

# **‘Lines of flight’: Sydney Clouts’s Birds**

**Dan Wylie**

## **Abstract**

Sydney Clouts’s poetic treatment of the natural world can conveniently, if slightly artificially, be approached through clusters of images: particles, rock, animals, and so on. This paper explores Clouts’s treatment of bird images, partly through the metalanguage of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their phrase ‘lines of flight’—the ways in which imagination and creativity ‘deterritorialise’, escape from, modify or critique normative frameworks—has the potential to act as a touchstone for a study of Clouts’s birds. I suggest that birds are a particularly iconic image in Clouts’s work in respect of ‘movements through space’ which are simultaneously and inescapably movements through and of the perceiving consciousness. The poems embody heterogeneous perceptions of the world which effect momentary unities, wholly new yet wholly immanent, an ever-renewing sense of belonging-in-the-world. The paper centres on those poems most obviously about birds—‘The Feeding of the Doves’, ‘The Avocado and the Sparrow’, ‘The Sea and the Eagle’, ‘The Hawk’ and ‘Wintertime, great wintertime’—although birds turn up frequently throughout his oeuvre.

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Starlings in vast flights drove along like smoke, mist, or any thing misty without volition—now a circular area inclined in

an Arc—now a Globe—now from complete Orb into an Eclipse & Oblong—now a balloon with the car suspended, now a concaved Semicircle—& still it expands & condenses, some moments glimmering & shivering, dim & shadowy, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (Holmes 2005:253f).

Richard Holmes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's biographer, notes that this description in one of Coleridge's notebooks of 'a protean form or a force-field, lacking fixed structure or outline, a powerful personality without a solid identity', was clearly 'some sort of self-image for Coleridge, both stimulating in its sense of freedom, of 'vast flights'; and menacing in its sense of threatening chaos or implosion' (2005:254). Menacing, perhaps, but also an image for the conflation or interfusion of self and object through which Coleridge envisioned a selflessly unified 'One Life'. The incorporative resonance of words, too, he envisioned as potentially unitary. He wrote to William Godwin on 22 September 1800:

I wish you to [...] solve the great questions, whether there be reason to hold that an action bearing all the semblance of predesigning consciousness may yet be simply organic, and whether a series of such actions are possible? [...] Is Thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? And how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words, etc., parts and germinations of the plant? And what is the law of their growth? In something of this sort I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things; elevating, as it were, Words into Things and living things too (in Richards 1978:264).

It is arguable whether Coleridge, after this characteristically brilliant outpouring—foreshadowing all at once Darwin, de Saussure, and Merleau-Ponty—ever satisfactorily answered these questions for himself. Suffice it to say that the congruence of his concerns with those of Sydney Clouts is at many points striking. Clouts wrote:

Poetry always produces that integrity of spirit and matter, joining

word and theme and feeling and thought, so that the poet [becomes] an elemental force (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9).

It is virtually certain that Clouts derived the title of his single published collection, *One Life*, from Coleridge's poem 'The Eolian Harp'. In the latter poem, the music of the wind, 'like birds of Paradise [...] hovering on untam'd wing', exemplifies

the one Life within us and abroad  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where [...]  
(in Richards 1978:66).

What is the quality of this synaesthetic meeting and becoming and interfusion? How is it that poetry seems the most powerful medium for expressing such intuitive senses of immanent belonging? How does Clouts's poetry in particular wield language and the suggestiveness of metaphor—especially for the present purpose, the presence of birds—in this cause? And what metalanguage might the critic employ in explicating such an immanence, one which by definition seems intrinsically beyond linguistic capture?

We might begin, by way of introduction, with an illustrative Clouts bird poem, 'The Feeding of Doves' (1984:3). It is a rare instance of a flock of birds in Clouts's work, and an early work which has not yet achieved the aphoristic clarity of later poems. It is, however, as concerned with the nature of the 'self', and with the relationship between thought and the natural world, as Coleridge's description of starlings. These doves are similarly protean, swooping down and away; they 'ripple' and 'shower' from above, 'beleaguer' the poet with his handful of crumbs and thoughts. Thoughts, crumbs, and doves entail and structure one another—'mind and nature as one,' as Clouts puts it (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9). The doves' movements entail and structure the world around them, including the poet's presence, in multiply interlocking and seamless ways. In the opening stanza of the poem, it is 'a thought taking wings' as much as the doves taking wing; not only is a thought taking off as doves do, it 'takes wings' (e.a.), as if acquiring them,

momentarily excising physical wings as items of attention from the flux of the world. It is the 'diet' that is 'pensive', not only the poet; it is the 'windowsills' which are 'glancing seaward', not only the doves and/or the poet; it is the 'grasses' which are also 'swooping'; it is 'stone' that is 'fluttering'. These persistently 'transferred epithets' are doing a strange thing: they are evoking the central subject, the doves, even as they describe something else in their world; doves and world are both distinctive and indistinguishable. It is not that doves *are* becoming stone, or that wings are being merely *compared to* grass: the first is impossible, the second only a partial explication of what is happening poetically. Something much more organic is being postulated: correlations and interdependencies, fused within a single motion of thought and writing, which *enact* rather than merely *describe* a self intricately imbued with, and imbuing, the world within which it subsists and finds its meaning. The self of the poem seems unconfined by that meagre pronoun 'me': it not only observes, but rather *is* the spaces and motions it describes. Clouts has said: 'The relationship of the poet with things is always being another' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9). The self is as wide, as intimate, and as protean as its perceptions, and these perceptions—those transferred epithets imply—themselves actively constitute the unfolding self. Moreover, like Coleridge's flock of starlings, this is at every moment a new self, an unpredicted but unquestionably authentic aggregation of qualities, both riven by and infused with the continuities and dislocations of the situation. Evidently, the conventional depiction of the 'self' as a discrete and bounded consciousness is not being abandoned, but is expanded in multiple directions, like lines of flight out of itself, in ways for which it is hard to find a meta-language of adequate precision.

