

Reading *Space* and *Place* in Chris Mann's Bird Poems in *Lifelines*

Pat Louw

Abstract

Michael Bennett makes an important point about the construction of space in a literary text, and reminds us that the literary analysis of space and place is something that has contributed to making ecocritical criticism different from what went before. 'If ecocriticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to view "settings" not just as metaphors but as physical spaces that inform, shape, and are shaped by cultural productions' (Bennett 2001:197). In this essay I use the concepts of space and place as a framework to analyse Chris Mann's bird poetry from *Lifelines*. I argue that the spaces created between human and nonhuman, contribute to an understanding of the type of relationship that exists between them. In a complex mixture of humility in the face of the unknowable dimension and a powerfully experienced encounter with the animal, Mann attempts to convey the essential qualities of that animal, free of stereotypical associations. He inverts the common usage of animals as metaphors for human society and instead uses human metaphors to describe the bird and the spaces which surround it.

Keywords: birds, Chris Mann, space, place, ecocriticism.

The human experience of the world is permeated through and through, on every possible level, by animality—by our relationships with other animal beings on the planet and by

our own animal ways of feeling and sensing (Slovic 2008:108).

Chris Mann's poetry deals with a wide range of topics, including social and political issues. His poetry has evolved over the years in response to new developments in the socio-political situation in South Africa and particularly in the area of science. In 2002 he published *Heartlands*, which he describes as 'a series of poems-of-place' in which 'people are shown to be present and a part of history and culture' (Levy and Mann 2007:222). A celebration of fruits and vegetables, entitled *The Horn of Plenty* (Mann and Skeen 1997), was published earlier. In 2006 he published *Lifelines*, where he focuses on a range of different animals, both prehistoric and contemporary. The poems are illustrated by fine line drawings by the artist Julia Skeen, and each poem has a corresponding biological sketch on the opposite page written by zoologist Adrian Craig.

Mann is acutely aware of the environmental crisis and the problem of biological sustainability. He sees *Lifelines* as providing 'a modest contribution [...] to the genre of eco-literature' (Levy and Mann 2007:221). Indeed, many would consider him an ecopoet. J. Scott Bryson describes 'ecopoetry' as 'A subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues' (Bryson 2002:6). My understanding is that the prefix 'eco' is an indication of the central concern of the poetry. It does not attempt to replicate the discourse of science or ecology, but it indicates that the poet is concerned about the welfare of the natural environment in the face of the dangers that threaten it today.

One of the characteristics of this type of poetry is that it recognizes 'the interdependent nature of the world' (Bryson 2002:6). The title, *Lifelines*, is an expression of this type of interdependence. The metaphor conveys a sense of urgency as one would imagine throwing out a lifeline to someone who is in danger of drowning. It is not specified whether it is the human or the nonhuman who can save the other. Mann therefore stresses the interconnectivity between different life forms as being crucial for the survival of both the human and the nonhuman species on this planet. I have selected a few of the poems which feature birds in order to investigate how

these creatures are represented. I will be using a broadly ecocritical framework for my analysis, including theories of space and place.

The idea of creating *place* means ‘making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us’ (Bryson 2002:101). Using the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s notions of *space* and *place*, Bryson explains that *space* becomes differentiated into *place* when it becomes known and is given value. However, Tuan also describes *space-consciousness*. This is the recognition that the more-than-human world is ‘ultimately unknowable’ (Bryson 2002:101). Thus *space-consciousness* is not simply an absence of value, but a consciousness of value that lies beyond human comprehension. It is a recognition of human limitations, and it leads to ‘an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature’ (Bryson 2002:6). I hope to show that Mann demonstrates such humility through the construction of spaces not only between the human and nonhuman but also between humans and God. He reaches beyond the human and the animal towards an awareness of the creator of the universe or cosmogenesis.

Lifelines brings together science, art, and poetry in what David Levy describes as ‘a holistic work of environmental art’ (Levy and Mann 2007:218). The juxtaposition of the different forms of representation in this volume signals the importance of crossing boundaries of thought. Placing the scientific and the poetic texts opposite one another may seem to suggest that there is a strict division between the scientific and the poetic discourses. However this would not be completely accurate. In *Lifelines*, the scientific discourse, while providing additional facts about the animal under scrutiny, is not always strictly impersonal in tone. Craig sometimes inserts a personal note into his descriptions. Molly Brown remarks, ‘Interestingly, Craig himself often confounds the generic expectations set up by the Latinate certainties of the scientific names heading his commentaries by allowing himself to drift into the supposedly discrete “learning areas” of history, [...] mythology [...] and even literature’ (2007:135). Conversely, we will see that Mann’s poetry is deeply embedded in scientific and biological study. There are numerous scientific references in the poems, such as to the DNA gene-strands, phosphate, and photons. Take for example these stanzas from the poem, ‘Bees’(7):

BEES

Before we'd scratched
geometry in the sand
or baked the first mud brick
of Jericho's walls
you'd waxed a hexagon
into honeying towns.

