

## “THEY SETTLE DOWN ON US / THEY DWELL WITHIN”: A. M. PIRES CABRAL’S ATTUNEMENT WITH BIRDS

“SE POSAN SOBRE NOSOTROS / HABITAN EN NUESTRO INTERIOR”: LA SINTONÍA DE A. M. PIRES  
CABRAL CON LOS PÁJAROS

« ILS S’INSTALLENT SUR NOUS / ILS HABITENT A L’INTERIEUR » : L’ACCORD DE A. M. PIRES  
CABRAL AVEC LES OISEAUX

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**Abstract:** Recent studies prove that imagination is a constructive process that transports the reader from one place to another, from one time to another, offering the possibility to inhabit another consciousness. To interpret, which in itself is an act of attention, opens a door to otherness, to kinship and empathy, asking from us affective responses towards human and nonhuman others. Drawing upon an ecocritical perspective, this paper considers how the depiction of birds in A. M. Pires Cabral’s poetry illustrates the way human dialogue with the nonhuman is a powerful tool in contemporary rediscovery of nature. The paper argues that by thinking with birds, the poet transforms not only his own self, but also the way readers envision the nonhuman other. Although Cabral’s passion for birds is not unique but part of a tradition that goes back to medieval bestiaries, I argue that at a time of biodiversity rarefaction his poetic depiction of birds is

an expression of the human affection attuned to the more-than-human world; mostly, however, this paper invites discussion on the poet's multilayered affection for birds as a result of his recognition that thinking with birds prompts, ultimately, deeper thinking about human beings.

**Keywords:** A. M. Pires Cabral; Birds; Ecocriticism; Human-Animal Relationships; Imagination; Place.

**Resumen:** Estudios recientes demuestran que la imaginación es un proceso constructivo que transporta al lector de un lugar a otro, de un tiempo a otro, ofreciéndole la posibilidad de habitar otra conciencia. Interpretar, que en sí mismo es un acto de atención, abre una puerta a la alteridad, al parentesco y a la empatía, al tiempo que requiere de nosotros respuestas afectivas hacia los otros humanos y no humanos. Desde una perspectiva ecocrítica, este artículo examina cómo la representación de las aves en la poesía de A. M. Pires Cabral ilustra el modo en que el diálogo humano con lo no humano es una poderosa herramienta para el redescubrimiento contemporáneo de la naturaleza. El artículo sostiene que, al pensar con los pájaros, el poeta transforma no solo su propio yo, sino también el modo en que los lectores ven al otro no humano. Aunque la pasión de Cabral por los pájaros no es única, sino que forma parte de una tradición que se remonta a los bestiarios medievales, el presente artículo sostiene que, en una época de rarefacción de la biodiversidad, su representación poética es una expresión del afecto humano en sintonía con el mundo más-que-humano; sobre todo, este artículo invita al debate sobre el afecto de múltiples capas del poeta por los pájaros como resultado de su reconocimiento de que pensar con los pájaros provoca, en última instancia, un pensamiento más profundo sobre los seres humanos.

**Palabras clave:** A. M. Pires Cabral; aves; ecocrítica; relaciones hombre-animal; imaginación; lugar.

**Résumé :** Des études récentes montrent que l'imagination est un processus constructif qui transporte le lecteur d'un lieu à un autre, d'un temps à un autre, offrant la possibilité d'habiter une autre conscience. L'interprétation, qui est en soi un acte d'attention, ouvre une porte à l'altérité, à la parenté et à l'empathie, nous demandant des réponses affectives envers les autres humains et non-humains. Dans une perspective écocritique, cet article examine comment la représentation des oiseaux dans la poésie de A. M. Pires Cabral illustre la manière dont le dialogue humain avec le non-humain est un outil puissant pour la redécouverte contemporaine de la nature. L'article soutient qu'en

pensant aux oiseaux, le poète transforme non seulement son propre moi, mais aussi la façon dont les lecteurs voient l'autre, le non-humain. Bien que la passion de Cabral pour les oiseaux ne soit pas unique (elle s'inscrit dans une tradition remontant aux bestiaires médiévaux) cet article soutient qu'à une époque de raréfaction de la biodiversité, sa représentation poétique est l'expression d'une affection humaine en phase avec le monde plus qu'humain ; avant tout, cet article propose une discussion sur l'affection, à plusieurs niveaux, du poète pour les oiseaux, car il reconnaît que penser avec les oiseaux provoque en fin de compte une réflexion plus profonde sur les êtres humains.

