias* – the future of Europe, the future of the world and of our studies is quite different from what Spitzer imagined. The intellectual identity of Europe developed in a different way and the word *Stimmung* in German has not recovered the deep meaning, very difficult to translate, unifying harmony-grace-music-person and cosmos. However, understanding the opinion of Leo Spitzer on twittering and harmony creates a certain reverence, giving us the sense of the seriousness of the topic about chirping of birds. Disagreeing with Spitzer, I hope, may be useful to a better understanding of the different intellectual function of history, in the consciousness of the same responsibility.

Spitzer immediately identifies its limit: his preference for convergences<sup>5</sup>. According to him, in the construction of the awareness of the truth of cosmic harmony the ancient and modern pagan tradition converged with Christian tradition; in the application of this harmonic feeling different traditions provided different paths and the historian would have been able to verify them. Anyway, it was important to verify that *always*, raising his face, the civilized European man was able to see, reflected in the universe, the harmony to which his life was inclined to. Of course Spitzer tried to show in the essay the different applications in time and space. But he admitted that what really mattered was to demonstrate the convergence of European culture in representing and leading man to the *Stimmung*, revealing the harmonious universe caught by a harmonic consciousness. However, there was a risk in the reconstruction of this pre-

4. Spitzer, *The Classical*, 318.

5. *Ibid.*, 410.

sumed ancient and modern, pagan and Christian harmony, of this common consciousness of the sacredness of life: the risk was to do something against history, perceiving identity where difference had to be noticed. Yes, my theme is not original, but it could be important to demonstrate that the convergence seen by Spitzer in the meaning attributed to the singing of birds was not really present in the texts. Trying to outline a brief universal history of the chirping of birds, giving space to difference, can help to a better understanding of the word harmony, in order to notice various typologies of harmony, rejecting its myth. I will devote myself only to the western perspective (working about western texts), as far as possible.

*The difference of the ancient birds*

The chirping of birds would be therefore one of the decisive evidences of the harmony of the world. Spitzer quotes a poem by Fulbert of Chartres (960-1028) and then a text by Gonzalo de Berceo (~1197- ~1264), and he connects their way of describing the singing of birds with the *Natureingang* of the Provençal troubadour poetry, as well as of the french and german poetry<sup>6</sup>. He discusses all these evidences in relation to the patristic tradition, recalling Augustine, Ambrose, and Boethius. The chirping of birds could thus evoke either the rebirth of Christian spirit and the return of spring, testifying the presence of spiritual grace, as well as the vitality of nature, grafted with the experience of troubadour love. Spitzer considers everything without contradiction: even the troubadours sing a *secularized* love in which, however, «something of the divine remains»<sup>7</sup>. The love chirping, which refers to the relationship between harmony, grace and nature, develops in parallel with «the pagan idea of sexual life that is reborn in the spring»<sup>8</sup>. This reference to pagan and ancient tradition gives us the possibility to note a first difference on the chirping of birds: if we carry out some surveys on Latin poetry, birds and their songs have a very different space than what a reader of Spitzer would expect. For Virgil in his *Georgics* the birds are

6. *Ibid.*, 455-60.

7. *Ibid.*, 460.

8. *Ibid.*, 455.

mainly enemies, and for Ovid in his *Ars amatoria* (*AAm* I, 271), the chirping of birds rather than harmony is associated with the song of the cicadas, to represent the landscape of southern Europe, a noise which is often annoying. Still in the *Ars amatoria* birds and their noise (with fish in the sea and stars in heaven) are evoked to show, without poetic touch, that a plenty of girls were available in Rome at that time (*AAm* I, 58–60). The singing of birds testifies, to use an expression taken from Lucretius, the overwhelming force of nature, because *volucres* were dangerous beings able to *erumpere coelo* (*De rerum natura* I, 162). You will also recall some cases evoking the musical charm of the singing of some birds (Petronio), but this is only one of the elements that the ancient world knows and it remains marginal. It is also true that the ancient world has sometimes known birds in a cage (especially in the eastern world)<sup>9</sup>, but for the most part birds were seen in the fields, as a force that is often hostile or indifferent, loud and annoying, a force to fight – as Virgil argues – because, for instance, when we build a hive to breed loved bees, birds eat it and they are harmful for them (*Georg.* IV.13–16 but on the contrast between birds and cultivations also II, 207–13 e II, 430). In the *locus amoenus* of the *Georgics* you listen *mugitus boum* and not the birds singing (II, 470).