I lay like a Gulliver
beneath your flight-path,
bewildered by the traffic
flickering in and out of your hive
and the grubs of ideas
you licked in my mind.

Did the dance-codes of bees,
you made me ask,
the algorithms of science,
the spirals of the stars
explode from a space-time nowhere,
by chance?

In these stanzas we have the Tuanian creation of *place*, as the speaker carefully observes and reflects on the more-than-human world of bees. He also creates *space-consciousness*, as he marvels at the design of the honeycomb and the unknowability of the mysteries of bee communication. Larger questions about the origin of the universe arise from this consciousness. Using a narrative device in his poem to describe his encounter with nature enables Mann to capture the drama of the moment and also to allow thoughts to expand into questions that extend beyond the moment. In an interview with David Levy, Mann explains:

After considerable thought, experimentation and rejection, I postulated a form in keeping with my creative abilities and the highly differentiated and changing character of the science I was trying to absorb. The larger forces at work in the universe would be

depicted not in a grand design but in a series of individual dramatic monologues in which the narrator addressed an animal he had encountered. By choosing encounters from my own lived experience and working them into different lyrics I could more readily incarnate aspects of the standard model of cosmogenesis into poetry (Levy & Mann 2007:228).

By describing a moment of encounter in the poems, Mann allows the reader to enter fully into the present and from thence to a timeless zone. This can be related to Gaston Bachelard's notion of the reverberation which is set up by the poetic image. Jonathon Bate writes:

For Bachelard, the poetic image has its distinctive being in this quality of reverberation, which is an overcoming of time. But we can only understand the being of the image by ourselves experiencing the reverberation (2000:154).

The communication of the poetic image to the reader involves a subtle transference of time and space: 'The poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me' (Bachelard 1958:xiii). This suggests that the power of the poetic image gives rise to a deeply felt experience in the reader, which is immediately internalized and takes new life in present time. I hope to show that Mann's poetic images have the power to evoke this type of experience in the reader through his appeal to the senses and his construction of space and place.

In a review, Nick Meihuizen describes the general pattern of the poems in *Lifelines* thus:

Typically, in the book the creature is addressed, an essence of it is expressed through the precise wielding of appropriate descriptive metaphor and a sacred barrier is traversed in a casual register, where an inner communion takes place, as if each creature were totemic in relation to human life, or somehow contributed towards making us whole (2007:137).

The idea of humans needing animals to complete them in a 'totemic' sense takes interdependency further than the anthropocentric view where animals

are valued only for their role in fulfilling human needs. It reinforces the interdependency suggested by the term 'lifelines' and refers to the much-debated question of the type of relationship that should exist between human and nonhuman life. Greg Garrard reminds us that ecocriticism has arisen partly in reaction to the Enlightenment view of nature and in particular to the views expressed by Descartes, who drew a very definite line of distinction between man and animals:

Descartes hyperseparated mind and body, and denied to animals not only the faculty of reason, but the whole range of feelings and sensations that he had associated with thought. As a result, he saw animals as radically different from, and inferior to, humans. They were bodies without minds, effectively machines (Garrard 2004:25).

Descartes' view is strongly countered by various ecocritics and philosophers, for example Derrida, who 'contradicts Cartesian philosophies of animals as creatures lacking sentience or feeling, and posits human ontologies or theories of being in response to the gaze of an animal' (Woodward 2008:2). Bate asks: 'is the distinction between man and animals so sharp?' (2000: 177) and goes on to describe behaviour in animals which is similar to human behaviour such as committing suicide or mourning the death of a mate. The notion of setting up humans as separate and superior to animals is satirized by Michael Pollan. He points out the folly of treating the human species as different from any other species but nevertheless acknowledges a 'gulf':

We've been telling ourselves such stories forever, as a way of making sense of what we call our 'relationship to nature'—to borrow that curiously revealing phrase. (What other species can even be said to have a 'relationship to nature'?) For a long time now, the Man in these stories has gazed at Nature across a gulf of awe or mystery or shame. Even when the tenor of these narratives changes, as it has over time, the gulf remains (2001:xxv).