**Mots-clés** : A. M. Pires Cabral ; oiseaux ; écocritique ; relations homme-animal ; imagination ; lieu.

### **1. Modes of affiliation and connectedness: Thinking with birds**

Relationships between the human and non-human worlds in our time are characterized by disruption and destruction as we seek to create ways of living and communicating with other kin. Academia tries to be part of movements that seek to slow down the great acceleration brought about by the post-World War II period, a historical event after which both humans and natural elements such as waters, rocks, plants and animals experienced the effects of large-scale industrialization and the consequent distancing between humans and the natural world. Within this context, and within the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, I propose to analyze poems about birds by A. M. Pires Cabral (Chacim, Macedo de Cavaleiros, 1941), a Portuguese poet and author who, throughout his literary career, has dedicated attention to the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds, in particular in the region of Trás-os-Montes, in north-eastern Portugal. Within the larger bestiary that characterizes his work, a special place is reserved for birds. Through the analysis of particular poems, my aim is to show how the depiction of birds illustrates the way human dialogue with the nonhuman is a powerful tool in the contemporary rediscovery and (re)enchantment of nature. If on a micro-scale perspective I look into Cabral's poetry, on a macro-scale I intend to share Donna Haraway's proposal: nowadays, "the task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (1). In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway dedicates attention to the work of Vinciane Despret, a philosopher and scientist who "thinks in attunement with those she thinks with—recursively, inventively, relentlessly—with joy and verve" (126). The reason Despret is relevant to my argument, and to multispecies theory, is that her work highlights that whenever we encounter another being there is the possibility "that something *interesting* is about to

happen" (127), prizing those who look at the world *with* the birds rather than *at* them (128). Above all, her insight reassures that the meeting between human and birds "create narrative", making the "world richer" (128). Furthermore, Haraway also states that "we are obligated to speak from situated worlds, but we no longer need start from a humanist patriline and its breath-taking erasures and high-wire acts" (132). My argument is that listening to other species and actively telling stories about them represents a practice of "ongoingness", a process that according to Haraway means "nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened" (132). What makes Haraway's perspective relevant to my reading of birds in Cabral's poems is that it animates and justifies the potential that poetic treatment of species can have in times of advancing extinction, extermination, and extraction. Although none of Cabral's birds are in immediate danger of extinction, through his poems we can, together with Thom van Dooren in his book *Flight Ways*, question the (central) role of humans as a cause of species extinction. In this line of thought, I argue that the poet emerges as a conservationist, taking the first step towards preventing the total disappearance of the birds he encounters.

As a scholar in the arts and humanities, and considering that modes of entanglement between humans and other animals are vital, and that they are part of a larger movement performed by different areas of knowledge to include nonhuman animals in human cultures, I intend to show how Cabral's poetic strategies in representing birds—namely the use of figurative language, rhythmic energy, repetitive sound, as well as a detailed presence of the natural world—function as a tool for the twenty-first-century reader to reflect on the loss of species and diminished biodiversity. Although allegory and metaphor are present in Cabral's description of birds, his poems express an engagement with the material life of the avian species. This focus allows the reader not only to better understand the human impact on the animal environment, but also to gain a new understanding of human-animal relationships, as Cabral's poetic discourse springs from his material knowledge of the birds and their habitat.

