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Bird Talking?
Finding Speechfulness in the Songs of Birds
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1. Breaking the Silence

To begin with, a silence. As before dawn. Or in an auditorium, in the hushed moments of darkness before a show begins. A not-entirely-silent silence, then? Perhaps, but this hushed anticipation, the one we share, feels like silence. Let's call it a theatrical silence. A collective breath withheld.

Then, something shifts, audibly. A minor spluttering, or fluttering, a disturbance in the air, like an intake of breath, or a little cough 'ahem', to announce the coming utterance.

The Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has something to say about this kind of beginning, inauspicious as it may seem. 'Why,' he asks, 'from time to time, do we feel obliged to bear witness to our own ability to speak?' (Virno 2015: 59). He formulates this question in When the Word Becomes Flesh, a volume that develops the influential analogy, first introduced in A Grammar of the Multitude, of the speaker as virtuoso performer. In that earlier text, the virtuoso speaker was taken as emblematic of the wage labourer in a Post-Fordist service economy, who must use language creatively to form relationships, to communicate ideas. In its companion text, Virno's emphasis shifts towards the linguistic faculty as a 'biological endowment', that is, the 'defining invariable attribute of the human animal' (2015: 10). In this context, the kinds of utterances that Virno finds the most worthy of philosophical attention are those that emphasize the simple fact of speaking over and above the meaningful content of what is spoken: the child's egocentric babble, religious glossolalia, and those 'stereotypical formulas' that characterize everyday conversation, such as 'Hello, how are you?' The linguistic term for this latter type of utterance is 'phatic talk', customarily described as 'talk for the sake of talking, with little or no informative content, the function of which is to establish or maintain contact' (Levinson 1983: 41). Those awkward openers,

such as ‘erm…’, ‘right…’ and ‘yeah…’ fall into this category, as do those familiar silence-fillers, ‘sort of’, ‘like’ and ‘know what I mean?’ Such utterances can, Virno acknowledges, seem ‘redundant and superfluous’, if not downright ‘corny and oppressive’ (2015: 59). However, this kind of utterance is, he argues, the means by which we show ourselves to one another -- and ourselves -- as speaking beings. The word ‘phatic’ derives from the Greek phanai, ‘to speak’ and, Virno argues, it is by implicitly emphasizing the fact-of-speaking over the what-we-say that phatic discourse says, effectively, ‘I speak’. It is by thus emphasizing the fact of speech itself that we ‘retrace the essential steps of our becoming human’ (Virno 2015: 60).

For many readers, Virno’s recourse to the fact-of-speaking as an essentially human attribute might well elicit suspicion, especially given the recent emergence of a range of post-humanisms -- or more-than-humanisms -- that seek to challenge the anthropocentric exceptionalism founded on Aristotle’s famous maxim, ‘man alone of the animals has language’. Indeed, Virno’s recourse to the human might resound particularly oddly given the nature of the work I present here: a transcription of my spoken imitations, or descriptions, of birdsong; or, more accurately, enunciations I delivered while listening, repeatedly, to a particular recording of a robin singing. But Virno’s theorization of speech, and of the virtuosic in and as speech, has proven unexpectedly persistent as a means of thinking through my own repeated attempts to speak with (or, in practice, just-after), and about, the sound of the bird’s much quicker, more agile, more articulate, more virtuosic, enunciations.

2. People Like Birds

On the recording, there is something guttural, the sound of breath catching at the back of a throat, of lips wordlessly spraying spit (which settles in tiny globules over the screen of my computer).

> Ooh -- oh -- right it’s got a pfft … god, god, g-d. Fl- …

Using the sound-editing software named (appropriately, perhaps) ‘Audacity’, I am recording myself as I speak -- or try to speak -- along with the sound of a robin singing. I have purchased a CD named Songs of Garden Birds: The Definitive Audio Guide to British Garden Birds (British Library 2004; not, at that point, asking whether it is the birds that are being labelled ‘British’, or only the gardens in which their vocalizations are likely to be heard). On the CD’s track-listings, each avian vocalization is numbered, catalogued and announced by a proper name, of sorts: ‘Blackbird’, ‘Mistle Thrush’, ‘Robin’.