Pollan's spatial metaphor of the 'gulf' between humans and the nonhuman world is useful for the purposes of analysing Mann's poetry. Other writers

have conceptualized the relationship semantically with spatial implications. Patrick Murphy, for instance, uses Bakhtinian dialogics to provide a model for the relationship between humans and nonhumans, which differs from the alienating notion of ‘otherness.’ He states: ‘Ecology and ecocriticism indicate that it is time to move towards a relational model of “anotherness” and the conceptualization of difference in terms of “I” and “another”’ (1998:40). Semantically, ‘other’ has the sense of difference and opposition whereas ‘another’ contains a suggestion of ‘sameness’, or of being on the same side. It denotes an addition to an already established group, not a different group. The notion of ‘anotherness’ is set up by Murphy in order to offer a more participatory model of relationship between human and nonhuman. It counters the construction of the alienated ‘other’ as a form of domination of the human over the nonhuman.

From the preceding discussion we see that representing the relationship between humans and nonhumans holds numerous possibilities. As with nature documentaries, there is the choice of whether to include a human figure in the frame: whether to convey an interaction between human and nonhuman or whether to let the animal appear alone. Mann defends his decision to address the animals directly in his poems by saying that he wants to ‘avoid the pathetic fallacy on one hand and the distancing stance of a Hughes on the other’ (Levy and Mann 2007:228). He explains:

This latter mode of address would, I would hope, encourage the reader to feel that animals were not so much objects to be observed, ignored or consumed [but rather] as chromosome cousins, fellow creatures in an interlinked web of necessary bio-diversity. To substantiate this relationship with an image, the artist has shown the animals in the book looking out and at the reader (Levy and Mann 2007:228).

The reciprocity implied in the above statement is an essential component of the concept of ‘anotherness’ and also of David Abram’s notion of the reciprocity of the senses. Writing about an encounter with a nonhuman other, Abram says: ‘Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient’ (1997:67).

The ecocritical aim of representing the relationship between the human and the nonhuman has been criticized for taking a realist approach. For example, Dana Phillips writes: 'If ecocriticism limits itself to reading realistic texts realistically, its practitioners may be reduced to an umpire's role (Phillips 1999:586). He fails to consider the possibility that reading 'realistic' texts may involve an understanding of complicated phenomenological philosophy such as that advocated by Abram with regard to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Secondly, he does not take into account recent developments in materialist-feminist theory, which promote a return to the material body and hence to a kind of realism which takes into account the insights gained from theories such as post-structuralism and postmodernism.

Although Mann's poems may give the impression of a simple realist approach, this belies the complexity of thought that lies behind his work. He takes on the challenge of attempting to replace an anthropocentric view of the world with an ecocentric one. In contrast to the 'realist' approach is the traditional literary convention of reading birds purely as symbols in literary texts. This focuses attention on what the bird can illustrate about human life and is therefore largely focused on human society. What is more difficult is trying to reveal the bird in a way that conveys an ontological approach and also a relationship of 'anotherness' with the animal which involves the constitution of the subject through the construction of spatiality. In Mann's poems there is a careful weaving of spaces between the speaker and the natural world—the interstices between the beings. The physical spaces constructed in these poems are sometimes contested and at other times peacefully shared. The way in which the two protagonists in these dramas react to each other is largely determined by the kind of space that lies between them and conversely, the way in which the animals react to one another creates a particular kind of space.

In *Lifelines* there are poems on a variety of birds, such as Heron (37), Dove (21), Cape Robins (11), Eagle Owl (25), Finches (35), Hummingbird (39), Owl (57) and Peregrine Falcon (59), in addition to other winged creatures such as the Dragonfly (23), Bee (7), Moth (51), Mosquito (49) and Cicada (15). From this rich collection, I have chosen poems to illustrate some of the encounters which take place between the bird and the speaker in different kinds of spaces. Initially the speaker occupies domestic space and then moves further and further away from home into the wild environment.

Each successive poem will follow the movement of the speaker: 'Cape Robins', 'Owl', 'Peregrine Falcon', and 'Eagle Owl'.

CAPE ROBINS

Before the dawn's faint grey had flushed the bush
and gleamed its hooks and fruits,
before the dusk had snuffed them out and brought its dangers near,
the robins pegged their boundaries out in song.

We heard them call and sing from perch to perch
and wondered why our house,
so blunt and stiff, without a worm or midge to dart upon,
should stand within the radius of their care.

