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### Bird Language in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*

#### Abstract

Analyzes the talking birds in *The Sword in the Stone* for what they show about White's knowledge of language. Notes the birds use "dialects appropriate to their social levels" and "speak, at various times, language characteristic of different stages in the origin of bird language."

#### Additional Keywords

Birds in T.H. White; White, T.H. *The Sword in the Stone*—Language

# BIRD LANGUAGE IN T.H. WHITE'S THE SWORD IN THE STONE

MARIE NELSON

In the first book of his Arthurian tetralogy T.H. White shows the young Arthur undergoing a series of transformations from fish to insect to bird to mammal, speaking to the creatures and being spoken to by them. The purpose of this paper is to show how White used his knowledge of language and literary history to give form to his fantasy.

Everyone knows that trees and animals and birds can't talk. We know it as surely as we know the rules that sub-categorize nouns.<sup>1</sup> Nouns represent entities that are either animate or inanimate, and beings that are either human or nonhuman. Those who are human speak; those that are not human do not speak. It is a simple matter of binary opposition. And yet creators of fantasy have often successfully broken the unwritten rule that determines our understanding of who uses language and who does not.

Writers of fantasy sometimes show in the process of breaking a rule that we internalize when we acquire language that they not only know language, but they also know a bit of linguistics. Tolkien obeys the physical laws of sound when he gives his towering ents deep voices. C.S. Lewis gives some of his talking beasts (the horses, Bree and Hwin, for example) onomatopoeic names; and some of his animals use onomatopoeic speech, as when Rabadash the donkey's words merge into a bray. Richard Adams makes similar use of onomatopoeia (his Rowsby Woof cries out "How--how! How--how dare you come snou-snou--snouting round here. Get out--out! Out!"); and he also gives a bird character named Kehaar the dialect of a Norwegian ship captain.<sup>2</sup> T.H. White gives whole flocks of bird characters the power of speech in The Sword and the Stone; and in doing so he makes an effective demonstration of his knowledge of language. His birds talk on various levels of formality, using dialects appropriate to their social levels. They speak, at various times, language characteristic of different stages in the development of language. Indeed, White even provides an extended discussion of the origin of bird language.

The question of origins seems a good one with which to begin. In The Sword in the Stone answering this question is not simply a matter of telling a creation story that includes a gift of language, as it is in Lewis's Narnia. Young Arthur asks, "Do you know . . . why birds sing, or how? Is it a language?" and his questions initiate a dialogue. Archimedes, Merlin's owl, replies, "Of course it is a language. It is not a big language like speech, but it is large." Merlin then presents an imitative theory of language origin which Archimedes forces him to refine.

"Language is very ancient," Merlin says (a truism), and adds, "little is said, but much intended" (an assertion of the symbolic character of language). His tone becoming pedantic, he continues, "Another friend of mine maintains . . . that the question of the language of birds arises out of imitation." The cry of the kestrel, he says, is an imitation of the sound the mouse makes when pounded on.

Parallel examples follow, but Archimedes objects that birds sing more than one note! The imitation theory is too simple. Merlin's ready answer is that only the call notes arise from imitation. Other notes are descants on the original. After some discussion of what would be called "age-grading" in contemporary jargon (young owls sing "kee-wick" in imitation of their prey, while old ones sing "hoo-roo, hoo-roo" in imitation of the wind in hollow trees where they want to sleep), the magician returns to his basic theory.

Speech begins with imitation. Repetition follows, then variation. And Merlin the linguist is off on paralinguistic features like tone, pitch, and rapidity of utterance.

"You can cry Kee-wick in tender accents, if you are in love, or Kee-wick angrily in challenge or in hate: you can cry it on a rising scale as a call-note . . . and if I come near to you in a startling way you may cry out Kee-wick-Keewick-kee-wick-keewick, in loud alarm."<sup>3</sup>

It is no accident, of course, that "kee-wick" repeated quickly begins to sound like "Quick, quick, quick!" The example suits the point. But Archimedes objects and the dialogue continues. Because one of the characters is not a bird, it is not really a debate in the medieval tradition; and the explanation is not a straight "bow-wow" theory because Merlin (who is a magician) adds the idea of sympathetic magic when he has the sound imitate what the speaker hopes to gain instead of just what he hears.<sup>4</sup> But White presents a nicely dramatized exposition of a theory of language origin.