And the magnificent song of the nightingale? The beautiful song of the nightingale is the song of Philomela, the song of sadness. With Ovid it becomes the song of the violence of sex, of terrible pain. Philomela was transformed into a nightingale after being raped by Tereus (her sister's husband) and the red spot on the nightingale's chest remember forever, after Ovid, that after the sexual assault the woman's tongue had been cut off in order to keep the secret on what happened. It had been a violence doubly perverse, because the betrayal came from a family member, to whom Philomela had been entrusted with confidence; this violence will be cruelly punished by Progne, who had suffered it as a wife and as a sister: she takes her revenge giving her husband his killed son to eat. The extreme pain

9. Cf. B. Van den Abeele, «*Pastus pro philomenis: rossignols en captivité du Moyen Âge aux Temps Modernes*» in *Les oiseaux chanteurs. Sciences, pratiques sociales et représentations en Europe du Moyen Âge à nos jours 4-5-6 avril 2012. Bibracte-Glux-en-Glenne*, in press. I thank B. Van den Abeele for sending me his text before printing. The essay documenting especially the use of the nightingale especially in times low medieval and modern.

had finally turned them too, Progne in a swallow and Tereus in a hoopoe (*Met.* VI, 421-674). The birds remind in the world of classical poetry a disturbing aspect of nature, its savage and loud nature, something that has nothing to do with the soundscapes of troubadour poetry.

A further observation can help us to understand that birds were marginal as a reference to musical harmony. In the ancient myths used and transmitted in order to explain the birth of music, birds are usually not involved. Virgil in the *Bucolics* (*Eclogues* I, 25 and VI, 82 to 86), heir of Theocritus (*Idylls* I), remembers that Pan came down to earth to teach pastors to put together the reeds and gently blow through it; shepherds had been fascinated by the sounds produced by the breeze in the reeds and not by birdsong. Elsewhere, turtles are mentioned because a successful literary tradition (which goes back to the *Homeric Hymns*), attributes to Hermes the merit of the invention of tools: he would have shown men the possibility of resonance of their shell. Other texts evoke the charm of metals in forge metals in order to explain the origin of music, starting from percussion the music history<sup>10</sup>. So, birds are absent. In Lucretius the exclusion of birds from the origin of music is explicit: in the *De rerum natura* he states that men learned the sweet melodies long *after* birds had awakened in them the habit of shouting in an ungraceful way to communicate with each other (*De rerum natura* V, 1078.86; 1379-81).

In short, the chirping of ancient birds did not exist, which means that birds do not evoke the future harmonious chirping, but many other things together, in which the element of delicate and emotional sensitivity tends to be marginal and love passion comes into a sense quite different from that expected («... genus hominumque ferarumque /... pecudes pictaeque volucres / in furias ignemque ruunt: amor omnibus idem» *Georg.* III, 242-44). Thus, we observe that the singing of birds is called in Latin in different ways depending on the birds, a verb that matches the modern chirp does not exist and there is no necessary link between feeling of harmony and singing birds. In their song there is a power that goes beyond the order of man, a communication skill from which men are excluded

10. Cf. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of World* Toronto 1977 (I read it in Italian translation Id., *Il paesaggio sonoro*, Milano, 1985, 16-17, 69); Spitzer, *The Classical*, 441.

and that they can decrypt only in exceptional and sacred circumstances, to grasp the secret of their future, marked by necessity. With their song the ancient birds teach that if there is harmony in the world it is not at all focused on man.

### *Soundscapes*

The chirping in the soundscape witnessed by classical Latin poetry seems to be released from the picture drawn by Leo Spitzer. If his idea that, from Plato to the Enlightenment excluded, Western tradition tried to represent the harmony of the world and man's harmony with the world was true, the chirping in the first phase would be an item out from the picture<sup>11</sup>. It is in fact not perceived as harmonious: it represents in the sky an order and a power of nature that seemed at all times threatening to overwhelm the man. This allows us to observe that the noise made by birds in the Mediterranean world, for all pre-industrial societies, is a background over-interpreted sound. In ancient societies there are remains showing a concern about the chirping, which was to be among the most intrusive noise in certain seasons and in certain times of the day. This noise becomes significant and enters the cultural languages as a symbol without relationship with the notion of harmony.

We are not accustomed to the history of *soundscapes*: in the history of pre-industrial societies it is undervalued. In worlds in which the writing and the images have a smaller space, the basic sounds, the system of signs and the symbolic of the sound (from the most humble to those built by the strategies of the culture), is a large force of identity. The song of birds takes us out of the history of culture as a development of a language based on definitive archetypes and gives us a sense of the social reality.