If anyone asks what it is I am doing, I say: ‘I’m making a performance about birds’. There is something wilfully flippant about this declaration, ‘a performance about birds’, and the follow-on: ‘… because people like birds’. It is a decoy, of sorts; I know I am working on a performance that can be announced this way, and yet I also suspect that, whatever it is I am doing, it is not really about birds. If the work is ‘about’ anything, it is, I suspect, the insistent human effort to organize, categorize, describe and define whatever it is that is habitually referred to -- loosely, reductively -- as ‘nature’.

It was Walter Garstang, Professor of Zoology at the University of Leeds, who in the 1920s set out to systematize the onomatopoeic notation of birdsong, believing that ‘by a rhythmic syllabic notation alone it is possible to imitate the dominant features of a song’ (Garstang 1922: 31). Of course, it could never be a precise art, Garstang himself acknowledged; the cry of a plover might be written as either ‘Pew-it’ or ‘Tew-it’, depending on the listener. But still, he argued, the ‘outstanding tonal peculiarities’ could be imitated ‘closely enough to be distinctive and recognizable’. And, indeed, lexical notations of avian sound still feature in many birdwatching guides, approximating calls and songs in plosive bursts and distended diphthongs: ‘hirruc-chirruc-teer-tuk-tuk-tuk-hag-churr-churr’ for a reed warbler, ‘chippoo-it tio-tew tutee-o wee-ploo-plootu-itty’, a song thrush (Bevis 2010: 89, 85). I like the way they look, these splintered syllables. They appear shouty, disruptive, especially amid the well-ordered morphologies of a taxonomic field guide. Like smatterings of expletives. As if to say, you just try to notate this.

At first, the best I can manage, in the space of the bird's rapid articulations, is a quick intake of breath, a blurted opener, words cancelled in mid-air. It makes me newly aware of the physicality of my speech-effort, which takes shape, it seems, in those suspended intervals between hearing the bird's sound, locating a word or expression, taking a breath, engaging larynx, moving tongue against teeth, shaping lips, feeling the sound come out of me -- as word, or gasp, or splutter. But I go on, again and again, attempting to catch a semblance of the song. What pulls me on is that I begin to hear, in the robin's song, the possibility of my own speech as I imagine it could be: eloquent, witty, impossibly fluent. Listening to birdsong with the express intention of describing it in language produces a tangible feeling of the impossibility of grasping it. It is physical, a tension felt in the body, like an urge. It is spatial too, the hoped-for trajectory of my speech, like casting a flailing limb into the space in front of me, attempting to catch hold of a something I feel to be there. What is the object, the it, I am after? Is it the bird itself, the small feathery thing with its looks, its confident claim on space, on my attention? Or is it the song, its rapid articulation, its form, its intelligence? 'It' may, in fact, be a perfected version of my own speech as a virtuoso performance, amazingly articulate and quick, always just out of reach.

3. Something Like Fluency

I am not the first to suggest that there is a correlation between the complex, variable songs of certain birds and the operations of human speech. Indeed, there is an entire field of study, within cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary linguistics, dedicated to comparative analysis of birdsong and human language. Much of this work has focused on the so-called 'syntactic ability' that enables speakers to recombine units of vocabulary into ever new configurations, responding to changing contexts (see Berwick et al. 2011). Certain birds, among them the robin, possess a similar ability to arrange and rearrange a learned repertoire of sounds, apparently spontaneously. In this sense, the robin's 'song' is not a fixed melody, one it would be possible to capture -- as the CD implies --

‘definitively’, that is, in fixed and final form. Any given recording will represent just one actualization of the robin’s singing ability. And each recording will, of course, provide just an excerpt from a singular creature -- the particular robin that here plays the part of ‘Robin’.