That the owl can speak as well as Merlin is taken for granted. The question is, how can the ability be explained? White's ironic presentation makes the "bow-wow" theory of human language origin and the imitative theory of bird language beginnings seem equally ridiculous; but at the same time the manner in which he presents the question makes the speech of bird and human characters equally believable. It is every bit as possible for Archimedes to question Merlin's assertions as it is for Merlin to make them.

Birds can talk in White's created world, and the reader does not even think to question this. A corollary reversal of the general expectation is also presented. It cannot be taken for granted that human beings always have the faculty or privilege of speech. The Dog Boy, his name notwithstanding, is a human character; but, exiled like the Wild Boy of Aveyron from the habitations of men, he cannot communicate beyond an almost preverbal level. And Wart, who ordinarily seems to show no reluctance to speak up, seems impelled to ask before he enters the bird community that is quartered in the mews of his guardian's castle, "Is one allowed to speak as a human being, or does the thing about being seen and not heard have to apply?"<sup>5</sup> He finds that he will be permitted to speak with the birds, but that he must go by the rules of their speech community.

Balan, a merlin named for one of the Balin-Balan brothers of medieval romance, advises the boy, who has now assumed the form of a hawk, on how to join the group. When spoken to, Wart answers a fierce peregrine in the polite syntax of Sir Thomas Malory's time, "I am a merlin, Madam, an it please you." Catechized, he says he is a member of a group properly called Beasts of the Foot. He gives some wrong answers, but it is agreed that he may be admitted to the order of birds.

The sparrow-hawk who is to swear young Arthur in begins with language that is inappropriate to the particular speech act he is to perform.<sup>6</sup> The formulas are formal enough, but they were designed for the execution of wills and testaments and the performance of the marriage ceremony, not for initiation into a select group. "I thee endow . . . love, honour and obey," the incompetent bird begins; and he ends with a malapropism, "till jess do his part." Thus the bird fails in his performance of ceremonial responsibilities. He has the language competence, but something has gone wrong. He

could swear Wart in if only he could remember how to do it properly--but he has forgotten the right words and the bones he is to swear on.

Old Colonel Cully has his problems too. His language shows a fine Shakespearean madness. The hawk that Merlin has warned Wart about introduces himself as "not such a damned villain," and he says of the boy's approaching initiation ceremony, "If it were done when 'tis done . . . then 'twere well it were done quickly." The overtones are ominous, but Wart cannot show fear. Showing fear would reveal that he is human, and such an admission would limit his opportunity to learn the lesson of courage that the hawks can teach.

The warrior birds have their own way of claiming the essential quality of heroes. These are the words of their "Ordeal Hymn":

Life is blood, shed and offered.

The eagle's eye can face this dree.  
To beasts of chase the lie is proffered:

Timor Mortis Conturbat Me.

The beast of foot sings Holdfast only,  
For flesh is bruckle and foot is slee  
Strength to the strong and the lordly and lonely.

Timor Mortis Exultat Me.

Shame to the slothful and woe to the weak one.  
Death to the dreadful who turn to flee.  
Blood to the tearing, the talon'd, the beaked one.  
Timor Mortis are We.<sup>7</sup>

The eagle's eye must face dree (suffering), flesh is bruckle (frail) and foot slee (sliding), as the northern forms show; but the refrain, "The fear of death disturbs me," becomes "The fear of death exults me" and is then transformed to "We are the fear of death." Me, the first person singular accusative pronoun, is first the object of conturbat (disturbs). It next becomes the object of exultat in a strange impersonal construction which can be translated "I exult in the fear of death." And then it changes to a first person plural subject as the birds assert in unison that they are the fear of death. The progression is from fear of of, to delight in, to identification with the fear of death; and the middle step could hardly have been taken if the language of the birds was completely restricted to the syntax of Modern English.