That we should share the same small patch of earth,
yet stay familiar strangers,
that they should hear our coaxing human talk, yet fly from us,
is as our different pasts and roles ordained.

This listening to another creature's speech,
our kind or theirs, this care for privacies
that nest inside another's weave of language
ensures our beings blend, our distance keeps us near (2006:11).

Mann plays with the concept of space and time in this poem. The lyrical description of dawn and dusk demonstrates that man-made, clock-watching time is being replaced with the natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset. The keenly observant eye of the speaker notices the 'gleam' of light on both the 'hooks and fruit' of the bush: the potentially dangerous and the sustaining elements of nature. This kind of balance is reflected in the structure of the poem. The poem is woven in a regular pattern, with short lines alternating with long lines in four-line stanzas. This creates spaces on the page at regular intervals which could be likened to the rhythm and pattern of weaving.

The line 'the robins pegged their boundaries out in song' is an example of the metaphorical use of human activities being employed to enrich the description of the birds (as opposed to the converse, where birds

are used as symbols for human activities). Song exists in time and yet the speaker uses the image to construct space. It is as if the space that is created by the birds' song enfolds and protects the domestic space of the couple's house. The wild bush surrounding the house is to some extent domesticated, tamed and brought into focus through the robin's song.

The poem's central concern is the nature of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The speaker imaginatively changes places with the birds and measures his house by the yardstick of what he presumes is attractive to them. The house is 'blunt and stiff' in comparison to a nest, which is rounded to match the shape of the bird, and is made from organic materials such as grass and leaves in comparison to a house made from sharp-cornered bricks and cement. There is a sense that the people feel both honoured and puzzled that their house 'should stand within the radius of their care'. The word 'radius' is mathematical and scientific, linking the image of the land surveyor 'pegging out his boundaries'. These images enhance the status of the birds activities, suggesting that with ease and grace they manifest the kind of knowledge that humans struggle to learn.

Returning to Tuan's notion of space-consciousness, we find in this poem a sense of acceptance and humility, for example in the third stanza: 'as our different pasts and roles ordained'. The religious connotation of 'ordained' suggests a sense of reverence for the 'natural order' of the world. It is not the anthropocentric hierarchy that is usually attributed to the Old Testament but rather an acceptance of the way in which different beings have evolved in relation to one another. The 'coaxing human talk' represents an attempt to make contact with the birds, but in spite of the invitation, the birds keep their distance. The space between them is maintained, and the speaker has the realization that this is how it should be, and is not cause for sadness.

Listening to birdsong can be compared to the process of place-making in the Tuanian sense. In the same way as a new neighbourhood is at first a confusing blur of images but later becomes differentiated into recognizable areas, so can listening to the sounds that birds make reveal 'landmarks' of recognizable sound in an undifferentiated blur of noise. This is part of the way in which space becomes place through time-based song. Recognizing a sound is not, however, the same as understanding it. One of the things that Mann does in his bird poems in general is to express what

meaning bird sounds have for him. At the same time he is aware that the real meaning is ultimately unknowable for humans, even though they have been able to identify warnings and mating calls. So while his poems create place for the reader, they simultaneously remind the reader of the unknowable dimension or space between human and nonhuman. The image of the nest inside ‘another’s weave of language’ expresses the inter-relatedness typical of the ecopoetic attitude towards nature while echoing ‘anotherness’ in the line.

The speaker makes the point that the lack of real communication is not in fact a lack, but rather an enabling factor which allows for ‘our beings [to] blend’. Without the protection of privacies that the non-communication allows, they would not be safe so close to one another and the paradox of the final line would not hold: ‘our distance keeps us near’. The concept of space thus takes on an ambiguity in this poem as it is measured both in terms of communication as well as physical space.

One of the important factors influencing the encounters described in these poems is the time of day (or night) during which the event takes place. In ‘Cape Robins’, it is the turning point between night and day, dawn and dusk. This is the time when the robin’s song is heard most eloquently. It is a transformative moment, when the natural surroundings change from benevolence to malevolence, or vice versa: ‘before the dusk has snuffed them out and brought its dangers near’. In the following poem, the encounter takes place at night.

OWL

Tell me, night-hawk,
who-whooping
from that black untidy splotch of a pine,

do you also shiver
with the beautiful
and dangerous love of the stars?

Imagine the infernos,
the heart-throttling cold,
the bone-bursting vacuum above our heads,

Imagine the whirl-holes,
the gusts of fire-dust,
the light-years of loneliness in space.

