

The Bard of Birds: Robert Adamson's Poetry and Poetics

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Abstract: Robert Adamson is one of Australia's leading contemporary poets and is a successful writer, editor and publisher. His interest and curiosity about birds has been a long-lived affair. As a child he was so obsessed with them that he used to draw their pictures and wanted to read everything about them. Attachment with birds has always been for Adamson a mode to connect with the outside world. He focuses on birds which are a common sight where he resides. In his typically Romantic vein, these birds become symbols of imagination and memory. Adamson charts the migration of birds and emphasizes that they transgress human boundaries, ignoring signposts and political borders. For us they are rare and exotic birds: various kinds of parrots, cockatoos, bee-eaters, birds of paradise etc. but for Adamson they are common sights. The flight songs sung in their praise carry a deep hidden meaning. We thus find that Adamson is a sensually susceptible poet. This quality helps him to project his enlightened mind through poems featuring birds of his native Hawkesbury region. His avian poems, based on the mighty world of eye and ear, carry symbolic and metaphorical connotations and touch our heart to the very core.

Keywords: Ornithologist, contemplate, exotic birds, sensitivity, indigenous.

1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Adamson is one of Australia's leading contemporary poets, and is a successful writer, editor and publisher. He has earned the distinction of having his work published in Australia, United Kingdom and America. His poems have also been translated into several languages. He has described the native birds and the gorgeous landscape outside his home in rural Australia very deftly.

In a poetry reading event Adamson described the native birds and the stunning landscape outside his home in rural Australia. He said he “feels the presence of native people of Australia.”[1]

His interest and curiosity in the birds has been a long-lived affair. As a child he used to draw their pictures and was so obsessed that he wanted to read everything he could on birds. He used to build cages for different birds. During his childhood, he even collaborated with a friend to steal a rare bird. All this reveals his sense of craft and devotion, which powered his writing at a later stage. Attachment with birds has always been for Adamson a mode to connect with the outside world. He focuses on birds which constitute a common sight in nature.

Adamson describes them, is amazed at their habits, places them against his own self, contemplates their veracity but at the same time also maintains a distance. These long felt passions find exquisite expression in his poetic works. Peter Riley, while reviewing *The Goldfinches of Baghdad*, states:

Images of the great river and the creatures it attracts, especially birds, are held against a various sense of personal pain and loss, seeking through the movement of the poem a settlement with existence, often terminating in a pure, objective notation of the existence of natural objects without any intervening interpretation. [2]

Adamson's self-confessed fascination with birds has taken many forms. His autobiography *Inside Out* recalls the pigeons and rainbow lorikeets he kept during childhood as a 'refuge' and the mixed up motives leading to his first felonious act, stealing of the rare rifle bird from Taronga Zoo. Shelley's 'Skylark' and Hopkins 'Windhover' were his initial poetic inspirations while the bird life and landscape of his home territory, the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales, have given him tremendous subject matter for over forty years.

In *Inside Out* Adamson introduces his many selves- the sensitive child mesmerized with the natural world, the lover and custodian of exotic birds who dreamt of becoming an ornithologist. The initial chapters of *Inside Out* like “Paradise”, “Birds”, “Fish” and “On the Trial of Ptilorus Magnificus” tell us that in spite of suffering from dyslexia in his childhood, Adamson could study on something he cared about: fishing and keeping birds. As Douglas Barbour comments –

The fish and the bird he first loved as a child continue to inhabit the poems to the present day; they mark his nationality while all the readings that also enter the poem mark his internationalism, his utter refusal to remain parochial in the world of art.[3]

Some of the premium poems in *The Golden Bird* bring to mind the visual arts. The poet's life long interest in drawing no doubt lies behind this sensitivity and alerts us to what birds and lines are. Joseph Donahue in Jacket Magazine writes:

Adamson's Birds are both objects of fantasy and a means of ontological speculation. They are associated with artistic mastery, with craftsmanship, and with the mind's love of order, with angelic presence and fellow workers of the river,

with the freedom denied to prisoners, with pure imperial hunger that swoops down as fast as Zeus.[4]

In his typically Romantic vein, these birds become symbols of imagination and memory.

The Goldfinches of Baghdad, Adamson's first book published in North America, terms with cockatoos, kookaburras, lyrebirds and a host of waders from his indigenous region. Adamson charts the migration of birds and emphasizes that they cross man made boundaries, ignoring signposts and political borders. As Peter Riley illustrates "As birds and words exchange places, his poems arrive as epistles from the other side of the world." [5].