As we have just heard, White uses Shakespearean forms to depict madness and Late Middle English to show polite formality; and in the "Ordeal Hymn" he draws on Middle Scots in a way that shows his debt to Dunbar's "Lament for the Makaris."<sup>8</sup> Another bird song, this one sung by the peaceful geese with whom Wart lives for a time, suggests a stage that goes back to the earliest beginnings of language--if one accepts Merlin's theory of origins. The geese sing as they fly,

We wander the sky with many a Cronk  
And land in the pasture fields with a Plonk.  
Hank-hank, Hink-hink, Honk-honk.  
Then we bend our necks with a curious kink  
Like the bend which the plumber puts under the sink.  
Honk-honk, Hank-hank, Hink-hink.  
And we feed away in a sociable rank  
Tearing the grass with a sideways yank.  
Hink-hink, Honk-honk, Hank-hank.  
But Hink or Honk we relish the Plonk,  
And Honk or Hank we relish the Rank,  
And Hank or Hink we think it a jink  
To Honk or Hank or Hink!<sup>9</sup>

Merlin, who had no scruples about being pretentious, might have called this self-reflexive onomatopoeia. I will stop short of that, but I think the various honks, hanks, and hinks can be taken as examples of the repetition stage of language development, one of the stages that every language-learner, his ontogeny perhaps recapitulating his philology, goes through.

White would not have needed to label the geese's "Boon of Life" as "one of the more Scandinavian songs." His use of alliteration, compound words, and kennd heiti clearly identifies the song as a representative of the Old Norse (and Old English) period. One stanza will show how the language

represents a value system that strongly resembles the code of the Anglo-Saxons.

Aged Ank answered: Honour is our all.  
Path-finder, People-feeder, Plan-provider, Sage-  
commander,  
These hear the call.<sup>10</sup>

The words of wisdom are spoken by an aged leader who extolls the values of honour and responsible leadership. The compound agent-nouns "Path-finder," "People-feeder," and "Plan-provider" fulfill the requirements of the alliterative tradition (as do "Aged" and "Honour" in the line above), and, since they show what the birds are by referring to what they actually do, they are also examples of a commonly used poetic device, the kennd heiti.

The dawn song of the geese imitates the style of a latter day poet of the alliterative tradition,

You turning world, pouring beneath our pinions,  
Hoist the hoar sun to welcome morning's minions.

See, on each breast the scarlet and vermilion,  
Hear, from each throat the clarion and carillion.

Hark, the wild wandering lines in black battalions,  
Heaven's horns and hunters, dawn-bright hounds and  
stallions.

Free, free: far, far: and fair on wavering wings  
Comes Anser albifrons, and sounds, and sings.<sup>11</sup>

Alliteration and rhyme and the use of "minions" make the allusion apparent; and the rhymes of "pinions," "vermilion," "clarillion," "battalions" and "stallions" draw attention to the Hopkins word and style.

The three representations of the literary language of the geese just cited show its development from imitative beginnings to a heroic age to a latter day tradition. For contrast with the rather formal examples just cited, consider the cockney of the puffins,

"Move over a bit, Auntie," they said, or "Shove along, Grandma"; "There's that Flossie gone and sat on the shrimps"; "Put the toffee in your pocket, dearie, and blow your nose"; "Lawks, if it isn't Uncle Albert with the beer"; "Any room for a little 'un?" "There goes Aunt Emma, fallen off the ledge"; "Is me hat on straight?";  
"Crikey, this isn't arf a do!"<sup>12</sup>

This is down to earth language, spoken by down to earth birds, today.

Clearly, the birds who speak in The Sword in the Stone speak with varied accents. Their varied speech is directly comparable to the language of human beings, who, like the birds, use the language of the past for formal situations and show their own origins by their speech. Sir Ector, bowing before Arthur in recognition of his right to kingship, says with formal dignity, "I wote well ye are of an higher blood than I wend ye were," and the words seem straight out of Malory; but when Arthur's nurse and tutor address him as an ordinary boy they speak the language that is natural to them--cockney English.

Other creatures than birds and humans also talk in The Sword and the Stone; and their language is similarly differentiated by situation and individual history. Fish speak. A frightened roach compulsively repeats all his consonants in an unavoidable stutter, while a pompous tench intensifies his pontifications with a purposeful repetition of p.

Ants speak, but their language admits no mad Shakespearean possibilities. Their language is a very controlled one, depending on the simple opposition of Done or Not-Done for the expression of all value judgments. Their word for "insane" is simply "Not-Done." I hesitate to say that White intended the language of the ants to serve as a demonstration of a strong statement of the Whorfian theory about the effect of language on thought,<sup>13</sup> but it will do. The language of the ants, governed by very simple laws of binary opposition, has no flexibility; and neither, perhaps as a

consequence, does their thought. The echoes of Orwell are of course apparent.