Although researchers acknowledge that songbirds display something like human syntactic ability, the avian equivalent of syntax is considered strictly phonological, that is, having to do with sound rather than meaning. A centuries-long philosophical tradition of human communicative exceptionalism rests upon this distinction, which, it could be said, was first established in Aristotle’s History of Animals. In that early work of systematic biology, ‘voice’, ‘speech’ and ‘language’ are differentiated from one another: a voice can resound without speech, and -- according to Aristotle -- speech can occur without language. In the definition he offered speech is simply ‘the articulation of voice by means of the tongue’ (1970: 73). Noting that the word Aristotle uses derives from the Greek for ‘joint’, Ronald Zirin comments that ‘articulation is to be taken quite literally here’, as a ‘jointedness’ by which ‘speech is divisible into a series of discrete units’ (1980: 336). And although Aristotle asserts that ‘power of speech’ is ‘peculiar to man’, he also comments, of songbirds, ‘those which have a broad tongue can articulate best’ (1970: 81). Such an admission suggests that, by Aristotle’s own definition, birds do, possess the ability to ‘speak’, that is, if speech is equated with the articulation of voice.

In modern usage, the adjective ‘articulate’, when applied to speech or speaker, is not merely a simple identification of their ability to enunciate differentiated phonemes; it is also a form of praise. To call a being ‘articulate’ is to imply a combination of technical proficiency with something more, something like fluency, clarity of expression, confidence and poise. To call birds ‘articulate’ is not only technically correct, but might also intimate something of their advanced skill; on a physiological level, their articulatory abilities far exceed those of humans. What Aristotle did not know was that birds do not articulate using the tongue, but instead via an organ called the syrinx. Sitting low in the trachea, this bony structure is a more intricate equivalent of the human larynx: controlled by up to

seven pairs of muscles, it enables songbirds to not only articulate extremely rapidly, but also to produce multiple sounds simultaneously (Bevis 2010: 26).

Of course, in literature songbirds have, historically, been admired and praised -- not for their articulacy as such, but for something close to it: an idealized form of 'eloquence' associated with what the critic Onno Oerlemans calls 'the desire to speak lyrically, which is to say spontaneously and authentically' (2018: 11). For numerous poets, especially those associated with the Romantic tradition, the encounter with birdsong is an archetypally poetic moment, a demonstration of what lyric expression might achieve if distilled to its essence. Birds, in this sense, represent natural, seemingly effortless lyrical ability: just as Keats praises the nightingale's 'full-throated ease' (1988 [1820]: 169), Shelley envies his skylark's 'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art' (2003 [1820]: 463). In her essay, 'Anon', Virginia Woolf speculates that the origins of the human desire to sing, and thus to write poetry, lie in the encounter with birdsong in the primeval forest (Woolf 1979).

It may appear that, within the aesthetic tradition, the communicative exceptionalism that elevates human speech above that of non-human animals is challenged, even inverted: birdsong, as 'pure' expression, prefigures human poetry and song, exemplifying the expressive possibility of these forms. Indeed, it could be argued that, by this logic, birds are virtuosically fluent precisely because they are untroubled by symbolic language: the drag of signification, the distraction of reference. As Barbara Johnson (2014) has noted, the aesthetic tradition is full of poets rhapsodizing about the paradoxical 'eloquence' of speechless things. She names this tendency 'muteness envy', citing the final lines of Archibald MacLeish in 'Ars Poetica': 'A poem should be wordless / As the flight of birds' (MacLeish 1985: 106). The price of this pure, undifferentiated expressivity is, however, the loss of linguistic subjectivity. The resulting condition is simultaneously joyous and melancholy, enviable and abject: perpetual anonymity, creaturely muteness.