Other things too, though chiefly birds, become parts of a language by which a world is understood and speaks itself through the poet. It is typical of him to propel his way through a poem questioning the physical realities and swooning at the beauties of sense and nature .

There is a section of bird poems in *The Goldfinches of Baghdad* which is of particular interest to read as it illustrates a favourite mode of Adamson to sell short the world outside and focus on one of these flying creatures with their constant suggestions of distance and Soul Dom. They are to us exotic birds: various kinds of parrots, cockatoos, bee-eaters, bird of paradise etc., but for Adamson they are mostly common sights . He describes them, is amazed at their brilliance, shows his familiarity with their habits, plays them against his own being, contemplates their reality , but keeps his distance and returns to what precisely distinguishes them and how important their nature is to the world. As in the poem "The Ruff" the poet states:

...how inhuman
they are, how utterly bird

(*The Goldfinches of Baghdad*, p. 44)

In the book *The Clean Dark*, one of the major poems, 'No River, no death', ends unusually with a rhyming couplet which, instead of summation of the poet's declarations , concludes without any message at all beyond the fact of what exists before the eyes. As the poet says twilight time is over and a flying fox can be seen fluttering about in the light of the stars. The twinkling of the stars makes the larrikin prawn bird also sing melodiously. To quote:

... The afternoon's last light has gone under now,
a flying fox swims in through a star
and the catfish are pecking the sting-ray's wing,
the larrikin prawn bird starts to sing.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 262)

His most recent collection seem to be most secured, specially *Black Water: Approaching Zukofsky* where the bird poems achieve a splendid exactness of description and the poet also pays homage to his poetic masters. He is currently working for the conservation of the Hawkesbury River. In *Black Water: Approaching Zukofsky*, forms of nature and culture perform a curious dance. In the book's first section, "Stone Curlew," each

poem takes its title from a bird's name-such as "Arctic Jaeger," "The Great Knot," and "The Pheasant Tailed Jacana." The first section opens with a series of bird poems with a singular difference. Dorothy Hewett points out:

Adamson's signature has always been the ability to become the thing he's writing about. Pushing to the limit Keats' Theory of Negative Capability he does not humanize nature but dehumanizes himself, so that in these poems he 'sings parrot, scratches lyrics in parrot talk, dances the stump hop of the night parrot', writes from inside the head of a stone curlew. But in the end he admits 'no one knows what it is to sing crow song.[6]

One of Adamson's most optimistic bird- poems is "Bush Stone Curlew" where he describes the bulky ground-dwelling bird of Australia whose defense mechanism is its ability to freeze in place. Adamson wonders what it was like to be inside this strange bird's head and his wondering led to a beautiful poem, as he says:

I am writing this inside the head
Of a bush stone curlew,
we have been traveling for days

moving over the earth
flying when necessary

I am not the bird itself, only its passenger...

(*Black Water: Approaching Zukofsky* , p. 13)

In the above cited lines the poet emphasizes that he is inside the bird's head only temporarily , as he says towards the end that he is not the bird but only its passenger and as a passenger he has undergone all the experiences which a bird undergoes.

Adamson is a passionate birder and a marvellous photographer of birds. Besides being fascinated by them, he is also keenly interested in matters of the soul. "Listening to Cuckoos" is the opening poem from his recent anthology *Net Needle*. It is a poem of just five couplets where there is repetition of lines "two notes ... two words". The speaker listens carefully as he finds the mysterious meaning in the "utterance" of birds and also dexterously invites the reader to realize the supernatural presence evoked in the birds' vocal performance. The poem signifies the beginning of transformation, of becoming an evolved soul – a person who has fully realized himself. To quote:

... Penetrating the dark green

of twilight, the storm birds call, two notes, two words,
and cackle in the broken egged dawn, in the echoing light.

(*Net Needle*, p.1)

Anne Elvey, while interpreting the above cited lines, writes:

The "broken egged dawn" captures not only the colour of the sky, but themes that reappear in several poems: death and life, unmaking and making, here, in terms that recollect

the birds (fertilized eggs may be broken in the act of hatching, but a premature breaking leads to death, while the broken egg of breakfast or baking signals a more complex relation to the birds that laid them and to their lives, fertility and deaths) [7].

We thus find that Adamson is a poet with sensual awareness. This sensual awareness helps him to project his enlightened mind through poems about birds of his native Hawkesbury region. His avian poems, based on the mighty world of eye and ear, carry symbolic and metaphorical connotations. Adamson's poems are rife with birds, their flights and songs. Many of these poems begin with something quite ordinary but the ordinary is often transformed into something extraordinary, and even sublime.



REFERENCES

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