

In the Parrot's Royal Court

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*I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.*

—Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

Some will say that Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* begins with “the scent of bitter almonds” that wafts into the nostrils of Dr. Juvenal Urbino, the most respected old man in town, as he hurries to report the suicide of his friend Jeremiah de Saint-Amour (1). Some will say that it begins with that suicide, an act of love-martyrdom that thrusts us immediately into the kind of world where love-martyrdom—along with love-murder, love-stalking, and other crimes of passion—is an acceptable and expectable activity. Some will say that it begins with three words: “It was inevitable”—words that tell us that this is a world in which Fate has inescapable jurisdiction (1). I say it begins with the disobedience of a surly parrot.

At first glance, the parrot is a lovely, special creature, “lighter than he seemed, with a yellow head and a black tongue, the only way to distinguish him from mangrove parrots who did not learn to speak even with turpentine suppositories” (23). Dr. Urbino’s wife, Fermina Daza, buys the bird after their house is robbed. She wants a guard dog; Dr. Urbino, never particularly fond of animals, decrees, “Nothing that does not speak will come into this house” (23). A parrot seems a good compromise. But this parrot is not one to make compromises: his defining characteristic is a propensity for defiance. When they let him roam the house with clipped wings, he falls into a boiling stew-pot “with a sailor’s shout of every man for himself,” leaving himself forever deplumed (24). When the parrot earns national fame for his singing, and the President of the Republic, a man with the lofty name of Don Marco Fidel Suarez, visits the house to attend a performance for himself, the bird refuses

to make a sound for two hours. After the doctor decides to keep him in his cage, wings unclipped, letting him out only for his four o'clock lessons on the terrace—lessons in French, liturgical Latin, arithmetic; the doctor is an insufferable pedant—he flies away.

Despite his insistence on anthropomorphizing the parrot with a robust education in the humanities, Dr. Urbino cherishes the bird's autonomy. He appreciates that the "maniacal" creature "did not speak when asked to but only when it was least expected" and "did so with a clarity and rationality that were uncommon among human beings"—he likes what is uncontrollable about it, un-domesticable, incapable of being molded by human hands (20). And yet, this unruliness in his animal subject—this quality that makes the parrot a perpetual "fugitive," unable to be *subject to* the doctor's will—is what ends up killing the doctor one sunny afternoon (48). Returning home from the funeral of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, Dr. Urbino finds the parrot sitting on a branch of the mango tree in the back yard, mocking him with the phrase "Royal parrot"—a profession of self-importance made from an elevated position (41). Fuming with post-funereal agita, the doctor climbs a ladder, catches the parrot for a moment, loses his footing, and falls to an ignoble death.

When the parrot is briefly in his grasp, Dr. Urbino utters "Ça y est!"—a phrase that can equally mean 'it is done,' 'I am done,' or 'it has happened' (42). This multivalent *cri de coeur*, a "triumphant sigh" in all the ambiguity of the phrase, marks the end of many things and the beginning of many more. Gone is Dr. Urbino, the professorial control-freak. Gone is his story of political action, cultural enrichment, social climbing in the literal and figurative sense. Awakened is the story of his wife. From this point forward, from chapter two onward, we travel with her, not him, through a lifetime of love both requited and unrequited—a lifetime that is itself "fugitive," marked by fifty years of flight from an adolescent affair. With the parrot-driven death of her husband, a man around whose center of gravity the entire universe seemed to bend, everything goes into amorous free-fall.