### *Patristic ordo*

As in ancient times, also Latin fathers do not show great compassion for the harmony of the singing birds. In his late teaching Isidore

11. Murray Schafer, *Il paesaggio sonoro*, 49-55.

of Seville, struck by the variety of birds, asserts that it is impossible to remember them all: he also remembers that there are unknown and amazing birds in the Far East. In his *Etymologies* we do not find a lot of traces of the birdsong as a sign of harmony; the melodious song is associated with the swan and it is a very special case (*Etym.* XII.7.18). Isidore recalls useful songs (such as those guiding the flock of cranes) (*Etym.* XII.7.15), annoying songs of very talkative birds, songs imitating the voice of man, without understanding it (*Etym.* XII.7.24 e 45-46). According to Isidore the nightingale and the sparrow do not have an interesting voice (*Etym.* XII.7.37 e 68). Blackbird's name is said to derive from its modulated voice, but this is not certain and it is not so relevant (*Etym.* XII.7.69).

Isidore considerably depends on Pliny the Elder for his information (in the X<sup>th</sup> book of his *Historia*, Pliny collects a lot of information on birds), and he offers a lot of useful material for medieval tradition: he warns against the magical interpretations of the song of birds, mentioning several details useful for future moralizing. In his time, however, doctrinal foundations are solid as well as the essential elements in order to implement a teaching on the relationship between birds and *harmony* of the world, different from what we found in classical latin antiquity. This is especially true for the acquisition by Gregory the Great of the possibilities of the symbolism, according to the Augustinian tradition. Rather than explaining the details of ornithology of Gregory (normally depicted with a dove suggesting him the sacred message in the ear)<sup>12</sup>, I would take a step back in order to show that the specific discourse on the symbolic value of the singing of birds has a theoretical basis in Augustine, referring to matters that Spitzer does not regard. The voice of the animals in Augustine had in fact a different role in comparison with the ancient world<sup>13</sup>. He had to deal with the problem of the intel-

12. Birds have an established symbolic function in Gregory. We must remember the blackbird and the crocitate of the crow in the *Vita* of Benedict (*Dialoghi*, II.2.1 e II.8.3 the little treatise on vultures, storks and ostriches in *Moralia* XXXI.8-9. 11-14 [39, 13-14] and the various allegories ornithological in *Moralia*: dove (I.2.2), eagle (IX.32.48), crow (XXX. 9. 28 e 32) and in general on birds dove and eagle (XVIII.34.54; XIX.1.2, XXVI.17, 27-30).

13. U. Eco, «Sul latrato del cane (e altre archeologie zoosemiotiche)» in Id., *Dall'albero al labirinto: studi storici sul segno e l'interpretazione*, Milano 2007, then in Id., *Scritti sul pensiero medievale*, Milano 2012 (Bompiani. Il pensiero occidentale), where I read it, above 688, 700-1.

ligence of animals (DCD I, 20; *Conf* III.18) and he excluded it, but in his *De doctrina Christiana* (II.1-4) he returned to the theme of the voice of the birds in the context of his general doctrine on semiotics, giving to birdsong a significant value. That song was not to be considered among the *signa naturalia* (mere sounds of nature, possibly symptomatic), but among the *signa data*, i.e. among the signs moved by a communicative purpose. It was not as human language, but they also had a communicative task, given by the creator. On the one hand human language found its highest expression in the Bible, revealing the divine plan, on the other hand the birds singing, revealing in another way the divine plan, (exemplified in Augustine's doctrine from *gemitus columbae*); the bird singing showed that in the creation God himself revealed his rules. Therefore *gemitus columbae* and Bible had elements of convergence: Umberto Eco has shown that in fact they are at the same level in the tree representing Augustine's semiotics. Augustine did not draw all the consequences of this, but in Gregory the result is achieved: birds, with their behavior and also with their voices, are a divine message offered through nature. They speak of the divine plan, so they are witnesses of harmony. «They say a lot of things, without knowing it» and they can communicate different things in different contexts. Materials collected by Isidore were ready for their *Fortleben* and those found in Gregory the Great are only the first examples.

*The speaking world who does not know what he speaks, but he speaks of God. Aviarium by Hugh of Fouilloy*

It is not important to underline that Augustinian view changes the perspective on the world and on the world of animals. It is surprising to observe that the singing of birds is not among the things exciting symbolic practice<sup>14</sup>. We find the application of the Augustinian idea and the continuation of the Gregorian and Isidorian tradition in Carolingian poetry, for instance in the *De universo*, the great

14. Cf. any examples E. R. Curtius, *Letteratura Europea e Medio Evo Latino*, Firenze 1992 (Classici [La Nuova Italia], 1), 219-23 (first ed. Bern 1948), about *locus amoenus* with and without birds, and F.A. Gallo, «Oci». *Voci d'uccelli in testi medievali*, Ravenna, 2007 (Le tessere, 14).



encyclopedia by Hrabanus Maurus<sup>15</sup>, where many information were taken from the *Etymologies* of Isidore, understood according to a symbolic sense: anyway, the provocative variety of birdsong sounds is only occasionally present. In his catalogue Leo Spitzer introduces on the early Middle ages the only case of a poem by Fulbert of Chartres, *De Luscinia*, where the feeling of spring expressed by Philomela in her song is explicitly connected with the proclamation of resurrection. And Spitzer notes that «There is no split between the dogma and the natural spring explosion of joy in the bird and in the man»<sup>16</sup>. However, I would note that such a union is due to the interpretation of nature according to symbolic needs, in the sense that we have seen in Augustine and in his tradition.