4. A Likeness

Flight. As that other avian skill that inspires admiration and jealousy in humans, flight is an apt (if overused) metaphor for the unattainability of birdsong. Birds are always flying off, disappearing into the sky. But then, so is speech, in its way. Perhaps this is why, when I listen to my own recordings, with the bird silenced, I am disappointed to hear that my speech does not take flight so much as flap about, ineffectually. Excessive and percussive, my blurted exclamations sound less like unpremeditated art, more like reflex responses: a predictable array of 'oohs' and 'wows' and 'errs', triggered by the suddenness of the song's repeated arrival. In place of the Robin's most impressive trills and flourishes, I hear only fairly unimaginative stabs at onomatopoeic imitation: a 'whistlewhistlewhistle', and a 'pleased to pleased to meet you', both reminiscent of popular birdsong mnemonics. At first, I find the predictability and narrowness of my habitual speech patterns acutely embarrassing. What was it that I had hoped? To replay the track and discover I'd blurted something akin to the 'TattatattatuiiEetuiiEe' of Kurt Schwitters' 'Ursonate' (1922)?[{note}]1 Instead, I am met not with the shock of an animal other, but the uncanny realization that I sound, at times, quite like my mother. The way she would say, of the blackbirds calling at dusk, 'Ooooh, just listen to those birds, going dit-dit-dit'.

As my repeated attempts accumulate, I find myself speaking not as the bird, but of the birdsong -- after it, around it, in hopeless pursuit or confounded admiration. And, increasingly, my articulations take the form of phatic filler: 'sort of', 'kind of' and 'like', the habitual jointings of daily speech. And, as I listen again and again, becoming accustomed to the embarrassment of my own voice, I begin to realize that this is what 'spontaneous', 'authentic' speech often sounds like in daily praxis: a sort of like, um, yeah, like anyway -- a resort to the familiar, stereotypical formulas that are kind of like the way I, and those around me, tend to speak. The speech itself seems to exude an emphatic desire to emulate the Robin's robinness. It does so not through eloquent description or praise, but via the gradual accretion of phatic intonation. Although it may gesture towards description, this speech is certainly not 'definitive' in tone or effect, and is not the

kind of speaking of that claims authority over its object. There is no fixing it; I have laid down numerous versions, each slightly succeeding, largely failing, in a subtly different way. Although each is a unique attempt at spontaneous description, each is of identical duration, its outbursts orchestrated by the Robin's now absent song. When I play them simultaneously, with the Robin's song silenced, to my surprise, something like birdsong is evoked with peculiar vividness. The voices (all of which happen to be mine) are engaged, it sounds, in a collaborative descriptive effort, as though each is deflected, reshaped, expanded and – and, occasionally, startled into sudden flight -- by the Robin's impossibly rapid articulations. This speaking, in its multiple chatty discordant concert, is in-progress, unstable, indecisive, insecure. It is positing a possible version of, appealing, seeking agreement. These voices, in their concerted effort, mimic the avian intonations, vaguely, while acknowledging, rhythmically, their falling short. There is something funny about the way they start up and then fall silent together, as if acknowledging collective defeat.[{note}]2

The process, a repetitive procedure, has produced a likeness of the Robin's song. The word 'like' is itself not incidental to what is going on here. Indeed, I have become convinced that this little word -- so often denigrated as 'overused' -- is the most significant of all those bits of phatic speech known as 'pragmatic markers'. Associated with young people, the speech habit of adding 'like' where there is no apparent logical need for it ('I opened the door and it was, like, her!') can appear to signal an endemic uncertainty about what anything in the world actually is. Alongside other interjections, hedges and vague terms ('I mean', 'you know' 'and everything'), 'like' tends to be especially criticized as a marker of sloppy linguistic praxis (Stenström 2014: 34). In the words of linguist John McWhorter, 'how often should a coherently minded person need to note that something is similar to something rather than just being that something?' (McWhorter 2016). However, as McWhorter argues, the habitual resort to 'like' is now not only not limited to a younger generation of English speakers, but actually has many varied and important functions in conversational discourse (McWhorter 2016). 'Like' can function as an acknowledgement of counter-expectation, or a

way of softening the discomfort of an unwelcome topic. Like other phatic filler words, ‘like’ can play an important role in modulating the timing of speech: delaying the introduction of the thing into the sentence, creating anticipation, ensuring its arrival is impactful. If I find myself saying, ‘It was, like, a bird’, I am signalling thus a sort of low-level incredulity at the sheer facticity of the bird-as-event.