One might ask what this parrot is supposed to represent—what he is a metaphor for, a signifier of. But García Márquez makes it clear that the bird's existence cannot be reduced to mere metaphoric function. We often think of animals in literature as signs: dogs mean loyalty, cats mean cattiness, rabbits mean speed (or baby-making), turtles mean slowness. Birds mean a number of things, none of them particularly birdish: the pigeon connotes urban grime; the raven portends death; the swan says something about Natalie Portman's psychosexual hang-ups; the eagle is a one-way ticket to jingoistic sentimentality. García Márquez is well aware of this hermeneutic of zoologi-

cal signification. It just so happens to be the mindset he has playfully attributed to Dr. Urbino:

He said that dogs were not loyal but servile, that cats were opportunists and traitors, that peacocks were heralds of death, that macaws were simply decorative annoyances, that rabbits fomented greed, that monkeys carried the fever of lust, and that roosters were damned because they had been complicit in the three denials of Christ. (21)

In Dr. Juvenal Urbino's great taxonomy of preconceived notions and questionable projections, one cannot distinguish the animal itself from the meaning to which it has been grafted. All their complexity as *beings* has been domesticated by conceptual flattening. To Dr. Urbino, the world of animals is a world of quacking, barking, and clucking metaphors. They are objects, notions, musings in the mind of a didactic man. But the novel itself does not subscribe to his opinions. The world of nonhuman creatures does not adhere to his decrees. The parrot, its spokesman, proves to be a magnificent exception.

Even before death's rude awakening, Dr. Urbino harbors a sense that the parrot is more important than his baldness and rudeness would suggest. The narrator remarks that "the fact that the parrot could maintain his privileges" after refusing to entertain Don Marco Fidel Suarez "was the ultimate proof of his sacred rights" (21). One is tempted to take all this talk about the parrot's "sacred rights" with a tablespoon of irony, but it's not necessarily an overstatement. It may very well be an understatement: the parrot does have "sacred rights," and they extend far beyond the mere assertion of civil disobedience.

Consider some of the sacred *rites* performed by this bird among men. He speaks truths which humans do not possess—"phrases from another time, which he could not have learned in the house and which led one to think that he was much older than he appeared" (24). He is an angel of death, a figure who hangs over Dr. Urbino, proclaims his own inexorable, capricious power, and boots the doctor from this mortal coil—or, if you prefer something a bit less gothic, a psychopomp, an animal spirit guide who bears the doctor's soul across the "instant he was suspended" between life and the afterlife (42). In narratological terms, he is nothing less than an *avis ex machina*, a bird descended from the author's Olympian aviary to effect a dramatic change on the course of the novel itself. The bird has powers: a gift to speak prophecy, a license to kill, an ability to effect a Copernican revolution that redefines the novel's focal point—*her*, rather than *him*. He is no god in this universe, but he

does possess a godlike agency—a large, perhaps inapprehensible measure of control over the grand scheme of things, coupled with an inscrutable will.

Animals are flat and mute in the imaginarium of Dr. Urbino, but this one is defiantly three-dimensional, defiantly vocal, defiantly (and literally) over and above the imagination that would seek to claim him. The parrot rebels against all conceptual entrapments. His mortal disobedience against the phrase “*Ça y est*” suggests that he cannot be “had” in a moment of utterance. His deplored exterior, stripped of identifiable coloration, suggests that he is a being with significance beyond the visual, not merely a thing-to-be-seen. His unwillingness to perform for the political elite—to adopt a state of subservient, dependent objecthood in their presence—suggests that he inhabits a position beyond *them*. The phrase “royal parrot” could very well be empty self-aggrandizement, but in this novel, all forms of aggrandizement—from folkloric exaggerations to romantic histrionics, including the idea that love is a physical affliction akin to cholera—must be taken seriously. We must be prepared to accept that the parrot really is what he says he is: a ruler, a law-maker in this magic kingdom of things preordained. Just as Dr. Urbino “let him wander wherever he chose to walk with his hulking old horseman’s gait,” the author bestows upon him untold privileges that belie his meager form (24).

One lousy parrot appointed deputy to the creator of the universe, given despotic lordship over life, death, prophecy, plot, and all that is seen and unseen: it sounds like *King Ralph* with a bitchy bird instead of John Goodman. In other words, a joke. Trace the parrot’s meddling throughout the entire novel, however, and one will find that García Márquez is serious about investing him with divine authority. At one point, we flash back to Dr. Urbino as a little boy, whiling away the afternoon in his father’s office. The father sits up, stricken with a strange intimation of his own mortality. Just then, the narrator tells us, “the angel of death hovered for a moment in the cool shadows of the office and flew out again through the window, leaving a trail of feathers fluttering in his wake, but the boy did not see them” (114). Is it the parrot? Maybe, so long as we stretch our belief in his capacity to mess with Dr. Urbino from beyond the limits of time. But it is definitely a bird, in all the physicality of birdness—and a bird unseen, pulling the strings of life like a shadowland puppetmaster. It is the parrot as archetype.