In order to better frame Cabral's poetry within contemporary criticism, I embrace some theoretical perspectives within the field of ecocriticism, which bring angles that promote a view of the world resumed by Linda Hogan in *The Radiant Lives of Animals*:

The animal realm, sacred waters, and the surrounding world in all its entirety is an equal to our human life. We are only part of it, and such an understanding offers us the bounty and richness of our world, one to be cared for because it is truly the being of the human (viii).

In this sense, I drew from new materialism because it allowed me to emphasize agency in nonhuman beings and the co-constitutive nature of interactions within eco-systems, and from affective ecocriticism because, as Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino demonstrate, “[b]odies, human and nonhuman, are perhaps the most salient sites at which affect and ecocriticism come together” (3). Both materialism and affective ecocriticism—drawing, for instance, from the work of Jane Bennett and Alexa Weik von Mossner—contribute to the reader’s perception of “the ways affective attachments and exchanges infuse a lively material world in which we are deeply embedded alongside other beings” (Bladow and Ladino 8)<sup>1</sup>. In the introduction to *Affective Ecocriticism*, Bladow and Ladino help contemporary readers to understand how affect works within individuals and between species; above all, they invite readers to examine the world “with environments in mind” (17). Furthermore, in *Creatural Fictions* David Herman explores the idea that “being a creature, subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, the vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body, emphasizes the fundamental continuity between humans and other animals” (3). This perspective on common vulnerability add value to my argument, for, as Herman states, “humans’ and other animals’ shared condition of embodiment, their shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the environments in which they live” underline “modes of affiliation and connectedness across species lines” (4). This way of thinking about the inextricable entanglement between humans and other animals, this “being-in-relation-to animals” further contributes to form “the horizon within which the discourses and practices of politics as well as ethics take shape” (4). This critical position is in line with Donna Haraway’s aforementioned perspective, in the sense that both authors demand a full recognition of the co-constitutive relationality between humans and other animals, also claiming that the aesthetic approach can foreground “modes of relationality” and “kinds of interpretative tools” (Herman 6) that will be needed to enhance understanding of how literary texts (and art in general) have always contributed to open up the scope of human-animal relationships.

Ultimately, by promoting the encounter between poetry and birds, this essay aims to contribute to the idea that the imaginative world provides tools for the reader to (re) imagine the disrupted contemporary world, and to promote ways of human attunement and affiliation with other animals. In the vein of Bénédicte Meillon’s words, I am asking how, in the face of our global environmental crisis, eco-poets, ecocritics, and teachers

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1 For an informed overview of the affective and material ecocritical turn and its ramifications from cognitive science to narrative and cultural theory, see Bladow and Ladino’s “Toward an Affective Ecocriticism. Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene”, especially pages 1-10.

in the humanities can contribute "to a shift in the language and politics that we humans rely upon to relate to the world, and ultimately, to determine its and our own fates?" (6). What I aim to show is that Cabral's poems about birds can be inspirational to readers, asking them to become cocreators with the world and that his eco-poetic perspective allows for an interpretation of the world "tied to feeling—both feeling for and feeling with" (Meillon 6). In this sense, two other critical voices have been particularly relevant throughout the preparation of this essay: Deborah Bird Rose's invitation to "Take notice", and James Paz's recent "Thinking with Birds: Avian Song and Psychology in Old English Poetry". Paz's essay sheds light on my own reading of Cabral's poems about birds, because one can consider that the Portuguese poet is also reenacting a tradition that goes back to medieval times, recognizing that animals, birds in particular, like humans, have an interiority of their own. In Cabral's poems, "birdsong and poetry constitute [...] a tangled kinship" (Paz 555). As in Medieval poetry, in Cabral's poems birds stand as images of the human soul, spirit or mind, following "classical and biblical tropes of birds as poets, and birds as souls" (Paz 555). However, particularly significant to my argument is that Cabral's perspective is in accordance with Paz's statement that birds "were represented as nonhuman thinkers who simultaneously encourage deep thinking in human beings" (562).