If speech is a form of thinking-aloud, then like is the means by which we articulate the process of this thinking. It is a jointing, a means of sounding out our relations with one another, with the world, and with the fact of speaking. Think of the way, in daily praxis, the word has become a pragmatic marker that prefaces the shift into reported speech, as with ‘and I was like “hello” and she was like “I don’t think so”’. In this moment I, the one speaking, am quoting speech from elsewhere, and yet intimating in the self-same gesture that the quotation is not necessarily exact. My ‘like’ tells you that I am not quoting verbatim, but giving a more general impression of the utterance’s effect. Here I may well do ‘an impression’, put on a voice, deliver a gesture in the style of the one quoted.

The insertion of ‘like’ is an acknowledgement of the gap -- both temporal and referential -- between an utterance and its (re)iteration. The temporal complexity of this relation is suggested by Rebecca Schneider’s conception of the interval. Mimetic relations, she writes, ‘require intervals, gaps between the one and the other, across which the second might imitate the first, across which the two might “cross-become”’ (Schneider 2016: 103). By intimating what the reported speech was like, as in how it felt to speak, or be spoken to, in that moment, the ‘like’ is a reminder of how speech acts on and through us compositionally, leaving an imprint, an impression.

My accumulated attempts to speak with the Robin can be understood as ‘impressions’ in this sense: vague likenesses, these utterances do something ‘like’ the bird’s song, which has left its imprint in the form of intonations, rhythmic configurations, pauses. Yes, the Robin’s song has certainly made an impression. We can think of this in the sense offered by Sara Ahmed, who asks us to remember the mark or trace left in the aftermath of such an encounter: the ‘press’

of an impression, she writes, ‘allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another’ (2014: 6). What I begin to understand, through repeatedly feeling the impression the Robin makes upon me, is how speech enacts relations with and between bodies, both actual and imagined. As we talk, liking can lead to likening, a becoming-like the other. This can be heard in conversations between friends and acquaintances: I say ‘yeah’ to let you know I’m following, you say ‘yeah?’ to check that I really am, and I say ‘yeah, yeah’ in response. I am nodding, as are you, and our intonations are rising and falling in concert. Situated and citational, this kind of cross-imitation depends on the co-presence of bodies, or the acoustic communion of voices. It is indicative of the way phatic talk does its communicative work not semantically, but songfully.

5. Liking Birds

After an interval of years (I began this work in 2011), numerous repeated attempts to speak with the Robin, and the Blackbird and the Mistle Thrush too have cohered, tentatively, as works. Still, there is no fixing them, not quite. Audio pieces double as scores for performance; performances themselves are forms of audio transcription. In order to do anything with this ‘bird talking’ I must engage, repeatedly, in the act of re-listening. To transcribe, I listen and type, type as I listen, and it seems the bird is orchestrating the fitful movement of my fingers, in a way that bypasses my conscious control. This is a kind of articulation that mimics the quickness of speaking-in-listening. It is only later that I realize this repetitive reprocessing has enacted a form of training: I learn to re-speak my earlier selves, splintered and reformed by the imprint of the birdsong, and I learn to do it with quickness and accuracy. An encounter with the Robin’s song has stimulated my desire to speak, if not lyrically, then virtuosically: to perform my utterances in a manner that might be considered ‘impressive’ enough to earn my time on stage.