In his 1821 “Defence of Poetry,” Percy Shelley described the Poet as an “unacknowledged legislator of the World” (par. 50). What he meant was not necessarily that the Poet could pass metaphysical laws from the comfort of his leather armchair; were this true, the Poet would probably make a lot more money than poets

almost universally make. What he meant was that cosmology is the Poet's chief prerogative—that the Poet takes it upon himself to represent the structure of the world (cosmos, or what Shelley would call “the spirit of the age” [par. 50]) in language (*logos*) and, perhaps, posit a better one. As the archetypal psychologist James Hillman points out, the term “cosmology” has an inherently aesthetic, even moral dimension: ideally, it doesn't just express “a vast gasbag, outer, empty, spacey and cold,” but a “fitting order” that frames to the benefit of everything framed—a world-structure that brings much-needed arrangement to the formlessness of existence (293). A true cosmology is the formulation of a world furnished. “Legislated,” Shelley might say, by the molding and shaping and organizing work of “unacknowledged” hands.

One such “fitting order” that Hillman himself proposes—indeed, the order that he thinks is necessary to “restore the aesthetic to primary place”—is an “animalized cosmology” (295). “Animal life is *biologically aesthetic*,” writes Hillman (295). By virtue of their primordial vividness, they have the power to move us in ways that we cannot quite account for. Unlike a stop sign or even a painting, an animal embodies “*sheer appearance for its own sake*” (294)—a basic visuality that (in and of itself, at least) does not represent, does not signify, conveys no “greed,” no “lust,” no “three denials of Christ.” An animalized cosmology, then, is a world-structure governed by animal forms that do not address us (for they are by nature “unaddressed phenomena”), but move us silently, bodily, below and against the flimsy assertions of the human will. It is an expression of the *cosmos* which acknowledges the animal's power to *dynamize* the human with the force of the nonhuman—what Hillman calls “the dynamis of nature” (295, 296).

I think of Obi-Wan's phantasmal head with the inscrutable face of a Bengal tiger, wordlessly telling Luke Skywalker to growl at the Death Star (*Star Wars*). I think of a Times Square full of pig faces, chicken faces, monkey faces impregnating me with subliminal agitprop. I think of “Ça y est,” that phrase of guttural submission in the face of an avian overlord that hovers above. But none of this constitutes precisely the picture that Hillman is painting; his picture of the animal-governed world is emphatically non-pictorial. With the phrase “animalized cosmology,” he's simply pointing to a world that he thinks already exists: the depths of the psyche, where archetypal forms govern us below our conscious knowledge. He doesn't intend, in other words, to posit a world ruled by discrete animal figures—willful, individualized beasts like the parrot—in which we don't actually live. He intends to show us the zoology of the underworld that is actually in our minds, a place below the deepest depths where “primordial brutal life,” a menagerie mashed together,

drives us to the actions we do not will. “All aesthetic reactions of our nostrils, muscles, throat and teeth are the force of nature through us, nature acting upon nature, speaking with nature,” he writes (296). In his catalogue of unwilled activities dynamized by the subconscious zoo, he also includes our primordial responses to symbols—which are so often, after all, animals.