## II

Before embarking on a search for such a meta-language, it will be useful to briefly survey Clouts's poetical birds. Birds, as the example above shows, are scarcely divisible in his poetic treatment from the air they traverse, the rocks on which they perch, the trees in which they shelter. Yet they do preserve their distinctiveness, too. They are less common, as images, than water, stone, trees, sea, and other natural elements, but their presence is frequent enough to warrant special scrutiny, and—I hope to show—do

indicate or embody some quite specific processes in Clouts's trademark quest for immanent belonging. That said, their imagistic connotations in the poems are, at least on the surface, highly variable, and hardly susceptible to any analogical or allegorical generalisations. They are in each appearance, so to speak, site-specific.

A handful of poems from the *Collected Poems* are centred on birds: 'The Feeding of Doves' (1984:3); 'The Sea and the Eagle' (9); 'The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow' (21); 'Driving from the Sea' (41); 'Wintertime, great wintertime' (57); and 'The Hawk' (72). Some of these I will examine in detail later. Most often, birds are mentioned in passing, as it were, sometimes, especially in the earlier work, in obviously symbolic terms. In the subtler later work, overt symbolism is supplanted by a more organic sense of their integration into a greater whole, or what Ken Wilber terms a 'holon' (a kind of temporary or perceived aggregation or ecosystem enclosed within, and enclosing, other holons; the poem itself is such a holon)<sup>1</sup>.

Clearly, the birds often symbolise, at a conventional level, escape, or a reaching-beyond. In 'The Soul in its Sleep' (1984:34), the eagle is depicted 'soaring upward clear of its mythologies', as awakening to something untrammelled by convention. In 'Wat die hart van vol is' (119), the 'sparrows tingle', energising the senses. The sensory appreciation is beyond intellectual articulation: the poet reveres 'many wings without a thought' in 'As it Was' (32), and in 'The Strong Southeaster' (16), the hawkbirds are 'mindless' and 'monumental'. In 'Such Silence' (48), the 'dawn bird' sings the senses awake. 'Everywhere', as Clouts states in 'The Beginning' (2), 'the sense must be quick to follow' the 'falling' flickers of intuition and enlightenment, and birds, along with other airborne creatures like moths and flying fish, are exemplary of the quick and fleeting.

Some instances recognise that these lines of flight out of a complacent self-hood can be a solitary business. In 'The Load' (1984:49),

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<sup>1</sup> Wilber defines the holon as 'an entity that is itself a *whole* and simultaneously a *part* of some other whole [...] holons within holons, in an *infinity* of probability waves' (1996:20). These are not dissimilar to Deleuzean 'planes of consistency' or 'fields of immanence' in that they possess at least four capacities: 'agency and communion, self-transcendence and self-dissolution' (244).

the 'call of the starling' is 'cold and lonely'. 'Can a bird be so lonely?' the poet asks in 'The Sleeper' (83), as he ruminates on the disconcerting independence and self-containment of the woman sleeping beside him. In 'Something Precious' (39), this paradox is imaged as a 'bird that hovers and falls'; in perceiving the object as distinct, the poem suggests, 'Something precious will escape you [...] will separate', so that 'You will be only yourself'. Even as the poet wishes to identify with the eagle or the hawk, the notionally separate 'self' will reassert itself: 'I am not the turtledove', he realises in 'Frog' (115). Separateness constantly baulks the effort to integrate and unify: 'The eye will not go in', as Clouts puts it in 'Within' (88). Yet at another, more profound level the apprehension of beings as separate seems artificial, or superficial: in 'The Autumn Garden' (11) a moth is seen 'flapping about with a quick, falling / lifelikeness', as if it is only mimicking true life.

Despite the impediments our very consciousness seems to impose on us, the effort at unification must be made, and it can reward. The flying fish in 'Juan' (56) seem to return to their watery element recharged by their flight. As in 'The Feeding of Doves', the lines of flight of birds can also circulate and return. Settling doves and pigeons, in particular, rather conventionally embody peace for Clouts. In 'The Gathering' (20), a poem which celebrates unifying the disparate, 'three pigeons' dig their beaks into the 'folded skyblue greys' of their own feathers with 'deft violence'. In 'What Remains' (23), 'Arctic snows [...] settle like a dove'. The 'first pigeon / cooing in the dusk' in 'A Part of Misery' (24), is metonymic of settlement and contentment. In 'Cape of Good Hope' (44), the 'white birth of a dove' is indicative of a quiet gentleness, even if it is sufficient to break the 'silence' of Diaz's contemplative sea. It is 'pure delight' when 'birds stay / and nothing scatters' ('Knotted globes of tawny resin', 25): there is always a part of the poet's consciousness which wants only to be nested within some 'broad wingfolded / wingbeating place' ('The Grave's Cherub' 86).

As that last formulation implies, however, there is ever a tension between the passivity of contented contemplation and the activity of creation. Illusions of separateness conflict with intuitions of organic or ecological unity; the insistent reassertions of separateness occasion oscillations between alienation and security, between feeling isolated and feeling energised by the very search for an absorption into the other (though as I will argue,

‘absorption’ is not quite right, either). If certain birds seem to insist on their otherness, are even threatening—like the ‘clacking of the Butcher bird’ in ‘Is’ (68)—there remains the possible apprehension of greater ‘holons’ in which ‘grasswings and boulderwings’ (‘The cold wreathes rising after rain’ 47) can take up ‘natural’ residence, their formerly distinct characteristics re-envisioned as

mingled as greenness is in green;  
landless essences that have been

deeper than touch in touch with things  
of the surface and what the surface brings

out of the solid fall  
outranging any human call (1984:47).