*Who-who are we,
I call back to you,
that we can breathe in such a wilderness*

and sing?

(2006:57)

The poem opens in a casual register, with a conversational tone. The term 'night-hawk' places the owl in the group of predatory birds, thus stressing its biological links rather than its literary associations as 'birds of ill omen' (Craig 2006:56). The speaker's light, almost teasing tone is in keeping with the fact that this type of owl (Wood Owl) eats mainly insects and 'seldom tackle[s] birds or rodents' (Craig 2006:56) and is not as bloodthirsty as some of the other raptors.

The spatial aspect of the poem is conveyed in its structure. The lines placed on the page form a regular pattern with the repetition of two short lines followed by a long one. This pattern is broken by the final line, which stands on its own and seems to hang suspended in mid-air without the support of the extra lines that the pattern has led the reader to expect. This gives it a strong emphasis, and allows the question to draw our attention to space and to the unknown expanses of the universe.

Initially a sense of distance separates the speaker and the bird as he refers to its call issuing from 'that black untidy splotch of a pine'. Although the darkness disguises the identity of the tree as a formless 'untidy splotch' in the speaker's view, he recognizes it as a pine tree. This suggests that he is familiar with his surroundings and is probably speaking from his home. From the known environment, the speaker's gaze takes us upwards, to look at the stars. In this movement, the space that is created between himself and the bird is relativized. With the grammatical change from 'you' to 'our', the spatial positioning in the poem changes, and he and the bird are placed on the same side, as equals in the face of the expanse of the universe. This could

also be read as an example of Murphy's 'anotherness'. There is a recognition that the gulf that exists between all forms of life on our planet, and specifically between him and the owl, is negligible in comparison to the unimaginable gulf between ourselves and other stars or planets.

In the line 'the light-years of loneliness in space', the speaker deftly expresses timespace, a combination of the two dimensions. This has the effect of evoking immensities of time as well as space in the mind of the reader, which gives rise to Tuanian space-consciousness and humility in the face of human limitations.

As in the previous poem, we are given a sense of the beauty and also the terror of nature. While stars may remain gentle and beautiful as they remain twinkling at a distance, they turn into themes of horror when brought closer and examined in the light of scientific facts about the cosmos. The frightening extremes of heat and cold, 'infernos' and 'heart-throttling cold' give a different perspective on the stars. It is as if he is giving us a telescopic view of the stars, sun and planets, constructing dimensions of space and time which reach far beyond the dimensions of human life.

It is with relief then that the speaker returns to the earthly dimension, calling across to the owl from a distance that now seems negligible: 'Who-who are we', retaining the encompassing first-person plural, and combining humour with a sense of wonder at both humans' and birds' ability to face this wilderness 'and sing'. Having imagined the awesome power and terrifying extremities of the universe creates a new awareness of the mystery surrounding human and animal life, and the 'who-who' of the owl seems to encapsulate this question.

Another interpretation of the owl's call is that it is expressing its identity in this way but is simultaneously questioning the identity of the speaker: 'Who-who are we?'

The speaker and the owl seem indeed to be 'fellow travelers' (Matteson 1994:247) or 'chromosome cousins' (Mann 2007:228). By placing himself next to the owl in relation to the possibly alien species beyond, Mann momentarily erases the barrier between the human and the nonhuman.

In the previous two poems, the relationship between human and bird is depicted as being harmonious. However, this is not always so. As the speaker moves away from his domestic space and explores territory which is

usually unoccupied by humans, he comes into conflict with the bird. This poem captures the drama of contesting spaces:

PEREGRINE FALCON

Climbing a crag, I heard a *kwaak-kwaak*,
and looked down and saw you scudding
across a river's crinkle on a bushveld plain.

You looked as small and remote as I felt.
You were a dark speeding speck of a bird,
a faint fury hollering, *Get out of my niche!*

Pulling slowly, up and over warm basalt,
I saw a carcass on a balcony in the sky.
I read you then, raptor. Your meat-hunger,

bunching its wings, had hurtled down, down
from out the glaring white zenith of the sun
at the grey fleck of a rock-pigeon far below.

Thump! A blue-black explosion of wings,
a scrunch of talons. A flapping, a jerking
lugged heavily to this abattoir of a ledge.

I stared and stared, at the parable of a kill,
at the stark, almost cryptic life-in-death art
of a headless squab on the table of a feast.