At the scene of the performance, though, it may be that the strongest impression

is made by silence. Thought to be listening pauses, suggestive of reciprocal communication between birds, the Robin's silences last several seconds. It feels, during these pauses, that bird is not so much awaiting an answer as demonstrating his mastery as a performer: manipulating my attention, making me wait, heightening my awareness of the fact that he is the one doing it. Yes, he, for it is generally accepted that only male birds sing, in order to claim territory and attract a mate. By this logic, birdsong has no 'meaning' beyond its display of skill, and its affirmation of the bird's presence. By this logic, if the Robin's vocalization refers to anything at all, it is the bird himself, and the song itself. The Robin 'says', in effect, 'I sing'.

This is a problematically simplified understanding of birdsong, of course -- one that is encouraged by the circumstances of my own encounter with it. I hear this creature's performance via recording, one that has been packaged and sold to me as the 'definitive' iteration of a robin's song via the medium of a commercial CD. To admire the bird as some kind of virtuosic solo performer is problematic, in part, because it requires the effective silencing of the surrounding environment, which is what happens as I listen so persistently and forensically to the Robin track. I thus treat his performance as discrete, apart from any context or connection to the life that produced it. This is a mode of engagement very far from the 'passionate immersion' advocated by environmental philosopher Tom van Dooren, who, in his book Flight Ways, tunes his attention to the 'multispecies entanglements' that bind not only birds but also humans and birds together in shared ecologies (Van Dooren 2014: 5). As Van Dooren makes clear, one in eight bird species is thought to be threatened with global extinction, and within some taxonomic families the number is much higher (e.g. 82% of all albatross species). In such times, he argues, what is needed more than ever is 'attentiveness to the diverse ways in which humans -- as individuals, as communities, and as a species -- are implicated in the lives of disappearing others' (Van Dooren 2014: 5).

Against the constant hum of the environmental catastrophe already in progress, the sound of a much diminished dawn chorus might well induce anxiety, as

Andrew Whitehouse suggests in his article ‘Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene’ (2015). But equally, the familiar song of a solitary bird might resound as a meagre and faint sort of consolation; proof that something other than human is still alive, even in spite of everything ‘we’ have done. In this context, my partiality to this particular bird -- star of Christmas cards and candidate for ‘national bird’ of Britain (Lindo 2014) – certainly risks perpetuating a habitual and comforting recourse to what is most familiar, best-loved and (apparently) unthreatened. But then, any attempt to think through the potential loss of bird species must contend with the aestheticization of birds, and their songs, by and through human representations of them -- not only in writing, but also in sentimental illustrations, wildlife programming, radio segments, brand names and logos, and artistic appropriations (including my own). To focus on such minor sentiments as ‘liking’ birds might, in times like these, seem like a determinedly trivializing move.

However, voicing a mere ‘liking’ for birds and birdsong may offer a means of taking a strategic step to the side of the sublime, that elevated state that gives to the ‘honeyed prose’ that narrates ‘nature’ as a site of idealized solitary encounter (Jamie 2008). As the poet Kathleen Jamie observes, more traditional literary responses to nature tend to equate spiritual uplift with remoteness, and depend upon the writer’s discovery of ‘wild places’. The archetypal figure in this story is the ‘lone enraptured male’, its setting a wilderness assumed to be devoid of humans, to exist, even in a fanciful sense, ‘outside human history’ (Jamie 2008). As is becoming ever more apparent, the celebrated ‘emptiness’ of such places is itself a sort of ‘theatrical’ illusion, a form of trickery dependent on careful editing (see Monbiot 2018). As an alternative to this stark and grandiose vision, merely noticing and ‘liking’ the bits of nature, the everyday sort of wildness we encounter at home, or on the way to the bus stop, could indeed form a promising starting point for serious deliberation of the more-than-human.