The very use of rhyming couplets here (unusual in Clouts’s oeuvre) captures the tension between the stratifying or concretising compulsions of language and form, and the supra-human or ecological sense of the interfusion of all things and their qualities. Yet the surfaces and the distinct qualities are themselves inescapable and essential. There are suggestions here of the Blakean ‘fall’, a collapse *out of* the unitary but also *into* a distinctively human mode of creativity.

That distinctive mode of course involves art and language. In the poem ‘Lines’ (1984:15), the ‘lines of flight’ are not of birds but of Rembrandt’s etching stylus; they are, however, analogous. The act of ‘etching’ one’s perceptions ‘can teach these curls / how most accurately to be / bright hair’; art and material reality inform one another. It is not quite as strong as the Berkeleyan *esse est percipi*, but it’s close. On more intimate inspection, which is to say by a change in perspective, ‘the whole head / becomes massed with innumerable directions / leading up to the wind and the sky’, and ‘The head is then not only the head’: it is itself and simultaneously more than itself, a holon within holons, ‘lines in a scheme of lines’. In short, as Clouts himself expresses it, his poetic aim is ‘to reconstitute, to rearrange if it can, all meanings around fresh ignition points’ (141).

### III

I have hinted at various points above that the manner in which I have tried to express this reconstitution of meanings is inadequate. This is because, I think, Clouts or the speaker is not merely drawing comparisons or analogies (*I am like a dove*); nor indulging in sentimental wishful thinking (*Oh, if only I were a dove*); nor trying impossibly to be wholly absorbed into a different discrete entity (*I am/could actually be a dove*); nor being merely symbolic (*The dove means/stands for X*). There may be elements of all these in the various deployments of his bird-presences, but more is going on: a sensate perception of being-in-the-world which is all but inarticulable outside the world of the poem itself. It lies just beyond that 'vanishing point' of a blade of grass where 'the air is pricked' ('Pathways' 1984:33), where there is no longer only mind and grass in separation, but simultaneously 'Mind *with* grass'. Mind and grass 'become' one another, yet in a paradoxical sense which does not entail destruction of their individual characteristics, whilst also 'going beyond' them.

But how do we *explain* this 'going beyond', this 'moving towards' without a 'definite object', as Clouts himself has said (in Butler & Harnett 1984:13)? What is 'becoming' or coming into being in the poem? How are we to explain both the difficulty and the freshness in Clouts's treatment of the natural world in his poems? Why, with what import, does he depart so frequently from studied form, from narrative progression, even from obvious metaphor? What, in the final analysis, does his technique hold or imply for an ecologically-orientated literary criticism?

It has to do, in some ways, with what Whorfian semanticists term *cryptotypes*, which Whorf defined as 'a submerged, subtle, and elusive meaning, corresponding to no actual word, yet shown by linguistic analysis to be functionally important in the grammar' (cited in Steiner 1975:91)—a kind of linguistic 'dark matter' which George Steiner describes as involving, say, 'dispersion without boundaries, oscillation without agitation, impact without duration, [or] directed motion' which 'translate as the underlying metaphysics of a language into its overt or surface grammar' (1975:91). Some of this sounds rather like the paradoxical formulations of the meta-language of French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which I have also found helpful here. The theorisations of Deleuze and Guattari (hereafter DG) present their own prickly abstrusities and frustrations; in a sense, their



central text, *A Thousand Plateaus*, seems to be offering up a richly metaphoric discussion of, or a kind of swarming infolding prose-poem to, the world and consciousness, a rumination ‘dispersed without boundaries’ rather than a reasoned argument. The book, moreover, denies its own book-ness, inviting the reader to absorb it in individualistic and non-linear ways, and in that spirit I will plunder it patchily for a terminology I find provocative and peculiarly apposite to Clouts, if not at every point rationalistically intelligible. It is an added attraction that DG tend to express themselves in terms overtly biological and ecological in tenor; indeed, their work is attracting increasing enthusiasm amongst ecologically-minded literary critics (see Chisholm 2008).

One way in is to note that both Coleridge’s flock of starlings and Clouts’s feeding doves, cited earlier, might be taken as beautiful examples of a ‘pack’, which DG distinguish from a mere ‘crowd’ thus:

Among the characteristics of a pack are small or restricted numbers, dispersion, nondecomposable variable distances, qualitative metamorphoses, inequalities as remainders or crossings, impossibility of a fixed totalization or hierarchization, a Brownian variability in directions, lines of deterritorialization, and a projection of particles (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:33).

In several of these characterisations Clouts’s treatment of the doves might be reflected, especially the small numbers, the motions of dispersion or deterritorialisation, and the lack of hierarchy, not merely between doves but between dove, mind, and stone. The directions the doves take are variable and Brownian<sup>2</sup>; the birds themselves are like particles—a crucial term in Clouts’s *oeuvre*—between which meanings are generated. There is, too, the pull-and-push of inequalities, of differences, of advancement into new correlations as well as remainderings of other dynamics. The ‘crumbs’ are as important as apparently more coherent entities: Clouts ever operated in the subtle marginalia of the ‘residuum’, the title of a key poem (1984: 78).

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<sup>2</sup> Brownian movement may be described as the ‘random movement of microscopic particles suspended in a fluid, caused by bombardment of the particles by molecules of the fluid’ (*Collins English Dictionary*).