A spillage of granules, loosed from its crop
was already drying its seeds for a new terrain.
A dust-coloured foraging ant, a mite's red dot

enacting some earthed, intrinsic narrative
hurried to the manna of a glisten of blood
as a maggot-fly entered the crib of the wound.

I turned and gazed, out over miles of bush,
awed that the plants, the hunger of animals
made such a simmering green Canaan of death.

I began to love you then. You sky-wrote to me
what you signal my species, when you migrate
and float round the earth: *Leave me to my life!* (Mann 2006:59).

In this poem, the speaker and the bird are in an unusual spatial relationship to one another: the man is *above* the flying bird. The vantage point which the speaker assumes when ‘climbing a crag’ is similar to that of a bird flying high in the sky. He sees the ‘crinkle’ of the river and the black speck of the bird below him. The words ‘crinkle’ and ‘speck’ create a sense of depth and scale and construct space between the speaker and the bird. The speaker finds that he has trespassed on a falcon’s territory and he interprets the bird’s ‘*Kwaak-kwaak*’ as a vehement protest at the human’s invasion: ‘*Get out of my niche!*’ His interpretation of the bird’s angry warning call could be seen as ‘project[ing] a human presence on the otherness of nature’ (Elder 2001: 322). However, this charge is offset by including the human figure as a participant in the poem. The human is not a ghostly observer with, in Donna Haraway’s words, ‘the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen’ (1991:188). This man is certainly seen by the bird and is the object of the bird’s subjectivity at this moment. In spite of the speaker’s momentary height advantage over the bird he says, ‘You looked as small and remote as I felt’, thereby shrinking his own importance in relation to the bird.

In spite of the inherent antagonism of the encounter, one could say that the speaker sees the bird in terms of ‘anotherness’. The term ‘another’ need not imply that there is a friendly relationship between the human and the nonhuman. It indicates rather that the relationship is not one of domination by the human. In this poem there is the reverse: the speaker’s clumsy human movements as he clammers slowly and laboriously over the rock contrast strongly with the power and intensity of the ‘dark speeding speck of a bird’, thus making himself not equal but in some ways inferior to the bird. The spatial arrangement in this instance is instrumental in constructing such a relationship.

In order to draw us into the space of the encounter with the bird, Mann conveys the scene of the kill in graphic detail, using images which appeal to the visual, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic senses. It enables the reader to participate imaginatively and to almost hear the 'scrunch' or feel the weight of the struggling bird flopping onto the rock with a '*Thump!*' Mann brings us 'to our animal senses', to use David Abram's phrase (1997:211). Abrams stresses the importance of keeping in touch with our senses and representing nature as a subject, capable of agency, rather than objectifying it. The 'agency' of the bird is amply demonstrated as it 'hurtle[s] down, down / from out the glaring white zenith of the sun', swiftly conquering space. The attack comes out of the sky like a bolt of lightning, blinding and paralyzing the falcon's prey with its astonishing speed and accuracy. In these lines, Mann takes our vision upwards to the sun and then swiftly downwards to the earth, emphasizing the spaces which this bird is able to traverse with ease and deadly efficiency.

The vividness of these images transports us to the space of killing: of the 'life-in-death art' / of a headless squab on the table of a feast'. The reader is forced to confront death physically and graphically through the speaker as he comes across the falcon's kill which was so recently alive and pecking granules that they are not even digested, but spill out onto the ledge, 'drying its seeds for a new terrain'. The cycle of nature, from life to death and back again is conveyed by this sight.

The poet uses spatial metaphors taken from man-made structures such as 'balcony' and 'abattoir' to describe natural spaces. This invites comparisons between the human and animal activities. 'Abattoir', for instance, is a place where animals are routinely killed for human consumption. It suggests systematic and mechanical killing compared to the dramatic speed, accuracy, and skill of the falcon. It also serves as a reminder that the falcon is doing what human beings do on a much larger scale.

Apart from using our senses to draw us into the space of encounter with the bird, Mann also creates a complex multilayered effect by superimposing different spaces onto the scene through the use of both literary and Biblical allusions. Mann fuses both the Old and the New Testament by using terms such as 'parable', which is used mainly in the New Testament, and 'manna', referring to the book of Exodus. The reference to 'manna' links up with a later mention of 'Canaan' in evoking Moses and the

Israelites wandering in the desert and being provided with food from heaven. There was a time when the Israelites were grumbling about not having meat to eat and the Lord provided them with quail in the evening: ‘That evening quail came and covered the camp’ (Exodus 16:13). In the poem, the story is given a grotesque twist as the small creatures at the bottom of the food chain, an ant and a mite, are given a quail-like meal to eat. It is as if the Biblical narrative has taken its form from this ‘earthed, intrinsic narrative’ which goes back long before the time of Moses.