Treatises devoted only to the birds (in all their varieties) are quite rare. For the most part they are oriented to falconry in its various forms: references to symbolism of singing in its variety are quite sporadic. Only a twelfth-century text is devoted specifically to the behaviour and to the imagery of different types of birds: the *Aviarium* of Hugh of Fouilloy. He composed «the work some time between about 1132 and 1152, during his tenure as prior of St. Nicolas de Regny, an Augustinian house, near Amiens. Although the *Aviarium* is focused on the natural world, Hugh treats material as his moral theology and directs it toward a monastic audience», but not only<sup>17</sup>: many observations seem to be intended specifically for the secular world. Hugh's work is the only known moralization dedicated exclusively to birds in this century. Here the singing of birds has some space (actually not so extraordinarily wide) to be linked to the moral significance attributed to different birds, according to a solid tradition: the *graculus*, with its graceless voice, represents vain philosophy (I, 50); the *perdice*, with its *vox dolosa* (as Isidore taught) represents the devil (I, 55). On the positive side there are the *vox turturis*

15. Rabano Mauro, *De rerum naturis: cod. Casin. 132 Archivio dell'abbazia di Montecassino*, a. c. di G. Cavallo, with contributions by G. Cavallo, C. Leonardi et alii, Pavone Canavese (TO), 1994.

16. Spitzer, *The Classical*, 455-60.

17. Cf. W. B. Clark ed., *The Medieval book of birds Hugh of Fouilloy's «Aviarium»*, Binghamton, NY 1992 (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 80), XI. We know today at least 127 manuscripts of *De avibus* of which 31, not considered for the edition Clark. They have been identified by B. Van den Abeele «Trente et un nouveaux manuscrits de l'«Aviarium»: regards sur la diffusion de l'oeuvre d'Hugues de Fouilloy», *Scriptorium*, 57 (2003) 253-71.

representing the *dolor mentis*, the pain and then the condition of the penitent (I, 28) and also the *clamor hirundinis*, which with its clamor represents the voice of those who repent (I, 46). Particular attention is given to the dove:

Columba pro cantu utitur gemitu, quia quod libens fecit plangendo gemit. Caret felle, id est, irascibilitatis amaritudine. Instat oculis quia delectatur in multitudine pacis. Gregatim volat quia conventus amat. Non vivit ex rapto quia non detrahit proximo. Colligit grana meliora, id est, moralia dicta. Non vescitur cadaveribus, id est, desideriis carnalibus. Nidificat in foraminibus petrae quia spem ponit in Christi Passione (I.11).

Even the sparrow and the turtle-dove indicate spiritual life:

Post columbae gemitum et accipitris questum, rogas carissime ne diutius differam, sed planctum turturis et clamorem passeris tibi velocius scribam. Nec tantum scribam, sed etiam pingam qualiter turtur heremi secretum diligat et passer solitarius in tecto clamare non desinat, ut sub exemplo turturis teneas munditiam castitatis et sub exemplo passeris ames custodiam callidae circumspeditionis, ut et vivas caste et ambules caute. (I.23).

I do not intend to examine the symbolic system of Hugh, who marginally uses the theme of the birdsong with very interesting points, such as those related to the evaluation of the *accipiter* which can be domestic or wild, as a positive or negative symbol. We are interested to underline that the chirping as a harmonious and sentimental concert does not exist in Hugh's work and we are far from the theme of the *locus amoenus*, the place where the harmony of the world emerges. Throughout the tradition that is summed up in Hugh there is the risk of seeing *loci amoeni* instead of metaphorical patterns; we can here document the Augustinian harmony of the world, but this is a harmony without compromise with sentimentality and with the fleeting human passions.