The kind of animal shadow-government that Hillman expounds seems altogether different from García Márquez’s “royal parrot.” Hillman speaks of a faceless mass, less a *they* than an *it*, less a politburo of pigs and bears than the sheer overwhelming force of animality itself. The parrot, by contrast, is a singular entity, possessed of form and voice. But García Márquez’s cosmology fits with Hillman’s insofar as the parrot can be considered a representation, an archetypal manifestation, and an external projection of that *dynamis* at the root of things—an *agent provocateur* that stands in for much deeper provocations. Fifty years before the death of her husband (but after the chapter in which the death takes place), Fermina Daza is sitting on the patio, embroidering. After months of spurning his advances, this is the day that she has finally agreed to accept a love letter from Florentino Ariza, her indefatigable admirer. (He had 70 pages; he’s managed to cut it down to half a page of “sober and explicit” confession [61].) Just when he is about to give the letter to her, when she sees “the blue envelope trembling in a hand petrified with terror,” something feathery enters the scene:

She raised the embroidery frame so he could put the letter on it, for she could not admit that she had noticed the trembling of his fingers. Then it happened: a bird shook himself among the leaves of the almond trees, and his droppings fell right on the embroidery. Fermina Daza moved the frame out of the way, hid it behind the chair so that he would not notice what had happened, and looked at him for the first time, her face aflame. Florentino Ariza was impassive as he held the letter in his hand and said: “It’s good luck.” (61)

Whether or not it is indeed the mystic parrot who shits on Fermina’s embroidery, the bird’s action alters the flow of two lives, catalyzing a crucial moment of chemistry. It is, in some sense, a *symbolic* action—an act of defecatory defiance that has both visual and physical effect. It is also a cosmological action, suggesting the “fitting order” that the author has built. In García Márquez’s world, birds *matter*. They produce matter. They drop it “right on the embroidery”—the embroidery of the world itself, a woven fabric of fate and chance. But the action of the bird is also a stand-in for something more-or-less human: that involuntary *dynamization* that allows both Florentino and

Fermina to get over the hurdle of their self-consciousness; that unwilling “flame” that blazes through the mechanisms of “impassive” bodies, allowing the two to see each other truly for the first time. Florentino calls it “good luck,” acknowledging it as something external, but Hillman would call it an unmistakable product of “the animal as psychic presence” (296).

In the cosmologies of Hillman and García Márquez, there is no separation between external nature and the human mind. We travel *with* nature, allowing it to drive us in its deep, involuntary way, just as the characters in the novel always seem to be shadowed by the unseen parrot. In the *Cholera* universe, nature, embodied in the parrot, fulfills the role of what Carl Jung would call the “trickster” archetype—a “shape-shifter . . . half animal, half divine,” who saves us from ourselves, from the entrapments of our individual propriety, by exposing us to “sly jokes and malicious pranks” (255). In Jung’s cosmology, the trickster “represents a vanishing level of consciousness which increasingly lacks the power . . . to express and assert itself” (265). It is the capricious external agent, projected out of necessity, that allows things to happen—and us to act—beyond the limitations of the conscious mind.

And yet, Percy Shelley was being romantic—after all, he was a Romantic—when he wrote that the Poet was an “unacknowledged legislator of the World.” Who’s to say that Hillman, García Márquez, or even Jung is correct in his exaltation of animal being? Who’s to say that animals have that power, that agency, that indwelt and inapprehensible charisma in the basement chambers of the psyche? Here’s the thing about that parrot: despite his profession of monarchial majesty, he was not born into high office. He was appointed by García Márquez himself; his ascension to the throne was very much a planned coup. The authority invested in him is by virtue of a higher authority, a creative authority with a *desire* to ordain him holy. The same goes for Hillman’s conception of an animalized cosmology: even though the esteemed psychologist would never, ever admit to its possible fictionality, it is fundamentally *notional*, imagined out of an apparent need to implant the non-human world at the deepest level of the human self. In García Márquez’s imaginary universe, love cannot happen without the intervention of birdshit. In ours, however, the role of the animal in the causal picture—the way in which it *matters*—is not necessarily so clear-cut.

“Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises,” writes John Berger in “Why Look at Animals?” (252). In the beginning, they allowed us to explain the unexplainable; they were the creatures *alongside* us to which we could ascribe “a power . . . comparable with human power but never coinciding with it” (252). Hence totemism; hence the belief that certain

qualities—courage, cunning, even the more dubious qualities that Dr. Urbino names—were embodied in animal form; hence an inalienable respect for the creatures who gave us the first metaphors, and therefore the first language. But now they are no longer beings alongside us; they have “withdrawn from everyday life,” present only residually in toys, cartoons, and other pale facsimiles. Even zoo animals “constitute the living monument to their own disappearance” (260). When you look at one, “*you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*”—something that has been objectified, flattened, stripped of aesthetic and psychic might (261).

Cholera takes place in a world visibly encroached by the mechanizing influence of steamships and telegraphs. Yet it’s also a world suspended, preserved, forever kept on the cusp of a fall into history—a world in which Dr. Urbino can be fairly correct in his assessment that “the nineteenth century is passing for everyone except us” (225). Perhaps the parrot, then, is a figure of nostalgic valence. Perhaps the whole idea of an animalized cosmology is built on the fantasy of a purer time—a time before civilization when the creatures of the world were demigods, not deli meats. Despite his power, despite his ancientness, one cannot help but see something feeble and dwindling in the parrot, with his deplumed nakedness and his “hulking old horseman’s gait” (24). His divinity approaches zero at just about the same speed that the telegraph approaches ubiquity. Nonetheless, García Márquez demands that the parrot be taken seriously as an agent of the outermost heavens and the innermost psyche—demands even that his characters and the reader submit. In the poem “A Passage to India,” Walt Whitman, another Romantic, addresses the modern world of “you engineers, you architects, machinists” with a powerful exclamation: “A worship new I sing.” One could say that the exponents of an animalized cosmology sing a worship *old*—a worship primeval. Why? Whitman might know the reason: “For thy sake, O soul.”

García Márquez is not the only author in the Western canon to give the royal treatment to a petulant parrot. A parrot named Loulou lords over the pages of Gustave Flaubert’s *A Simple Soul*—or at least lords over the imagination of the story’s protagonist, a modest mid-19th century servant named Felicite. Before his arrival, Felicite’s existence is one long, gray thread of drabness and sorrow. She has no real lovers, no real friends, no real life outside the house where she does unfulfilling work for 100 francs a year. As the narrative proceeds, skipping over chunks of a life that seems uneventful enough to skip over in chunks, everyone close to her—her daughter, her nephew, and even the stuffy mistress who takes about five decades to accept her as a member of the family—kicks the bucket. Everything changes when

the parrot enters her life. Bequeathed to her mistress by a local baron who could tolerate him no longer, he bears some remarkable similarities to Dr. Urbino's favorite pet. Any superficial beauty he has is canceled out by a destructive personality: "His body was green, his head blue, the tips of his wings were pink and his breast was golden. But he had the tiresome tricks of biting his perch, pulling his feathers out, scattering refuse and spilling the water of his bath" (24). He, too, angers the local populace (in this case, the other servants and the mistress) with his outbursts, refuses to talk on command, and escapes at the first opportunity. Yet Felicite loves him more than anything else in the world. As the years go on, the dreariness of everyday life fades from her consciousness, and "the narrow circle of her ideas [grows] more restricted," he alone comes to occupy her thoughts (25). "Only one noise penetrated her ears," Flaubert writes: "the parrot's voice" (25).

Thinking about the average pet owner, Berger posits that "the pet *completes him*, offering responses to aspects of his character which would otherwise remain unconfirmed" ("Why" 256). There is no doubt that Loulou unlocks something in Felicite, but it seems to be much more than an "aspect" of her personality. He unlocks her spirituality, her imagination, her ability to conceptualize things above and beyond her meager station. Before Loulou, Felicite isn't a particularly devout Christian; after Loulou, she sees an image of the Holy Spirit and decides not only that it must be real, but that the artist has made a fundamental ornithological error:

They associated in her mind, the parrot becoming sanctified through the neighborhood of the Holy Ghost, and the latter becoming more lifelike in her eyes, and more comprehensible. In all probability the Father had never chosen as messenger a dove, as the latter has no voice, but rather one of Loulou's ancestors. And Felicite said her prayers in front of the coloured picture, though from time to time she turned slightly towards the bird. (28)

As the bird becomes the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit becomes "lifelike"—closer to home, closer to the human who depends on it. Loulou is dead by this time, poisoned by a servant he particularly enjoyed insulting, but it doesn't matter to her. In stuffed form, suspended in "lifelikeness" by a taxidermist, he becomes an ideal vessel into which she can pour all the slippery mercury of transcendence: everything she cannot do, or be, on her own.