Reinforcing and reiterating the idea that new modes of approach to other life forms are urgent, in *A Short Philosophy of Birds* Philippe J. Dubois and Élise Rousseau present a perspective that invites the reader to consider the material life of birds relevant. The authors offer another example of the "co-constitutive relationship" (Herman 6) between humans and birds. According to Dubois and Rousseau, in the twenty-first century, birds can be of significance, guiding us in all sorts of ways and helping us to reflect on our own lives, "if only we take the time to observe theirs" (xii), sustaining that their own work is based on research but also on their intimate knowledge of birds, acquired through observation and attention, for they believe that birds, "nimble and spontaneous, masters in the art of life, have much to tell us—if only we will listen" (xiii). The practice of listening to other species accompanies humans for hundreds of millions of years; as reminded by David G. Haskell, our ancestors lived for millennia "in attentive relationships with the sounds of other species", a way to maintain conversation with the living Earth. Thus, in today's world, characterized by a significant reduction in biodiversity, and at a time when scientists increasingly talk about a sixth mass extinction, as is the case of Elizabeth Kolbert, Haskell reminds us that when we walk outside and open our ears to the sounds of a sparrow, "we connect to meanings that emerge from the deep time of our membership in life's community". Also, in a direct and clear way, Haskell tells us

that to listen to the language of birds implies to cross divides and boundaries between species, in so far our human body interacts actively with the nonhuman world. By noticing birds, we learn to accept and respect them, thus enlarging our own language. In Haskell's own words, in the birds' voices "we hear the many rhythms of the seasons and the varied physicality of habitats", "we learn the individual stories of each bird" thus hearing and creating "Earth's universal grammar". On the other hand, by giving attention we awaken to the possibility of losing this web of communication, to this failure in understanding that the other species live lives of agency and feeling. Facing such prospect, theory, namely ecocriticism, urges readers to pay attention to texts in which both human and nonhuman life forms have intrinsic value (Buell 7); in the face of destitution, literary theory insists that readers (re)imagine ways to interact with the physical world, finding awe in its forms and creatures.

Human care and respect for nature and other species is not a new philosophy, but twentieth-first century western societies are on the way to rehabilitate this kind of thinking, recognizing creativity and intelligence in the nonhuman world. Ecocriticism has been underlining the necessity to re-animate the world, as Val Plumwood states: "Opportunities for re-animating matter include making room for seeing much of what has been presented as meaningless accident actually as creative non-human agency" (123). Moreover, "in re-animating, we become open to hearing sound as voice, seeing movement as action, adaptation as intelligence and dialogue, coincidence and chaos as the creativity of matter" (123). These statements have been at the core of ecocriticism, the challenge to re-imagine the world in richer terms, a process that would allow us to enter into a dialogue with other species and other kinds of minds. Nowadays, scientists, critics, and philosophers keep reinforcing the need for change and offer tools for humans to see nature and other species anew. This is the case with Dacher Keltner, a psychologist who prompts us to find awe in nature; when that happens, "our individual self gives way to the boundary-dissolving sense of being part of something much larger" (31). Amid the profusion of different species, Keltner claims "there is an intuited life force that unites us all" (125). My conviction is that Cabral's poems about birds not only tie all these theoretical aspects, but also reverberate them, connecting the human and non-human worlds. Like a painting, Cabral's poems "catch life for the ear or the eye, stills what's going on in human and non-human nature" (Felstiner 14).

To conclude this first part, and to echo the general title of this special issue—"Ecocriticism in the Twenty-first Century (and in the Centuries to Come): Plants, Animals, Futures"—I would say that what I attempt to do is to write with birds in mind, to draw attention to them and to their "woven relationships with a diverse array of other species,

including humans" (Dooren 4). My aim is to make sense of the micro-stories represented by birds in Cabral's poems, and the wider entanglements within their context in a particular region, Trás-os-Montes. I'm amplifying the poet's voice because I see it as relevant to future generations, who should know that the written word was a meaningful tool in the face of ecological catastrophe; that in a time of extinctions, poetry was a meaningful imaginative tool that stimulated change through empathy, understanding, and respect for "the intimately entangled, co-evolved, forms of life with which we share this planet" (Dooren 5).