*Chirping poetry. Carmina Burana and poetry in vernacular languages*

The use of birdsong in the moral and religious symbolic language has a long fortune, as testified by many examples after the works by Hugh of Fouilloy: on some texts Spitzer wrote, such as the *Milagros*

of Gonzalo de Berceo or the so-called *Bestiary* of Gubbio, to remember the best known examples<sup>18</sup>. Yet an important innovation must be recorded, precisely in the time of Hugh; it occurs in collection of the *Carmina Burana*<sup>19</sup>. In several *Carmina* about love topics, we find the theme of the forest of love marked «leto avium cantu» (69,3); in some of them the song of the nightingale has become explicitly a love song, no more a singing penitential (71, 2a-2b, 79, 3, 81, 4); the nightingale and the blackbird (71, 2b) and the skylark (81.4) help love relationships and they take part in the meetings of lovers. I do not mean that innovation is due precisely to any of the authors of the *Carmina Burana*, but some sections of the collection, dated to the mid-twelfth century, show an interesting treatment of the relationship between birdsong and love encounters.

I can illustrate the keen sensitivity documented in the *Carmina Burana* about chirping as an appropriate context of love, using one of the most famous texts of the collection, dedicated to the dispute between Phyllis and Flora on the superiority of the *clericus* in comparison to the *miles* in the *ars amatoria* (n. 92). The theme has origin in Ovid (*Amores* III.8) and it will be highly successful in the twelfth century (we remember the pages by Andrea Chaplain in the *De amore* XVIII, 172-73)<sup>20</sup>. The text *Burano* is dated around 1150. Phyllis (who supports the *miles*) and Flora (supporter of *clericus*) discuss at length, bringing alternative arguments, and then they decide to refer the matter to Cupido, going to the court of love. In this court everything helps love and immediately the two girls experience the decisive chirping of birds:

Sonant omnes avium lingua voce plena:  
 Vox auditur **merule** dulcis et amena,  
**corydalus**, **graculus** atque **philomena**,  
 que non cessat conqueri de transacta pena (CB 92, 63).

The birdsong marks the entrance into the kingdom of love. Those who are there cannot resist love: in fact, the two girls going into the

18. Spitzer, *The Classical*, 457-58; Eco, «Sul latrato del cane», 693.

19. A. Hilka, O. Schumann, B. Bischoff hrsg., *Carmina Burana*, I-III, Heidelberg 1930-1970.

20. Cf. A. Bisanti, «L'Altercatio Phyllidis et Flore (Carmina Burana 92) fra tradizione e innovazione», *Pan. Studi dell'Istituto di filologia latina dell'Università di Palermo*, 24 (2008), 197-222.

temple *crescunt in amore*. We note the obvious and completely conscious use of the theme of sentimental complicity of chirping, seductive even in sadness, but we have to note also another thing. The ornithological bestiary selected by the author of the poem (blackbird, crow, lark and nightingale) is instructive for us, because it seems a direct (sophisticated and ironic) reply of the contemporary description by Hugh of Fouillois, which certainly had a wide circulation in the world of the laity and of the schools<sup>21</sup>. In Hugh the blackbird is the symbol of *voluptas carnis* and his voice proclaims the sin; the *graculus* – according to the teaching of Hrabanus – «est loquacissimum genus et vocibus importunum, quod vel philosophorum vanam loquacitatem vel haeticorum verbositatem noxiam significare potest». Especially this second bird is the symbol of an erratic population, coming close to the religious world, but often betraying it and criticising it<sup>22</sup>. According to Hugh, philosophers but also painters, jugglers and doctors are represented by the crow because they usually move from one place to another, they can also learn the language of the religious world in order to disseminate it in a distorted and ridiculous form. The nightingale and the lark are not marked so negatively, but in the scheme by Hugh they would have an entirely different function from that indicated in the *Carmina burana*: they are birds of penance while in the poem they become birds of yearning love, waiting for new and possible consolations. It is clear that in Hugh there is a controversy against the new and unstable world of his days, and for the reader of poem 92 the reference to the four birds quoted in the *De avibus* gives a modern and ironic taste to the verses. Especially the inclusion of the *graculus* in the temple of love is to be noted. This presence does not seem justified either by a real reference or by literature (*Phaedrus docet*). We understand so that the harmony of the loving chirping is not based on the tradition of religious symbolism, but it seems to overthrow that old symbolic world represented by Hugh in its mature phase.

The fortune of the theme of chirping, as we have seen it in the *Carmina*, is successful and it spreads in the vernacular poetry, in the poetry of the courts. Spitzer reminds *Qand the rossignols el foillos* of Jaufré Raudel (1125-1148), in which, however, the application of the

21. Van den Abeele «Trente et un nouveaux manuscrits».

22. The theme is characteristic of many folk tales.

theme seems very tenuous and only referred to the nightingale<sup>23</sup>. Various examples could be mentioned in the provençal, french or german poetry. We meet one of the most important references to loving chirping in *Tristan* of Godfrey of Strasbourg. This text brings us to the beginning of the thirteenth century, and reveals the cave in which Tristan and Isolde know their love, inlaid in an exemplary fashion by birdsong. On this point Godfrey shows parallels with the composition of text 92 of the *Carmina Burana*: Tristan and Isolde, consuming their love, are welcomed in the cave blessed (transformed into a royal court) and there «they had the goods from which every pleasure comes»:

their servant was the singing of birds; the little nightingale, the thrush and the blackbird and other birds of the forest, the goldfinch and the calandra served them contending with each other, these pets were available at all hours for their ears and for their senses<sup>24</sup>.

