

# A Hawk that Somersaults

Year: 1991  
Level: First Year, Autumn Semester  
Unit: 10161, 10162, Foundation Studies 1 & 2  
Duration: 9 days  
Dates: May 3, 6, 10\*, 11\*, 12\*, 13, 17, 20, 24. \*Castle Mountain, Webb's Creek Camp.

## Origin

From preliminary notes: *"From psychology to somatology: In contradistinction to 'Fasnacht'\** (the previous project devised by Rhett Brewer) *which attempted to activate unconscious well-springs, this project will operate somatologically: working with the body itself as a psychic 'envelop'; this examination will be arrived at indirectly through the body-of-a-bird, that is: through a birds-eye view of the human condition. The project could proceed by addressing the simple question: What do I mean, when I say that I inhabit a body?"*

At the time of conceiving this project I was reading Dante's "Purgatory", a passage in Canto XIII left an indelible mark, it alluded, for the purpose of metaphor, to the barbaric practice of sewing up the eyelids of hawks to prepare or tame them for the sport of falconry; *"For all their lids an iron wire transpierces, / And sews them up, as to a sparrowhawk wild / Is done, because it will not quiet stay."* A footnote to this reference, in the Dorothy L. Sayers translation, quoted from Frank Illingworth's book on Falcons & Falconry (P.81). I used this footnote describing the practice directly in the project.

A second key reference was to D'Arcy Thompson's classic text 'On Growth and Form' (1917) that adopted a structural approach to biological evolution arguing from basic mechanical principles for apparent distortions of form (stresses subject to gravity, or issues of buoyancy, or aerodynamics).

C.G.Jung provided a third keystone. At the time, I was working my way through the Collected Works, retrieving many serviceable quotes for different projects. In this instance one dealing with the correlation between fantasy and creativity was apposite and included.

In preparation for the project I did a fair bit of research on birds of prey and visited Featherdale Wildlife Park to engage directly with the caged raptors in their confinement. The 'Falcon and Falconry' entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1962) proved particularly useful as a reference and copies circulated of a remarkable photograph of a 'Trained Eagle Flying to Fist'.

Carlos Castaneda's "Teachings of Don Juan" also had relevance with the transmigration or interchange of bodily states between human and animal.

Mythic creatures: the so-called 'Fabulous Beasts' were also referred to, the Griffin in particular as a curious hybrid.

## Premise

The essential premise of this project was built around the proposition of what sort of creative activities might occur if students were to imaginatively occupy the mindset and physical predisposition of a bird. The strangeness of the inversions: feet become hands, hands become feet, and the capacity for flight (flights of fancy), it was presumed, would in certain ways *incapacitate* familiar patterns of behaviour and for the duration make more apparent the particular limitations and peculiarities of human physiology (from the perspective of a bird: as grounded, heavy, slow).

Relevant episodes of the *Supersense* (1988) BBC Documentary series were shown. At the time this was a series that used groundbreaking effects and filming techniques to show how animals perceive the world around them.

I was mindful in the design of the project that a three day camp had been scheduled to take place midway through it (to Castle Mountain, Webb's Creek). This provided a useful off-campus 'natural' bush context to engage with – a space shared with the birds themselves. Participants were required to creatively explore opportunities across four forms of activity: Perching, Pecking, Nesting and Flying.

### **(1) Habit a body inhabit abode.**

It is an anticipation of this project that it manoeuvre between a number of apparently incompatible occurrences, in a search for clues leading to a course of embodied action that assimilates disparities analogically.

The confining core of the project is the notion of *Soma*, the restrictive captivity of being, each of us forever 'at home', as minders inhabiting a body.

This habitat, overlooked in familiarity: the habit of being, needs through a certain contortion to be revisited as if for the first time; seen as an existential cage of specific dimensions and limited scope.

Unlikely as it may seem, the approach intended assumes the morphology of a bird. It is in the guise of a 'hawk', as being-bird, that being-human is scrutinised.

### **(2) Heels over head over heels**

Through the processes of comparative morphology similarities and disparities accumulate.

- (a) **Homology** – Describes resemblance of structure: affiliations of a common ancestry that establishes a curious experiential kinship of being (evolutionary engrams). Sharing as shape a bilateral symmetry, a differential cephalisation (head to toe), a single sagittal axis (arrowing forwards), dorsal and ventral surfaces (front and back), handedness (left and right). This configuration of structure and deployment of organs establishes a familiarity of accommodation – an abode of accessible accommodation: becoming-bird.
- (b) **Analogy** – Describes resemblances of function. It is in the area of purpose (teleology) that curious inversions and incongruities occur. Evolution differentiates body parts through elaboration (hypertrophy) and retardation (atrophy) according to usage; each species existing as a distortion or variant of the other in encapsulating a comparative abnormality of predisposition.