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I want to go further, however, to suggest that the notion of the 'pack' helps describe Clouts's poetic technique itself. His startling metaphors and correlations perform 'qualitative metamorphoses' of the given, and are themselves enacting 'crossings' and dispersions of particles (words and images) in non-hierarchical ways. The unfoldings and infoldings of Clouts's best 'pack'-like poems encourage a non-linear, aggregative manner of reading and therefore of relating to the world. This is counter-intuitive, what we might call *unnatural*. 'These combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates—against itself' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:242). As I understand this, DG mean that the mechanisms of Nature cannot be explained merely by a narrowly Darwinian genetic genealogy or 'filiation', nor in terms of any pre-designed or imposed structure or blueprint; there are events continuously arising out of the 'Chaomos' which combine formerly utterly incongruent entities in aleatory ways, with all but entirely unpredictable new aggregates forming and temporarily stabilising on what DG call a 'plane of consistency' or 'field of immanence' (154). Each poem might be regarded as such a field, with an analogous detachment from genealogy. Clouts has said, perhaps slightly overstating it: 'To know that it can happen here—behind the poem is a person, behind the poem is a life, and a beating heart, eyes, senses, etc., not a tradition. There is no tradition behind poetry' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:12). Crucially, at any rate, these new instantaneous aggregations are occurring in, or with the participation of, mind and language. Clouts's poem 'The Feeding of Doves', then, acts as the trace of multiple such aleatory encounters between mind, language, doves, rocks, etc., compressed into a startling, grammatically fresh, aggregate of words—the poem.

It is not that filiation and structure are false or unimportant or non-existent, only that they are not the whole story. Stabilities do settle, like doves; these DG call 'striations' or 'strata' or 'stratifications' or 'territories'. Always, however, there are forces and energies escaping or breaching or returning to those strata, in multiple processes of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation'. Or as Clouts puts it: 'The imagination disestablishes its own constructions continually' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:37). These motions DG call 'lines of flight' or, in a kind of aggregative shorthand, the 'rhizome'. In anyone's language, I take it, such stratifications also exist: the stability of

grammar itself, conventions of association and symbolism, the sense that usage and thought have been in a crucial sense inherited. But also constantly operating is the rhizome of challenge, escape, advancement, assertion of difference merely in personalisation of style, neologisms or inflections drawn from newly encountered languages or philosophies (something like what Harold Bloom calls the ‘anxiety of influence’).

That Clouts was thinking along similar lines (literally) might be evidenced by the second stanza of his poem ‘Pathways’ (1984:140), whose title itself evokes ‘lines of flight’. In this stanza, the philosophic traditions on which the poet inevitably draws are transformed into, literally consumed by, a rhizomic multiplicity of plants, light, and bees, interfused in ways Aristotle could never have predicted:

All that the philosophic men  
have said of the mind  
in its contemplation,  
bends like a field of lupins whose  
slant sunlight is profuse and burrows  
sharply into famished bees (1984:140).

These lines alone exemplify almost all the qualities of the ‘pack’ outlined above, ending with the implications of the ‘Brownian movement’ of the ‘profuse’, particle-like *and* pack-like, mutually fructifying lupins *and* bees<sup>3</sup>. In both its expansion into the vasts of history and fields, and in its return to the miniscule, there works in the poem what DG call

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<sup>3</sup> DG appropriately exemplify this in the symbiotic relationship between the unlikely allies of a wasp and orchid: ‘The wasp becomes a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion [but a]t the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp [...] in a circulation of intensities’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:10).

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a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series [light and bees, say] on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:10).

There is no name or structural shorthand to be given to this new aggregate; there is no longer a merely mimetic correlation between a signified and signifier. The poem is what DG call a 'body without organs', which is 'permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:40). Birds, for Clouts, are just such 'nomadic singularities', sometimes settling and congregating, sometimes embodying a line of flight, of thought, and of verbal expression, out of and beyond the ordinary. In a very particular sense, the poet (perhaps the reader, too) *becomes* the dove, or the 'hawkbird', or the 'boulderwings'. It is an almost instinctive identification even stronger than what Coleridge famously termed the 'willed suspension of disbelief'. It is a sense of becoming which DG, in the chapter '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...', explicate thus:

To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination [...]. Becomings-animal [or becomings-bird] are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which the becoming passes. [...] A] becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself [...] it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject. [...]

Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible affiliation (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:238).

It sometimes seems as if Clouts had read Deleuze and Guattari, whose use of the word 'kingdom' here coincidentally but highly appropriately evokes Clouts's poem 'Animal Kingdom' (1984:76). In that poem, the deceptively simple line 'the river that I heard / included birdsong' projects consciousness onto a hitherto all-but-inconceivable plane of interrelationship, ambiguous agency, and 'alliance'. It somehow transcends even metaphor; it is not the case that birdsong is being compared to a river, but that a complete new assemblage of river, song, hearing, and expression is being actually created. The poet's own vision is not just *like* the sun that shines or enlivens; in a sense it *is* 'fly and frog / pond hand stalk and loquat / river and beak'. Humanness and birdness belong equally within the 'field of immanence' that is here metonymically the interfusion of sun's warmth. All, it might be said, is/are synecdoche; hence the poet can, even as a momentarily separable entity, partake in, and be redefined by, the 'lines of flight' inscribed on the world by other entities or nomadic singularities: 'Locust locust leap with me / water flow and mirror me' (1984:76). Particles and flows, like the characterisations of energy-matter in quantum physics, express the same 'thing', the same 'plane of consistency'. (Lines of flight are by no means confined to birds: in 'Dew on a Shrub' [1984:88] even a 'crocodile flies to me'!) Put another way, Clouts attempts—to echo Adrienne Rich—to write not poems *of* experience, but poems *as* experience.