*The sweet talk of birds: a social and doctrinal novelty in the XII century*

To my opinion Spitzer saw continuity instead of discontinuity. Reading again his examples as well as ours we do not notice different *ways* of representing in the chirping of birds an identical experience of harmony, corresponding to the European cultural identity according to Spitzer. We notice real differences. Social history and the history of ideas suggest the forces creating a real innovation. I would like to indicate two forces in particular to which the innovation can be related. The first concerns the social life of the courts which from the twelfth century began to be interested in the practice of the so-called *Vögel Garten*, inspired especially from the East. The XXIII<sup>rd</sup> example of the *Disciplina clericalis* testifies this practice, coming back to the West from the East, with the story of the bird persuading the man who had captured him to give him back his

23. Spitzer, *The Classical*, 460-62.

24. Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*, F. Ranke hrsg., Berlin 1959<sup>4</sup>, *Die Minnegrotte* XXVII, vv. 16887-6995: «ir dienest was der vogele schal: / diu cleine reine nahtegal, / diu troschel unde daz merlîn / und ander waltvogelin. / diu zîse und der galander/die dienden wider ein ander / inwette unde inwiderstrît. / diz gesinde diende z'aller zît/ir ören unde ir sinne».

freedom. The tale is in the whole tradition of *Barlaam* (n. 10) and has a great diffusion in the vernacular. The man motivates his chase: «Solos cantus tuos audire cupio», reminding us the reason of its hunting (in reference to the tastes courteous)<sup>25</sup>. Of course this is not an absolute innovation and also the ancient latin culture had known the use of aviaries in gardens (as Varro testifies, describing his beautiful villa in Cassino), but this custom was lost in the European aristocracies and then established again, also thanks to the new communication with the East (of which Peter Alfonso is one of the major witnesses). The concreteness of the gardens of the new courts (with many literary and iconographic evidences) represents the social place where the chirping of birds is harmonious with the human experience, in a different dimension in comparison to Hugh of Folieto<sup>26</sup>. It should also be noted that once again the chirping is related to aspects of sexual costumes, suggesting a sexuality quite different from what we had known in the songs of the birds of latin antiquity.

We should also notice that in the school of the twelfth century the ability of the birds to adequate their chirping to the feelings of man could also be referred to another element. Umberto Eco – dealing with the meanings attributed to *latratus canis* – noted an important mutation in the history of semiotics. Arabians brought to the West not only the *Vögel Garten*, but also the theme of the talking birds, birds using a language which can be learned<sup>27</sup>. The theme of the language of the birds is not only a literary theme, but it is reflected in the logical debate of the moment involving the history of semiotics. Peter Abelard explains in the *Logica Ingredientibus* a difference in animal language not present in the boethian tradition. Animals produce purely natural sounds. These sounds do not represent signs in themselves, but they are symptoms. On these symptoms man builds conjectures and they do not refer to a code. Together with these sounds animals also produce other sounds, governed by

25. Pietro Alfonsi, «*Disciplina clericalis*». *Sapienza orientale e scuola delle novelle*, C. Leone ed., Roma 2010 (Testi e documenti di letteratura e di lingua, 31), 90 and commentary, 161-62.

26. For gardens courteous and chirping in Spain: J. Rubió i Balaguer, *Vida española en la época gótica* Barcelona 1941, I read it in *Obres de Jordi Rubió i Balaguer*, IV Barcelona 1985, 121, and also 113, 117, 120-21. Also cf. Murray Schafer, *Il paesaggio sonoro*, 152-53.

27. Cf. Eco, «Sul latrato del cane», 681; for a example cf. Filostrato, *Vita di Apollonio di Tiana*, I.20.

something that Abelardo calls *institutio*. The *institutio* is a willingness agent, which makes animal sounds meaningful and relevant according to a code. This happens because language does not generate or transmit only concepts but also moods. The most important thing is that the animal language acquires an element of continuity with the language of men. This willingness agent controls both types of sounds and like human rationality allows the development of a language *ad placitum* (which does not happen to animals), so this willingness allows the animal linguistic interventions according to different situations: it makes them sensitive to specific circumstances, *naturaliter*. If God gave man the ability to generate *ad placitum* those signs representing the intellect applied to particular facts, the same God gives the animals a chance of a language that is not only a representation of the general and permanent *ordo mundi*, but it can be applied to historical circumstances. And so birds can chirp in the gardens where lovers decide to kiss each other.