No one elects to worship the parrot in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Given the choice, Dr. Urbino would be perfectly content—though not nearly as impressed—with a bird of flattened meaning, or even a bird without meaning like the "simply decorative" crows. It is García Márquez, the author with the

macroscopic, cosmological perspective, who gives us a sense of our dependence on the animal-form-divine, on the divine *channeled into* the animal. And the same goes for Flaubert. As Julian Barnes points out, the tone of *A Simple Soul* is never anything less than masterfully balanced: “Imagine the technical difficulty of writing a story in which a badly stuffed bird with a ridiculous name ends up standing in for one third of the Trinity, and in which the intention is neither satirical, sentimental, nor blasphemous” (*Flaubert’s Parrot* 17). That tonal balance is crucial because it means that we cannot dismiss Felicite’s parrot-exaltation. Nor can we dismiss the moment when she sees him—or thinks she sees him—for the very last time:

The beats of her heart grew fainter and fainter, and vaguer, like a fountain giving out, like an echo dying away;—and when she exhaled her last breath, she thought she saw in the half-opened heavens a gigantic parrot hovering above her head. (33)

If García Márquez invents a fanciful world in which the order of things depends literally on avian intervention, Flaubert creates a situation—a real, human, not-at-all fanciful situation—in which the dependence is in the mind. An ordinary woman needs an ordinary bird to feel the possibility of life after death. The bird may be hers, but the need is not hers alone.

Barnes interprets the parrot as an embodiment of the Word—*logos*, language, the all-powerful author’s voice. I think he’s half right. The parrot is an embodiment of the Word made Flesh. Flaubert started writing *A Simple Soul* because he had a stuffed parrot on his desk (Barnes). Already, he was faced with an animal that had been translated into an artificial form—an animal whose body was being used to convey something human, even if that “something” was not something that could be pinned down. The story he wrote is a testament to that very kind of meaning-making: using the image of the animal to convey that which is inapprehensible; using the form of something close yet profoundly distant to make recognizable the divine. The parrot transmutes from author’s paperweight to character’s pet, to character’s redeemer, to reader’s symbol. These are all artificial states of being—all parrot-expressions, parrot-*logos*, each one more notional than the last. But they all retain, and draw power from, and even extend, that real thing of familiar mystery at the root of the conceptual genealogy: the parrot itself. Contemplating a simple wooden bird, another manmade “derivative” of real-life birdness, Berger muses that “art does not imitate nature,” but is an attempt “to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by

nature” (“White Bird” 9). In the parrot, Felicite sees the brief hope of transcendence. In the parrot-as-symbol, the hope sustains.

Animals are “good to think,” said Claude Lévi-Strauss (89). He, of all people, would have known he was making an understatement: animals are *necessary* to think. The imagination depends on animal life. It depends on the presence of creatures alongside us, with us, telling us the things we can never know. Without animal symbols, or animals that can *be* symbols, we cannot think widely, grandly, highly, divinely. The cosmology of the imagination constricts to a simple solar system; the circuits of the mind close in on themselves in smaller and smaller loops. The self becomes all-important, stripped of a necessary submission. The parrot becomes a thing to put away, to hide in the shade of a covered cage, rather than a creature to revere and remake in translation.

But there may be hope for the Dr. Juvenal Urbinos of the world, the urban and urbane who seek a universe they can control, even if they don’t have the faith of a Felicite. That hope will come, perhaps, when the animal flies away—when it speaks out of turn, makes a mess in its cage, shits on the grand embroidery. Quoth the parrot: “Royal parrot.” Quoth the man: “Ça y est.” *It is done. I am done. It has happened.*

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