#### IV

I think it is a mistake to label, let alone decry, Clouts's propensity to search for organic unities in natural environs as uncritically and narrowly 'Romantic', as certain critics have done. Prominent amongst these is Stephen Watson in his essay 'Sydney Clouts & the Limits of Romanticism' (Watson

1990). Writing in the turbulent 1980s, when the anti-apartheid struggle and what Louise Bethlehem has termed the 'rhetoric of urgency' (Bethlehem 2006:1-3) dominated literary critical discourse, Watson disparaged Clouts for his lack of attention to immediate political events, for apparently being able to locate transcendence only 'in relation to the natural world—not in society, and certainly not in anything like a recognisably South African version of it' (Watson 1990:72). The results, according to Watson, are pseudo-spiritual poems that are 'evasive, even escapist' (74), a Utopian fantasy and 'smokescreen' that was 'facilitated' by the 'romantic tradition' (78). This is not the place to offer a studied response to Watson's robust and provocative treatment of Clouts: suffice it to say that I think Watson's characterisation of Clouts's motivations as 'mystical' or 'spiritual' is imperfect; and that while many writers legitimately respond to the 'short-wave' oscillations of immediate socio-political events, others may equally legitimately respond to 'long-wave', more subtle and incremental changes in global mentality, amongst which are subtle shifts in human relations with the natural world. Today, some 23 years after Watson first published his article and in the midst of our clear and overwhelming environmental climacteric, it seems obvious that Clouts's perspectives (like those of, say, John Clare or Henry Thoreau) are re-gaining a relevance which appeared scarcely creditable at the time.

Clouts certainly was influenced by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake—not to mention his favourite, Wallace Stevens—and self-consciously so. (It is intriguing how, in a critique like Watson's, such evidence of 'intertextuality' is seen as a weakness, where in T.S. Eliot it is regarded as a strength.) But as even a passing acquaintance with those poets reveals, their so-called Romanticism encompasses as many differences and arguments as it does similarities. Clouts professed himself suspicious of the 'daring, dangerous Romantic note', especially that of the suffering poet (in Butler & Harnett 1984:12). At no point does Clouts pretend that the attainment of a unitary vision of any kind—an experience of the 'One Life'—is easy, stable, or irreversible, or even that it should be. He is not a romantic 'nature poet' in that sense. Nor is he vapidly 'mystical'. The studious materiality, the muscular effort at compression and surprise evident in almost every line of his oeuvre, should be testament enough to that. He writes: 'I think of transcendence as inhabiting [a] raptness, that possession of the poem *by the*

*world* (in Butler & Harnett 1984:13; e.a.). Throughout, the energy is manifest in a grammar of physical ‘movement’, of boundary-crossings, of momentary poise before the swift ephemerality of being reasserts. ‘I have moments either of transcendence or of movement toward that transcendence, of passage into it, of definition of it [...] whatever any *line* which one tries to think of might be doing *at that time*’ (13; e.a.). Birds are exemplary exponents of such a line or lines.

Nor does Clouts pretend that Nature is unrelievedly beneficent, as a superficial reading might imply (the same incidentally goes for Wordsworth and Coleridge). Some early bird-related poems demonstrate that Clouts saw the natural world as in certain manifestations dangerous and predatory, but he characteristically used this perception to examine the nature of the field of immanence within which the poetic mind manifests.

An early bird poem is ‘The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow’ (Clouts 1984:21). The tree is characterised as a battlefield: the ‘sheens’ of its leaves are ‘sharp, corrosive’, like plates of armour which an incursive sparrow is either confronted by or dons—or both. It is unclear at times just what is fighting what in the poem, and I’m not convinced that the ambiguity is deliberate; but if it is an unintended confusion in the poem, it is also a revealing one. At one stage it seems there is a massing against the sparrow, as if by the Zulu troops of ‘Cetawayo’; but it is finally the sparrow’s ‘gaze / of quick command’ that ‘sway[s] the battlefield’ (1984:21). On the one hand, the sparrow seems to insert himself within the plates of the leaves—like ‘listen[ing] amongst the particles’?—and this partnership gains him a ‘subtle’ ascendancy; on the other hand, he seems to enclose within himself the power of ‘small fibres densely steeled’; it is hence a combination of self-confidence and partnership which prevails against the anonymous attackers. This is, I take it, the early expression of a poet struggling to define the self and its poetic metier—a self, torn between confrontation and belonging, which has not yet defined securely the parameters of an emerging theme of displacement and belonging in a world of formless threats, or a Chaosmos of potential dissolutions.

Aggressiveness in the natural world is background to a second bird poem. In ‘The Strong Southeaster’ (1984:16) the rather unspecific ‘hawkbirds’, which ‘sink on the light / and fold their imperative wings’, have a ‘mindless, monumental’ hieratic air rather too reminiscent of Yeats and his

Byzantium; they are an expression perhaps of a desire to leave behind the 'turbulent cloud / of brooding victors' and the 'mustering gloom / of power', perhaps even of thought itself. The desire here seems to be to enter the almost death-like (yet intimately alive) state outlined in 'As It Was' (1984:32). In that poem about the persistence of the natural world after human death, 'the entire restless mind / stumbles to the cold', after which there will still be 'many beetles marching forth / and many wings without a thought', and water 'tasting so sweet and deep and cold / of unhuman numerous things'. Clouts in both these poems seems still in search of an 'absolute' line of flight which will be genuinely transformative, but can only imagine it as an after-death/afterlife state of 'cleansing' (16). (This does inadvertently echo the rather misanthropic strain in some contemporary ecological thinking, even amongst scientists envisaging a 'world without humans', but lacks its edge of weird triumphalism. Most often Clouts, it seems to me, expresses his 'becoming-nature' ideals not as escapist from the human, but as an expansion of what it means to be human.)