Mammals speak, and their language, again, shows differentiations comparable to those of birds and human beings. The malapropisms of a frightened hedgehog (he speaks of a "killee's heel") remind the reader of the characteristic speech patterns of Arthur's nurse; and, in contrast, a pretentious badger reads his own version of the creation story aloud in dissertationese, which brings us back to where we began. This is an example of the badger's scholarly jargon, and it is equal to Merlin's:

"People often ask, as an idle question, whether the process of evolution began with the chicken or the egg. Was there an egg out of which the first chicken came, or did a chicken lay the first egg? I am in a position to say that the first thing created was the egg."<sup>14</sup>

According to the badger, God created the eggs from which all the fishes and serpents and birds and mammals emerged, and then He called all the embryos before Him to give each a special gift. The gift He granted to man to own exclusively was not language.

White is true to his own myth. When Wart must pull the sword of power from the stone, the friends he has made during the course of his successive transformations encourage him in their own voices. The last to speak is a "white-front," a goose, who says simply, "Come along, Homo sapiens." So geese can't talk, but in T.H. White's world they do; and birds are capable of using language that is differentiated by stage of historical development, dialect, and degree of formality. They are also capable of suiting the style to the substance.

Satisfaction of certain primary curiosities may be one of the best pleasures of fantasy. Some questions, like the one about where language came from, are unanswerable; but some of the unanswerable questions, as White and others have shown, are the most fun. First, the rule that only human beings can talk must be broken. Then other questions may be asked: how do the creatures speak? and what is their language like? In answering these questions the Rule-breaker becomes Speech-maker and Fantasy-creator.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Noam Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965), pp. 79-86, discusses the subcategorization of nouns, using the terms + and - common, + and - count, + and - abstract, and + and - human.

<sup>2</sup>I refer to the speech of Kehaar and the other characters mentioned in "Non-Human Speech in the Fantasy of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Richard Adams," Mythlore. 5 (1978), 37-39.

<sup>3</sup>T.H. White, The Once and Future King (1939; rpt. N.Y.: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1966), p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (1948; rpt. N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 73-74 discusses the imitation of sounds with the intention of gaining power over the phenomena represented by such sounds. If the performer demonstrates that he has power over a creature he wishes to catch, he has, in effect, performed an act of sympathetic magic, because he will have dramatized what it is that he wants to happen.

<sup>5</sup>White, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup>I am using the term "speech act" in the sense developed by J.L. Austin, How To Do Things with Words (1962; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975) and J. R. Searle, Speech Acts (1969; rpt. London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>White, pp. 82-83.

<sup>8</sup>"Timor mortis conturbat me" is the refrain of Dunbar's "I that in heill wes and gladness." William Dunbar: Poems, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 61-64.

<sup>9</sup>White, p. 173.

<sup>10</sup>White, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup>White, pp. 167-68.

<sup>12</sup>White, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup>Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," Language, Thought and Reality, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1971), pp. 134-159.

<sup>14</sup>White, p. 191.

(Continued from page 19)

in fantasy; read for a stern warning that the inner journey is necessary to produce a whole, integrated human being; read for the hope that if we all have the same kind of dragons in our psyche it means that we can communicate; read for the sheer pleasure of enjoying the integrity of a faultless word-crafter.

Grace E. Funk

MALORY

He sang a plaintive threnody  
A melancholy melody  
Such a mournful symphony  
Of minstrelsy and psalmody

Of mountains grim in Bolgary  
Of forests dark in Muscovy  
Of deserts drear in Tartary  
Of Araby, of Arcady

Of cruel plans of tyranny  
Of ruthless plots of treachery  
Of callous schemes of trickery  
Of falsity, of perfidy

Of witty mimes of mimicry  
Of merry jests of jollity  
Of joyful masques of mummery  
Of drollery, of raillery

Of mystic tales of wizardry  
Of magic lays of sorcery  
Of legends fell of devilry  
Of witchery, of knavery

Of golden dreams of errantry  
Of courtly deeds of chivalry  
Of daring feats of gallantry  
Of rivalry, of bravery

In ballads old in Gramarye  
Beside the singing sea.

Mark Allaby