The ‘blood’, ‘wound’, and ‘crib’ suggest both the birth and death of Christ. Following from that is the Resurrection, and the cycle of new life following death. Again it seems that the narrative of nature precedes that of the New Testament, and it re-enacts itself in the present before the eyes of the speaker. The space of death is transformed into a space of life with the lush green growth of the bush:

I turned and gazed, out over miles of bush,
awed that plants, the hunger of animals
made such a simmering green Canaan of death (Mann 2006:57).

The word ‘simmering’ has an auditory echo of ‘shimmering’ which suggests the play of light on the trees or grass. Combined with the allusion to Canaan, it could also suggest the shimmering of a mirage in the desert: a promise of rich, sweet food such as the land of milk and honey, which turns out to be an illusion. However, ‘simmering’ is a more powerful word in that it suggests a strong force building up from the inside. In cooking, to simmer something is to cook it in liquid slightly below boiling point. When applied metaphorically to emotions, there is the sense of destructive emotions being held in check, which could break out at any moment. Therefore this word constructs an ambivalent space because it could be a creative or a destructive force which is moving under the surface. It is a hidden force which is perhaps made up of myriads of little creatures like the ant, the maggot, and the mite, all doing their work in order to turn blood into greenness and life. The transformative action of these animals makes a ‘Canaan [out] of death’. The line is ambivalent as it can also be read as making Canaan a place of death. I think this line demonstrates the density of the poet’s meaning because it contains both the sense of violence under the surface and also the

richness of growth and food. Killing and growing, death and life, are inextricably bound together in nature. This is a well-known fact, but Mann conveys it in a fresh way by combining a dramatic narrative situation with an age-old allusion.

The simple fact that animals kill each other because they are hungry is brought home to him sharply in this poem. It is knowledge which he experiences graphically and immediately as he climbs up that ledge and sees the evidence of the kill. The type of experience of death is brought home to him almost physically. It is reminiscent of the short story by Doris Lessing, 'A Sunrise on the Veld', in which a young boy stumbles upon a scene of horror while wandering in the bush far from home, and he sees a wounded buck being eaten alive by ants:

The knowledge of fatality, of what has to be, had gripped him and for the first time in his life; and he was left unable to make any movement of brain or body, except to say: 'Yes, yes. That is what living is.' It had entered his flesh and his bones and grown into the farthest corners of his brain and would never leave him (1994:32).

Here, Mann conveys the physicality of the knowledge of death, growing into both his flesh and his brain and even his bones. It is experiential knowledge as opposed to mental, theoretical knowledge. The paradox in Lessing's quotation is that the knowledge of death is expressed as 'that is what living is'. Mann constructs a similar paradox in the reference to Canaan.

The final message from the bird is conveyed in space: 'you sky-wrote'. The final emphatic message, '*Leave me to my life*', seems to indicate that the bird is drawing a clear barrier between himself and the human. He does not want to be judged by the criteria of human behaviour and the speaker allows him this space to be separate and to be somewhat unknown. It seems to me that in this poem as well as many others in this volume, we experience the animal as 'an enigmatic presence with whom we have been drawn into a living relationship' (Abram 2002:214). This is done through the device of the human figure in the poem which provides us with an entry into the experience of the encounter with the bird or animal involved and helps us to question the boundaries that define the space between the self and other, or another.

The final poem in my selection deals with an encounter with an Eagle Owl. In this poem the speaker is at his most vulnerable as he is not only far from home, having chosen to wander in a wilderness area, but it takes place at night while he is asleep.

EAGLE OWL

You terrified me from sleep.

I'd gone off into the night
a ruminant of Africa's stars,
and lain down in the grass

that wet the Hashaza hills,
my hitchhiker's rucksack
pillowed under my head.

Whish! I woke with you
hovering your dark angel
between me and the moon.

Your pinions smashed air
across my face. I leapt up,
yelling, flailing my arms.

You sped off, and left me
quivering with a revelation.
My genes like Jacob's ladder

were grounded in the earth.
Their spiral twists of rungs
reached up into the stars,

Into the genesis of space (Mann 2006:25).