*To react: the rational human being can only judge individual circumstances. Birds away from poetry*

Did you forget the old embarrassment for birdsong? Did you overcome the patterns of monastic symbolism? I would not be completely certain. I am struck by a note of Jordi Rubió i Balaguer: examining numerous manuscripts of different ages and different origin transmitting the text of the Fuero Juezo of Ferdinand III, he noted that in the representation of the *locus amoenus* there is a clear gap between an iconography representing the birds fluttering and singing and an iconography excluding them completely. Only a circumstance? It is striking that the two greatest Italian poets of the late XIII<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century show their effort to limit the relationship between chirping soundscape and love, which had become traditional in the troubadour poetry. Dante introduces the chirping in the garden of Matelda, the Eden place at the end of the Purgatory (Purg. XXVIII. 16). Birds sing here, but we note a detail: Dante emphasizes that the singing of these birds is tied to a certain time of the day (*l'ore prime*), as a mechanism able to repeat itself, not an individual initiative as, for example, in the cave of lovers of Tristan. Petrarch is also very careful in the use

of chirping and at least in one case we have a clear example of the exclusion of the poetic theme: the sonnet CLXII follows closely the *Lydia* of pseudo-Virgil, but when it refers to an exchange between the protagonist and the birds («Lydia arridet occellis») <sup>28</sup>, Petrarch does not follow his model anymore, confirming the slight annoyance about the chirping I noticed in the *Canzoniere*.

Certainly, with Dante and Petrarch we are dealing with complex texts created according to a variety of formal requirements. Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (I.2.5) explains the reason why animals and birds cannot be considered equipped with a language appropriate to particular historical circumstances; they do not have individual initiative, but they operate only in relation to the needs of their species, and therefore they have no motivation to communicate outside their species and even within their own species if convergence is spontaneous or automatic, with no need of communication. If animals speak this is due to a miracle of God and this justifies the conversations between mystics and birds (in the spiritual and hagiographic tradition, Gertrude of Hefta anticipates the case of Richard Rolle) <sup>29</sup>.

The position of Dante is not original. It comes from Thomas of Aquin, who explicitly denies the line related to Abelard, which granted an interlocutory chance to birds. Using the *De interpretatione* of Boethius, Thomas no longer recognizes a chance to talk to the animals: their noise has only a circumstantial and symptomatic value, a symptom that an operation of the species is taking place without any possible comparison with human language. The same Albertus Magnus states not only that in animals an intellectual *virtus* cannot be recognized, but also that the imaginative in them *natura regit*, i.e. the mechanism of the species is the society of animals (*De anima* II.3.22) <sup>30</sup>. A real language involves human communities and between the two dimensions there cannot be communication. In the *Summa contra gentiles* III.113 Thomas explains that only those who possess intellect and reason, in order to distinguish if a thing is good

28. «Lydia» in V. Clausen, F. R. D. Goodyear, E. J. Kenney, J. A. Richmond eds., *Appendix Vergiliana*, Oxford 1987<sup>5</sup>, v. 108 (5).

29. Spitzer, *The Classical*, 441; Gertrude of Helfta *Legatus divinae pietatis*, P. Doyère, J.-M. Clément, les Moniales de Wisques, B. de Vregille eds. trad., *Le Héraut (Livres I-V), Oeuvres spirituelles II-V*, Paris 1968-1986, I.1 and III, 54 (also II.3: here the birds distinguish a *locus amoenus* but they don't sing).

30. Eco, «Sul latrato del cane», 704 n. 19.



or bad (according to the diversity of the individuals, of time and place), they only have language and this language forms society<sup>31</sup>. The strong connection between language, individuality and reason means that it is not conceivable an initiative of birds chirping as a sign of welcome to lovers.

The *resistance* to the singing of birds and to the language of animals in general (expressed first by Thomas of Aquin on a doctrinal level and then represented by Dante's poetic discretion on chirping) can also be explained considering the development of the intuition by Peter Abelardo in the Franciscan Order. This development suggests a semantic doctrine different from the doctrine of Thomas: human language returns to be considered closer to the language of animals, losing the ontological reference that we have seen. Between *De signis* of Roger Bacon and William of Ockham, the reduction of human speech to symptom of the effects that individual things leave in mind had reinforced the topic of the possible agreement between the chirp and the conversation between lovers<sup>32</sup>. Human words and animal calls are now indistinctly *signa naturaliter* or *ad placitum*: always they are *ordinata ab anima et ex intentione animae* and their naturalness itself does not consist in relation to a substantial structure, but in the relationship with an operational dimension. Examples from Bacon do not involve our chirping, but the birds singing in the communication with each other, which could be interpreted by man. His examples are taken particularly from communications of the cock and the magpie: they testify that the singing of birds is oriented to specific purposes, requiring different and specific linguistic applications.

