
AN EXERCISE IN PRACTICAL CRITICISM: "Owl"

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O W L

is my favourite. Who flies
like a nothing through the night,
who – whoing. Is a feather
duster in leafy corners
ring – a – rosy – ing 5
boles of mice. Twice

you hear him call. Who
is he looking for? You hear
him hovering over the floor
of the wood. O would you be gold
rings in the driving skull 10

if you could? Hooded and
vulnerable by the winter suns
owl looks. Is the grain of bark
in the dark. Round beaks are at
work in the pellety nest, 15

resting. Owl is an eye
in the barn. For a hole
in the trunk owl's blood
is to blame. Black talons in the
petrified fur! Cold walnut hands 20

on the case of the brain! in the reign
of the chicken owl comes like
a god. Is a goad in
the rain to the pink eyes,
dripping. For a meal in the day 25

flew, killed, on the moor. Six
mouths are the seed of his
arc in the season. Torn meat
from the sky. Owl lives
by the claws of his brain. On
the branch 30

in the sever of the hand's
twigs owl is a backward look.
Flown wind in the skin. Fine
rain in the bones. Owl breaks
like the day. Am an owl, am an owl. 35

George Macbeth

George Macbeth's owl does not have a mortarboard on top of its head. It does not symbolize wisdom, as generations of undergraduates were led to believe when they proudly pinned the small enamelled badges in the figure of an owl onto their lapels. To George Macbeth, Owl is a predator, guided by precise but automatic responses collectively called instinct. The only knowledge Owl possesses is that of the eternal cycle of hunger – violence – satisfaction.

Macbeth does not use the article: he calls the bird 'Owl'. Without the article, definite or indefinite, the word no longer signifies genus

but becomes a proper name, and therefore presumes, or implies, a specific personality. We use words as we use matches: inanely. The mind gropes dully and sluggishly for the word needed to complete a structure and the tongue, numbed with repetition, utters it. It is mere customary breath, and has no savour. But when you say 'owl' without that precursor of custom and platitude, the article, your mind is given the chance to sample the strangeness (almost the un – Englishness) of the word, and to notice the primitive onomatopoeic recall of the bird's hoot.

With latter – day deftness and economy the title is inseparably welded to the rest of the poem. The poet plunges *in medias res* with the same speed as Owl strikes his victim. The masculine pronoun is inescapable: Macbeth does not use the neuter 'it' for Owl, and this he does for a reason. Dismissing this as a mere device, a poetic gimmick, or an understandable personification resulting from the poet's over – concentration on the subject is, of course, a temptation, but it should be resisted. This strengthens the effect generated by the omission of the article, and endows the subject with a virility which is perfectly in keeping with Owl's predatory nature.

'Owl' is an honest poem, wrought with skill and vision, even though at times it is too clever perhaps, or even consciously ornate. Although some of its diction may be the result of strained (though not unhappy) choice, and some of the truncated grammar too obviously truncated, it remains 'poetic' in the positive sense of the word. Without stooping to condescension (or to Christian Charity), we may safely lay any demerits at the door of experimentation, which is the contemporary poet's birthright (a modernization, or perhaps an extension of the ancient 'poetic licence') and the rough tool by means of which he fashions tomorrow's poetic style. Unsuccessful experiments remain just so, whilst the successful ones become 'originality' later.

'Owl' is not an easy poem to comprehend. It is full of compressed imagery which the reader must unravel if he is to make much sense of it at all. The floating quality of Owl's flight is instantly captured in the first stanza. Owl flies '*like a nothing*'. Metaphor, the poet's magic wand, changes him into a feather – duster. This might outrage the traditionalists' sense of poetic decorum, and they may not relish the discovery of such a menial object in a poem, but it is familiar to us all, and enables those of us, who, like myself, have never handled or felt an owl but who have felt a feather-duster to capture the ruffled silkiness of Owl's feathers.

The verb '*hovering*' in the second stanza may be an insuperable test of patience. After all, a brand name transformed into a verb (in a poem!) is rather cheeky, and is reminiscent of the pumpkin being

transformed into a carriage. This question of suitability of diction merits a long and involved discussion, but, since it is not central here, it would be more to the point to continue the task of interpretation. A particular type of Hoover vacuum cleaner glided over a cushion of air just an inch above the floor in a most effortless fashion. It was an application of the Hovercraft principle. Why, we ask, didn't Macbeth opt for the much more respectable *'hovering'*? Probably for the simple reason that owls do not hover, but I suspect that there is a stronger technical reason as well. The 'oo' sound in *'hoovering'* echoes the bird's cry, and whole word conveys the quality of its grass-level gliding flight.

The question *'O would you be-gold/ rings in the driving skull if you could?'* (ll.9 - 10) is rhetorical rather than necessary, but the image itself conveys rather well Owl's huge eyes, and it prepares us for the technique Macbeth is about to use in describing the bird itself, based on spareness of detail and essentiality. In stanza three *'Owl is an eye/ in the barn'*; its beak becomes *'a hole/ in the trunk owl's blood'*. In a sudden whittling away of inessentials Owl becomes just talons and brain: *'Owl lives/ by the claws of his brain'*.

Macbeth is attempting to capture Owl's spirit, but he does not sacrifice or neglect the visual aspect in doing so. We can 'see' the typical outjutting eye-brows when he says 'Owl' is *'hooded'* (l. 11), but we do not miss the sinister implication. 'Owl' is a *'grain of bark in the dark'*, too: an excellent image which allows us to distinguish Owl even in the tenebrous recesses of the darkened barn. What a marvellous all-seeing eye the poet lends us! This image produces an effect akin to that obtained in great paintings, wherein dark figures in a dark background are still discernible and detailed.

Owl's violent way of life is deftly described. Owl comes *'like/ a god'* over chickens (ll.22-3), sweeping down majestically and then locking *'cold walnut hands/ on the case of the brain!'* (ll.20-21); the victim becomes *'torn meat/ from the sky'* (ll.27-28) to the owlets. The chickens instinctively know the danger, and as soon as their eyes, dripping with rain, register Owl's arrival they scatter (stanza five). Of course one cannot miss the aptness of the diction, which accounts for the economy and compression to a great extent. In using *'walnut'* for describing the talons (l. 20), for example, Macbeth conveys to the reader such things as texture, hardness, sharpness and colour.

In the last stanza Macbeth attempts to unite what we may call the 'spiritual' qualities he has observed with the physical ones. Owl is but impending peril, so he is *'a backward look'*. The word *'sever'* in *'in the sever of the hand's/ twigs'* conveys the violence, the sense of sudden execution. But Owl is a thing of beauty, too. He is *'flown*

wind in the skin', and has '*Fine/ rain in the bones.*' Owl is elegant. He '*breaks/ like the day*', in glory.

The poem ends with the words '*Am an owl, am an owl.*' Has the poet's admiration fired his imagination, and has his sanity been immolated? Is he flapping his arms as he leaves the poetic stage? Macbeth is definitely identifying himself with Owl, and indeed there is much of 'Owl in Man, and much of Man in Owl'. The violence, the elegance, the majesty and the danger are attributes of both species. But Owl is purer, freer, more attractive. He has a dignity derived from his mysterious lurking and his hooded looks. He has an innocence which we have lost, because he only kills to survive and to feed his young. He has the freedom of independence which we have bartered for sophistication. Owl is semi-human in the sense that he does not have those qualities which render us perfid. Macbeth seems to conclude that since we exit losers in a comparison with Owl he would opt for being more like Owl and less like Man.