The critical potential of ‘liking’ nature is asserted persuasively by Susan Fraiman in her compelling article ‘Pussy Panic’. Here Fraiman identifies an impulse, in some of the most influential works of ‘animal studies’, to disavow the ‘feminizing

associations' of emotionality in human--animal relations. She reads this in, for example, Cary Wolfe's 'overstated' insistence that 'confronting the institution of speciesism … has nothing to do with whether you like animals', and in comparable moves by Peter Singer and Tom Regan to 'rule out "liking"' (Wolfe 2003: 7, emphasis in original) (Fraiman 2012: 102). Fraiman aligns her own critical project with a decades-long effort to overturn deeply embedded categorical associations between women and animals as 'similarly debased by their shared association with body over mind, feeling over reason'. By this logic, writes Fraiman, a corresponding 'degree of manliness is correlated to a degree of distance from these and other related categories -- physicality, literalness, sentimentality, vulnerability, domesticity' (Fraiman 2012: 99). And in some sense, it is precisely the 'physicality, literalness, sentimentality, vulnerability, domesticity' of my own (and my mother's) seemingly inarticulate, non-elevated, affectionately phatic responses to birdsong that I am insisting, resolutely, on repeating, proliferating. It is talk that does not seem to 'say' anything 'about' birds. Instead, it performs liking, and likeness, and like, as a relation between articulate beings. This reference to relationality, relations formed by liking and likeness and the word 'like', brings me back to Virno's conception of phatic talk. For him, this mode of speaking seems to emphasize the relationality of language. When conversing phatically, 'the interlocutors don't say anything, if not that they are speaking ("Hello, hello," or "Yes, I'm here"), and they don't do anything, if not making themselves visible to the others' eyes' (Virno 2015: 47). As Giuseppina Mecchia explains, according to this logic, 'my speech makes me appear [in] the public sphere, at once distinct from and fully embedded within a multitude of linguistic subjects all connected to each another by speech itself' (Mecchia 2015: 11). We feel the need to reaffirm our identity as speaking beings not in order to stake a privileged claim on 'humanity' as solo performance, but as a way of (re)staging our 'selves' as formed in relation to others.

It may be going too far to suggest that Virno's conception of humans as a multitude interconnected by their ability to speak might be rearticulated as a multispecies entanglement. Certainly, my own bird mutterings are very far from

articulating anything like this. For in speaking with the birdsong, I also speak over it, delivering an affectionate obliteration, a swallowing-up in praise. It is not about birds. If this work is about anything, it may be the way speech performs liking as a form of embodied relation, one that takes the shape of a funny sort of verbal mimesis. Or, it is about the way the speech that results from such encounters can, depending on its context, be heard as a species-defining eloquence, or -- like so much 'chit-chat', 'babble', 'chirruping' or 'tweeting' -- as a vague (and, by intimation, vaguely irritating) cacophony.

But, as much as I still think that what I am doing here is not 'about birds', not really, after the performances, people will come and tell me stories about birds -- birds they have seen, heard. Birds they remember. Fragile and fleeting relations, encounters they found meaningful, or funny. People speak to me as if I have been speaking to them about birds. And so I do the only thing I can: I listen. It's a relief, frankly, after spending so much time listening only to versions of myself. I listen especially to the ways people voice their liking for, curiosity about, the small, feathered things that fly off before they've had a chance to really look, or encounter them. Well, I don't stay entirely silent: I nod, and laugh, and say 'yeah', and 'yeah yeah', and 'uhuh', and sometimes 'oh, wow yeah!' It's small talk. We do it together, in the foyer or the bar. We stand around and chat about birds. After all, it's what the performance is about.

Notes

1 Ursonate, begun in 1922, a 'a tone poem in sonata form' (Schulz 2011: 8), was composed of rhythmic and repetitive speech sounds that, in typographic form, resemble the lexical notation of birdsong.

2 At this point, I would like to invite my readers to listen to the recording: https://soundcloud.com/emma-l-bennett/two-tries-robin

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