At the end of the Middle Ages there was a conflict on different types of harmony represented by chirping; a conflict of taste, implying a doctrinal conflict; a conflict of taste also in relation to the new social customs and to the new categories of power and poetry. Modernity continues to face this problem. In modern times chirping was tried to be transcribed in modern musical notation. The best known cases were at the end of the XV<sup>th</sup> century with the Flemish composer Nicolas Gombert (1495-1560) and especially with the French Clément Janequin (1485-1558), with its *Chants des*

31. Thomas of Aquin, *Pol.*, I.1b; cf. Eco, «Sul latrato del cane», 722.

32. Eco, «Sul latrato del cane», 724.

*Oiseaux*<sup>33</sup>, but also *Juliet* knows something about this (and she knows even much more, as you can see from our epigraph)<sup>34</sup>. Attempts continued for decades: we all have in mind the transcriptions by Anastasius Kircher (1602-1680) in *Musurgia*. They are extraordinary texts, but in our framework it is sufficient to note that they correspond to a myth and to a forcing: with very few exceptions, the song of birds cannot be written in musical terms (at least in terms of the music of the XV<sup>th</sup>-XIX<sup>th</sup> century). Sounds consisting of a single height are rare and normally on the spectrogram large frequency variations in a few instants are recorded<sup>35</sup>. In a certain sense, the chirping is a prophecy of electronic music, in full contradiction with the classical age that worked for the music *Wohltemperierte* (to remove also the quarter tone, useful to the human voice and useful to the harmonic system!). There is a relationship between this problem and our problem of harmony, because once again the attempt to reconcile and *concertare* the voices of birds to human music has made us unable to see what it was. It is singular that the needs of symbolism and those of rationalism were reconciled in this case, without any suspicion by the followers of Thomas. The fact that birds were transcribed into a pentagram showed that birds were subjected to the rules and numbers of human music. Thus, their song became rational, controllable, transmittable and harmonious, because the whole universe was rational. Rational even if they had no rationality: they were bearing a message that they did not know.

Today everything is changed. The experiments of Ottorino Respighi (1924) in the *Pini di Roma* (with the III<sup>rd</sup> movement of the concerto, dedicated to the *Pini del Gianicolo*) introduce recorded material with the birds singing<sup>36</sup>; the dramatic experiences of Olivier Messiaen, who reproduced in the concentration camps the songs of birds, with occasional and revented tools; and the various frequencies of electronic music (where the traditional relationship seems to be reversed and human music tries to expand itself into animal music, using all frequencies), do not consider man at the head of a system, but inside a higher activity to be called *life*, to use the

33. Murray Schafer, *Il paesaggio sonoro*, 152-53.

34. William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3 Scene 5.

35. Cf. E. M. Nicholson, L. Koch, *Songs of Wild Birds*, London 1946.

36. Murray Schafer, *Il paesaggio sonoro*, 161.

language of Messiaen: now we do not know how to call it. Leo Spitzer would be satisfied? Would he consider this the habit of unaware intellectuals dancing on a new abyss? What is certain is that *his* harmony gave us a postwar tragic enough to make us incredulous about his hopes: when, in 1944, at John Hopkins University in Baltimore he gave his essay to *Traditio*, Nazism was dead, but Little Boy had not yet redesigned Hiroshima and you know ... chronology is all.

#### ABSTRACT

In a famous essay Leo Spitzer studied the theme of birds chirping, arguing that in literary composition it represents and expresses the harmony of the world. In fact in European literature birdsong it served to represent different situations. In the classical tradition predominates (without being exclusive) a more aggressive, annoying and disturbing feeling about the singing of the birds. The buzzing of bees must have seemed more harmonious. In the medieval tradition the chirping is then called upon to represent more and more insistently the harmony of the world. It will become evident in the poetic tradition Romance and Germanic. Even in the twelfth century, however, the singing of birds could represent markedly different views on what was harmonious; we try to show it, in particular, comparing the description and evaluation of the song of the birds in *De avibus* of Hugh of Fouilloy with some texts of the *Carmina Burana*, in particular *Altercatio Phyllidis et Flore* (CB 92), which could refer to the *Aviarium* parodying. In the post-medieval the literary tradition manifests knows these contradictions and differences (medieval and pre-medieval) and subtly playing with them and develops it. This is exemplified quickly with cases that lead us to our times. The expression Shakespearean put to epigraph - that's what our research promises - may finally be read with greater pleasure and *gusto*.

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