The bird body evolves aerodynamically, necessitating amongst other things, that 'arms' and 'legs' as limbs change place. The claws of a bird's foot become hands that clutch and grasp; the wings, the bird's arms, move the body as feet (limbs of mobility). Through identification and analogy awkward disparities (oddities) arise which momentarily disrupt the orientation and familiar sense of being-human. This avian foreignness should trouble the habitual norms of say treading and grasping as anthropic occurrences and reassert their own purposeful peculiarities.

### **(3) The Relativity of Oddness**

Numerous questions arise concerning the normative in relation to being through the simple contrast of being-human with being-bird. For example, in what way would our 'hold' on experience change if, as in the bird, grasping were to occur on a head to toe axis (top to bottom, beak to claw) and not as an activity of sides (hand to hand, left to right) ? In what way would our sense of mobility shift if, as in the bird, movement was equated with an upward and downward oscillation on either side as a 'beaten' advance, instead of the pedestrian rhythm of backwards and forwards; the metronome of walking-beneath-us?

### **(4) With a sharp needle and waxed silk**

*"To tame a hawk that has been caught wild, it is necessary to blindfold her. In the west this is usually done with the hood, but the method of sealing the eyes was also known in Dante's time, being perhaps imported from the east, where it is still used. It is effected with a sharp needle and waxed silk. Carefully the falconer threads the silk through the edge of the lower eyelids, drawing them closed by twisting the thread and tying it across the bird's head. This method does not hurt the falcon, and as she sheds her fear, the thread is gradually untwisted, letting her see a little more light, until finally the eyes are wide open and the thread can be removed"*

The central metaphor around which the project could be seen to 'hover' is the sport of falconry, of which some rudimentary research is recommended. Two aspects of this sport could be of specific significance to the project:

- (i) Taming the hawk (the hood, hoodwinking).
- (ii) Training the hawk (the harness).

The existential undercurrents of 'captivity' (capture, captivation, restriction) offer a useful referent to the dichotomy of the human-bird hybrid.

### **(5) Birds eye view from Castle Mountain**

The territorial shift from an overtly anthropic environment: grounded-ness, enclosure, containment, to that of an aerial aerodromic environment: the camp as aviary, should escalate ornithologic tendencies, offering as it does a terrain of interactive cohabitation in which the 'bound-earth-air-open' axis can be experientially examined.

Activities of consideration fall into one of four interrelated categories:

#### **(i) Perching    (ii) Pecking    (iii) Nesting    (iv) Flying**

In all of these activities specific attention should be drawn to the part played by 'head', 'hands' and 'feet' as co-relations to action. All investigations need to be appropriately documented for assessment purposes.

##### **(i) Perching**

Immobility, observance, 'roosting'. The occupation of an above ground site and the documentation, from that fixed location of your 'observations' – bird insights.

##### **(ii) Pecking**

An activity of gathering, ground based meanderings, probings, proddings, scratchings, extractions, findings. The compilation of a collection of items, bower bird borrowings, magpie thievings.

##### **(iii) Nesting**

A site specific installed piece that is constructed nest-like from materials that come to hand. Considerations of discretion and hidden-ness as to location.

##### **(iv) Flying**

Amongst other things a useful experiential resource of bird-being is the activity of canoeing: as a metaphor of flight. For example: arms/hands 'flap' the paddle that glides the boat, legs are immobilised during 'flight', keel of the boat: keel of the bird. The water surface mirrors the sky, the boat floats/glides on air. The manufacture and launching of kites as an ancillary activity could also be considered as an appropriate earth-air option.

### **(6)**

*"And yet we know that every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in what one is pleased to call infantile fantasy. Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in their life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable. It is therefore short-sighted to treat fantasy, on account of its risky or unacceptable nature, as a thing of little worth."*\*

\* (C.G. Jung Collected Works, Vol. 6, Psychological Types: The Problem of Types in the History of Classical and Medieval Thought p.63 )

With my own group of students for this project I conducted, partly for amusement, a 'bird selection' test, where I asked each to select 3 birds from a list of 12, on the basis of ones they most strongly identify with, and place the sequence in a triangle as: (1) 'Top' and below to the left: (2) 'Left', and to the right: (3) 'Right'. The 'tally' (from most to least popular): Owl(8), Kingfisher(6), Magpie(6), Eagle(5), Penguin(4), Parrot(3), Sparrow(3), Duck(2), Cuckoo(1), Pigeon (0), Gull (0). Predictably all 5 Eagle selections were located as 'Top'.



BY COURTESY OF CAPTAIN C. W. R. KNIGHT

TRAINED EAGLE FLYING TO FIST