The yearning for some Yeatsian state of pure art is expressed more imploringly in 'The Hawk' (1984:72). Slightly reminiscent of Tennyson's imperious eagle, the hawk on its 'glimmering scythes' of wings 'darkens the mountain / darkens the field', but also seems to offer some hope of a vehicle, a vector of directives to the poet, who cries out 'for a word of judgement / lean as a blade' from a condition of threatened chaos in which 'Flowers are toppling' and 'the earth burbles blood'. The vision of a 'white cloud' urges the speaker to cry out to the 'scholars of Mercy' for the solace of an interpretation of 'the flood'. The threat represented by the hawk can only be answered by a specified meaning, apparently; in this sense, Clouts had not yet reached the point of self-confidence at which he could postulate the *loss* of his self, and the relinquishing of specifiable meaning in the universe, as creative and agentive positives.

In its detached, 'darken[ing]', even death-dealing line of flight, the hawk in this poem echoes the eagle in others. In 'The Soul in its Sleep' (1984:34), 'the eagle soar[s] upwards clear of the mythologies'—as clear an expression of Deleuzian 'deterritorialisation' as one might wish for. Clearly for Clouts there is a solitariness, a sense of self-alienation incumbent on this soaring, especially in the earlier work. 'The Sea and the Eagle' (1984:9) is a good instance here. This poem is shot through with questioning, but ends



with a strong foreshadowing of the confident authority of the later poems. Precisely because it is a bit gauche, it lays out the dynamics especially clearly. The poet is evidently looking for a ‘destiny’, a solidified sense of placement within the world (something analogous to DG’s ‘arborescence’, or attachment to pre-determined models or genealogies); he envisages that the ‘sea’ or the ‘eagle’ might embody or direct him to this destiny. He queries the bird’s ‘line of flight’, its destination and its motivation, as if he might follow it somehow. The eagle is envisaged as being privy to something ‘conceal[ed] in thunder’, as being of a primordial authority, pre-human in the depth of its history. This is not, however, a process of romanticised regression to some antecedent mode of being (‘though fragments of regression, sequences of regression may enter it’ [Deleuze and Guattari 1987:240]). Rather, the thrust is focussed on the present and the reformatory: the eagle is envisaged as *knowing* how the seasons have ‘mingl[ed] us in the flowing metre’. This is an especially important image, since it implies that poetry itself, the ‘rising and falling’ cadences of speech, are embedded in, co-existent with, inseparable from both our own existence and that of the greater ecology. To recognise that inseparability is to *know* in the manner the poet imagines the eagle does. Sea and eagle are thus, in a sense, our unconscious—and in line with Deleuze and Guattari, Clouts eventually wants not to *interpret* the surface signs of that unconscious (as he does in ‘The Hawk’), so much as fully to *experience* its multiform, rhizomatic haecceity, its ‘thisness’.

For both statements and desires, the issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to the [hieratic or genealogical] tree model. The issue is to *produce the unconscious*, and with it new statements, different desires (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:19; e.i.o.).

Mind and language must have their place in the process of unifying the disunited—reterritorialising the deterritorialized—as Clouts’s next line also acknowledges: ‘We have given you both [sea and eagle] a mystery’. He is asking the old question: Is meaning inherent in the world, to be discovered, as if in a mirror (if only we could be sea-like, or eagle-like); or do we impose it upon the world? Both and neither: we are already inside the meaning of the

world, wilfully though we conceal it from ourselves, or merely fail to achieve awareness of it. Unquestionably there are internal contradictions here, but they are the contradictions of life itself, the contradictions of verbal expression of and within life<sup>4</sup>. Clouts ends the poem: 'Reveal it and we shall see ourselves / suddenly like a rising wing, / terribly like a swoop of water (1984:9). Only when we recognise how we shape and are shaped by our willed and/or unwilling integrity with our surroundings do we know who we are. Such knowledge is inevitably transitory and even frightening. This is not about 'transcendence', as Stephen Watson seems to think it is, but about a reterritorialisation of our putative self within a perpetually mutating, 'airborne' cosmos. This is to exemplify Clouts's own manifesto: the sense 'that one is not only in one's body but outside it. [...] The relationship of the poet with things is this always being another' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9).

## V

'Producing the unconscious' may be said to be the central concern of perhaps the most successful of Clouts's bird-centred poems, though it was not published in his lifetime: 'Wintertime, great wintertime' (1984:57-8). In this

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<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari express this as the contradictory-but-simultaneous existence of the *tonal* and the *nagual*, which they derive from Castaneda: 'The *tonal* seems to cover many disparate things: It is the organism, and also all that is organized and organizing; but it is also signifiante [sic], and all that is signifying or signified, all that is susceptible to interpretation, explanation, all that is memorable in the form of something recalling something else; finally, it is the Self (*Moi*), the subject, the historical, social, or individual person, and the corresponding feelings. In short, the tonal is everything, including God, the judgment of God, since it 'makes up the rules by which it apprehends the world. So, in a manner of speaking, it creates the world'. Yet the tonal is only an island. For the *nagual* is also everything. And it is the same everything, but under such conditions that the body without organs has replaced the organism and experimentation has replaced all interpretation, for which it no longer has any use. Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:162).

poem, the speaker conducts a somewhat wry ‘conversation’ with a ‘glossy bird’, probably a wagtail. At first the relationship is dualistic, almost confrontational: the bird’s ‘tapping tail upbraid[s]’ the poet, perhaps for his very sense of separateness. He in turn ‘mutter[s] like a witch upon it’, as if evoking a magical incantation. Obviously *Clouts* is not advocating necromancy: rather he pursues a method of associationism akin to magical symbolism. ‘If the writer is a sorcerer,’ Deleuze and Guattari appropriately argue, ‘it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf, etc.’ (1987:240). Again, this is not a simplistic or fantastical transposition or merely imagined metamorphosis: it is a ‘fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings’ (240). Such becomings eventuate in *affect*, which is ‘not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from one’s humanity, if only for an instant [...]?’ (240). From this upheaval emerge lines which, like examples we have already seen, themselves form the sense of a multitudinous, newly aggregated world, one without name, a ‘body without organs’:

Drum drum the sodden world  
till all the drops go flying.  
Little tail, good  
Governor Conclusion, drum  
the acid core of worms,  
the plateau of desertions,  
absence, lies, confusion (*Clouts* 1984:58).