The specificity of the name 'Hashaza' indicates the speaker's familiarity with the local, indigenous knowledge of place. Barry Lopez maintains that in order to really know a place intimately, you need to make yourself vulnerable to it, and this is certainly what the human figure does by exposing himself to the African night without protection of a roof or covering: 'You must open yourself to its textures, its colors in varying day and night lights, its sonic dimensions' (Lopez 1998:300). This vulnerability leads to a very close encounter with the bird.

The drama of this encounter is captured by the violence of 'smashed' and the auditory effect of '*Whish*', drawing the reader into the experience as in the previous poem. The word has both a tactile and an auditory effect as the feeling of the air rushing past as the wings sweep close to the speaker is evoked. Here, as in the previous poem, the human figure is being threatened by the bird. The Cartesian hierarchy is upset and man is denied his position of superiority over the animal world and instead presents a comical figure 'yelling' and 'flailing' in shock and impotence. It is as if this exposure to nature has put the human 'in his place' in terms of the ecosystem. His spurious position of superiority is dependent on his hiding inside man-made structures and the slightest deviation from that habitat shows him how vulnerable he is.

Mann develops a complex allusion to the Biblical Jacob and his dream while sleeping in similar fashion with his head on a rock. Jacob dreams of angels going up and down the ladder, connecting him to heaven. When Jacob wakes up he says: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God' (Genesis 28:17). In the poem the angel comes between the speaker and the moon, blocking out its light and suggesting that this is an angel of death, not life. Yet the consequence of this encounter for the man is that he is left 'quivering with a revelation':

My genes like Jacob's ladder

were grounded in the earth.
Their spiral twists of rungs
reached up into the stars,

Into the genesis of space (2006:25).

The significance of this revelation lies not so much in what he learns but in the way he learns it. The DNA spiral, genetics, and cosmogenesis are all part of the wonder of creation and this is something we can read about and understand intellectually. But it becomes a revelation when this knowledge enters into his very being through the awe and terror of his experience. The epiphany is brought on by adventuring into the spaces and times that are usually reserved for animals and kept hidden from humans. The encounter with the Eagle Owl is thus instrumental in giving the man an experience of the sublime and bringing him to a new understanding of the wonder of creation, breaking through the shell of dullness which ordinary, routine life can result in and shaking him bodily and spiritually into a new space.

In the poems discussed, space is created both by the visual imagery and by the bird's song or call. The falcon's call is a harsh warning, an alarm call, and it creates the space between the speaker, high up on the cliff, and the bird, flying below. Without that sound he would not have been aware of the 'dark speck' far below him. In the Owl poem, his hooting creates the space between the speaker and the tree although this space is immediately diminished in relation to the 'whirl-holes' of the universe. Earthly space changes to 'outer space' and returns with renewed awareness to the earthly existence of all species.

The question of whether this poet is successful in moving beyond an anthropocentric view of the universe remains. It should be pointed out that an anthropocentric view does not necessarily involve the erasure of the human in the representation of the nonhuman. A definition of anthropocentric is: 'considering human beings and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe' (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2003). I would argue that by including the human in the picture, he does not make it anthropocentric, but rather, he creates an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in a way that undermines the importance of the human. The speaker in these poems is shown, often humorously, to be inferior in some way to the bird. It puts mankind in different 'places' in relation to the animal and thus disrupts the Cartesian hierarchy with mankind as the dominating figure at the pinnacle of the universe.

The inclusion of the human figure in the poems is instrumental in constructing 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991:188) in which the human

takes responsibility for his presence and is not simply a godlike observer. 'Situated knowledge' is also mentioned by Murphy who refers to 'a foundation based on situated knowledges and the determination of understanding through experience' (Murphy 1998: 48). Experiential knowledge in addition to intellectual understanding is what that Mann attempts to project through relating an event 'situated' in a specific place.

What we have in these poems is a space-consciousness. Through the interactions between human and bird, and the accurate and detailed observations that are given, Mann turns space into place in the Tuanian sense. In addition, he holds the deeply felt knowledge of place in tension with the unknowability of the universe. As with Merwin's poetry we can say that in Mann's poems,

Space-consciousness emerges from a mindful relationship with place because a deep knowledge of place produces a humble awareness of our own limitations (Bryson 2002:105).

Chris Mann illuminates the notion of space through his interaction with the nonhuman. Space comes alive, changes from space to place—and possibly back again to space in the sense of the immeasurability. His handling of the spaces between the human and the nonhuman takes us into the realm of the nonhuman and makes us more deeply aware of the mysterious boundaries we share with them.

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English Department
University of Zululand
plouw@pan.uzulu.ac.za