A new world seems to be drummed into being here: what was once ‘sodden’ is made dry, cleansed of its inner corruptions; the droplets fly outwards into new territories. Ironically, of course, the ‘acid core’ of the world’s corruptions are themselves the stimulus behind the drumming; only the recognition of abuses can evoke a counter-movement, a destratification, a movement towards a new ‘Conclusion’. That this is seen as fundamentally political—delivered by a ‘Governor’—gives a partial quietus to Watson’s accusations of political disengagement, though it does remain unspecific.

The presence of 'desertions' and 'lies' thus sounds negative, but they might also be seen as Deleuzian rhizomes—vectors or expressions of rebellious renewal, challenge, and escape. The 'core' and 'plateau' are themselves territories from which new movements inevitably take off. So the bird's feathers 'troop' or parade 'the spectrum / moist presumptive stream'—a neat encapsulation of deterritorialisation<sup>5</sup>. (Recall Clouts's phrase 'the spectrum soul' from 'The Soul in its Sleep' [1984:34].) More importantly, there is 'not a flounce / of supernatural phrase / abolishing as bird its actual nature'. There results neither a glib religious appropriation of the bird into an allegoric realm of merely human significance, nor a denial of the haecceity of the bird-as-bird. Clouts observes the bird itself closely *as bird*: 'its belly showed what gluttons birds are made'. Despite that, it also contains features of all other haecceities: 'the body alteration takes / can be reptile, man, or bird'. Its signification is not confined to its genealogies or evolutionary descent: 'Its plumage seemed to show / its parentage—to hell with that!' This robust dismissal of pastness gives way to a concentration on the 'freak[ish]' nature of an unpredictable present, whose aesthetics make for an ethical humbling:

Freak fire and snow  
some birds are very beautiful  
and this bird doubly so,  
to miserable mind repentance brought.  
O muddy mind of sorrow, brace your soil (1984:58).

The recognition of beauty in the instance, abrupt as a freak snowfall, engenders 'repentance'. Repentance from what? The next lines imply that it is the separation of 'mind' from 'soil' that has been the problem: the bird has pointed the way towards some sense of reunification, a renewed recognition that the mind at bottom *is* soil—and 'muddy' with its own delusions. Moreover, 'sorrow', like the lies, greed, and confusions noted earlier in the

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<sup>5</sup> Another echo, too, I suspect, of Blake's famous couplet from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?' (cited in Keynes 1972:150).

poem, proves to be the grounds of renewal, the stimulus to ‘brace your soil’, to actually recharge itself with energy as well as support the very earth from which it came, in renewed symbiosis. ‘Brace’ here carries the echo of ‘embrace’.

In the vast scope of the Chaosmos, the poet realises, the change may be miniscule, yet the bird even in its diminutiveness encompasses all ‘beams and darkness’, is integral to the greater ‘rhythms’ of life: ‘It was the bird whose scope / of beams and darkness pressed / the axial rhythm’s millionth part of change (1984:58). There is no way of predicting this change and what might stimulate it: no preconceived plan or blueprint, no genealogical filiation, no simple correlation between a signified and a signifier, between a word and its predesignated object. This is to return us to Coleridge, whose desire to eliminate the boundary between Word and Thing is echoed by Deleuze and Guattari. They write: ‘Signifier enthusiasts take an oversimplified situation as their implicit model: word and thing. From the word they extract the signifier, and from the thing a signified in conformity to the word, and therefore subjugate it to the signifier’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:66). Rhizomic writing like Clouts’s breaks this bond; it moves even beyond our capacity to theorise it: ‘Theories of arbitrariness, necessity, term-by-term or global correspondence [...] serve the same cause: the reduction of expression to the signifier’ (66). But ‘content and expression are never reducible to signified-signifier’ (67), even though there often seems a close correspondence. In fact, according to DG, a signifier is merely a frozen extraction from an implicit multiplicity, a door or threshold like the notion of a Self, a momentary imaginary within a multiplicity which is ‘already composed of heterogenous terms in symbiosis, and [which is] continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors’ (1987:249). Clouts himself echoes this remarkably closely: The poet adopts ‘complexity for his own and knows himself as more complex than anything he will ever see. He can give the name complex and multiple [...] and incomprehensible to the things that are’ (in Butler & Harnett 1984:37).

The closing section of ‘Wintertime, great wintertime’ enacts just such heterogeneity, such mobile crossing of thresholds, such deliberate escaping of self and of theory, such irreducible marriages of points into fresh symbioses. The bird is only momentarily, or in one limited mode, a signifier;

it is also at once a heterogeneity of 'spinning drops'; a spectrum of qualities of wider 'scope'; a body which is both itself with its greedy 'belly' and 'unaxiomed', not wholly subject to predetermining laws; and an 'entrance' to profounder perceptions. Upon this recognition, paradoxically, a profoundly true and engaged ethics can be effected.

I felt the spinning drops that stage the world's  
unaxiomed body's hungry entrances.  
What I am not I am. The core expounds  
the beating of a heart. Unmagical,  
into this mud I carry the morning star  
thrown with time's tragedy  
to glitter like an angry stone.  
The beating of a heart! It binds that stone.  
I wept for all betrayals, greed and loss (1984:58).

'What I am not I am.' This sounds evasively paradoxical, even mystical, but I think can be explained in materialist terms of mud and feathers, too. There are two kinds of 'I' here: the limited self of the bounded body, the ego-centric sense of selfhood which is both real and illusory—illusory because it pretends to exclude all of the Chaosmos which effectively *does* constitute its being (that which it is not). Embrace that embracing 'soil' or cosmos, and a different, wider, integrative 'I' may be postulated, if no longer directly expressed, an 'I' somewhat like Freya Mathews's 'ecological self' which is like a temporarily stabilised ripple (a holon) in the onrushing, endlessly interlocking waves of energy that constitute the universe, and is therefore a 'function' of those waves, only in a severely limited sense a discrete entity (Mathews 1994:108). There is, as Clouts's phrasing indicates, nothing 'magical' about this: it is simply a recognition that 'time's tragedy'—the Blakean fall, if you like—is for us, our peculiar consciousness, to have dragged the cosmic and illuminative (the 'morning star') down into the mud of illusion and disillusion (betrayal, greed, and loss), the rationalistic and unimaginative, where it smoulders like an 'angry stone'. Yet it also 'glitter[s]'; it is a 'heart', is *our* heart; again, this fall is grounds for 'hungry' regeneration, for the fresh recognition of beauty, and hence for the ethical act of weeping. How one perceives such discreteness or unity, as Clouts's words

'expounds' and 'stage' indicate, is inevitably to some degree a matter of expression, of the theatricality of language. As Clouts himself puts it in his MA thesis, 'The Violent Arcadia': 'The tone of the poem is a function of [the poet's] presence-in-his-language; and the appearance of the 'I', full or slight or implied, is this presence raised into the personal mode under the aspect of dramatic intensity' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:35). Both poet and bird, in becoming-another, are Deleuzian 'nomadic intensities', creating their own symbiotic unconscious through their interdependent 'lines of flight' into the world of the poem.

## VI

Birds in Clouts's poems are depicted as ineffably themselves, but are not reducible to themselves alone. They partake of their environs, just as the self is a function of its environments; in reading the poem, the appearances of the bird or the speaker's self manifests as neither the bird-self 'itself' nor purely a word. In this, Clouts's poetic method enacts the dilemma of human-natural relations everywhere. As verbalising humans we are perpetually, simultaneously in flight from the natural world, and flying into it, and flighted within it. Further analysis of this poetry for its compactness and philosophical implications might have a good deal to say to the practice of an ecologically-orientated literary criticism.

In a useful article, appropriately entitled 'The Sound of a Robin after a Rain Shower', Sabine Wilke outlines an eco-critical field characterised by 'two camps and a variety of approaches that try to mediate between them' (Wilke 2009:91). The 'nature camp' explores 'the linkages between natural and cultural processes', arguing that 'both realms need to be acknowledged in their own right' (91). On the other hand, the 'constructionist camp' insists on 'the historical and cultural construction of nature' (91). Wilke outlines a number of thinkers who have endeavoured to mediate between or meld these positions, including Glen Love, Dana Philips and Max Oelschlager, ending with discussion of the dialectical arguments of Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno. She cites Philips, who suggests that on the one hand 'we need to cure ecocriticism of its fundamental fixation on literal representation' while on the other hand needing 'to have a perspicuous sense of the differences between words and things' (in Wilke 2009:99). This is precisely the area in

which Clouts's poetry to my mind works, endeavouring to set up not so much a dialectical relationship, let alone an allegorical one, as Wilke draws from Kant and Adorno, so much as an even subtler one of Deleuzian 'becoming'. Indeed, what Wilke characterises as 'allegorical' in Adorno seems to me, from the very quotation she includes in evidence, more than that, something rather closer to Deleuze and Clouts. Adorno writes of a strand of German romanticism, a persistent brand of perception by which 'a rock appears for an instant as a primordial animal, while in the next the similarity slips away' (quoted in Wilke 2009:110).

In natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion. Each can step in for the other, and it is in this constant fluctuation, not in any unequivocal order of relationships, that natural beauty lives (Wilke 2009:110).

While dialectical relationships inevitably persist between 'territories' or 'strata', the apprehension of beauty goes further. An ecologically-attuned literary criticism which fails to acknowledge this, which becomes beholden either to empirical science (Glen Love's tendency) or an ecological theologism (Oelschläger's tendency) is likely to miss dynamics essential to the human phenomenology of perceiving the self-in-nature. I keep coming back to Clouts's sparrow's 'gaze / of quick command' (1984:21) among the surfaces of the avocado leaves, an example of what Edward Casey has deemed the phenomenological power of the 'glance':

The place-world shows itself in its surfaces, as existing within its own normative parameters, geomorphic or evolutionary, agricultural or wild—or else as exceeding or undermining these parameters, as ill at ease with itself. The glance takes all this in without needing to pass judgment or to engage in reflection. A bare apperception, a mere moment of attention is enough: *a glance suffices* (Casey 2003:198; e.i.o.).

This is analogous, I think, to Clouts's 'method of the speck and the fleck' (1984:79). In being so poetically absorbed in the phenomenology of the glance, all momentarily becomes everything; human face and landscape



become one another even as they assert their individuality. Casey cites Deleuze and Guattari:

What face has not called upon the landscapes it amalgamated, sea and hill; what landscape has not evoked the face that would have completed it, providing an unexpected complement for its lines and traits? (Casey 2003:202; Deleuze & Guattari 1987:173).

Birds, in Clouts's poetry, embody and enact just those complementary lines, the 'lines of flight' of the mind, winged with thought.

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Department of English  
Rhodes University  
[d.wylie@ru.ac.za](mailto:d.wylie@ru.ac.za)