## **2: "Give a place to birds": Open up hospitality to other voices**

"The Birds"

In all variety, they settle down on us, the birds.

They dwell within. By what miracle  
though they are black, their flight is white?

Birds abound on our ancient paths:  
some are edible, some have bright colors.

The beak, a precise tool.

Oh, floating birds, to whom the steepest cliffs  
are vulnerable,

carry our pain with you, our affliction.

Pray for us, we who turn to you.

*As aves*

Diversas, pousam-nos, habitam-nos  
por dentro, as aves. Por que milagre  
ainda quando negras voam branco?

As aves abundam nos antigos caminhos:  
umas são comestíveis, outras têm cores.

O bico, um certo utensílio.

Aves flutuantes, a quem são vulneráveis  
tão íngremes lugares, convosco  
transportai nossas dores, aflições.

(Cabral, *Antes que o Rio Seque* 120).



This is how A. M. Pires Cabral's poem "The Birds" begins<sup>2</sup>. In it, Cabral inscribes some aspects which are relevant throughout his poetic work: birds fly and float, have tools which allow them to survive, some are colorful, and thus, aesthetically agreeable, others are simultaneously fragile and courageous. Some, like the hens and roosters he has written about, are edible. Parallel to physical descriptions of the birds, the poetic voice uses words related to the religious realm—"miracle", and the expression "pray for us who have recourse to you"—leading the reader to consider that the poet sees birds both as biological species and as transcendent creatures. The poem's center is that birds fulfill the poet's desire: to fly, and, thus, to depart from pain and affliction. Also, the lines: "the birds / they dwell within" allow me to explain my approach to Cabral's poems about birds, primarily because they tell the reader that birds and humans influence each other, that is, in the poem each of the species crosses into the other's territory. The bird inhabits the human materiality, and the human body constitutes the bird's territory as well. Further, it reminds the reader that poetry is the dominion of the inner and intimate, and, thus, that from birds and poems new images and ideas are created, enhancing the possibility not only "to re-entangle human languages within nonhuman speeches", but to acknowledge that "human speech is but a part of a vaster discourse" (Abram 179).

"The rarefaction of the winged world was something that worried me for a long time" (160) writes Cabral in *Por Esta Terra Adentro. Páginas Transmontanas*, a collection of essays on the northeast region of Portugal, Trás-os-Montes, in which the poet dedicates a chapter to birds. In these pages, he describes his enchantment with birds, while affirming that his heart belongs to ecologists, whose mission he sees as noble: to keep the earth livable (163). As Cabral explains, his love and fascination for birds stems from his proximity to them during his boyhood walks in the region, particularly in summer. Accordingly, his poems are populated mainly by swallows, skylarks, blackbirds and sparrows; less numerous are herons, kingfishers, white wagtails, pelicans, hens and roosters. In parallel with his declaration of love for birds, he names the authors who have written about avian species in the Portuguese literary tradition, all of them, like him, defined by the rural environment. He mentions the well-known Miguel Torga and Aquilino Ribeiro, as well as the more popular Abade de Baçal, all of whom wrote about birds. Outside the Portuguese literary tradition, I would say that Cabral's poems belong

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2 Some titles of the author's poetic work: *Solo Arável (Arable Land)*, 1976; *O Livro dos Lugares e Outros Poemas (The Book of Places and Other Poems)*, 1999; *Como Se Bosch Tivesse Enlouquecido (As if Bosch Had Gone Insane)*, 2003; *Douro: Pizzicato e Chula (Douro: Pizzicato and Chula)*, 2004; *Que Comboio é Este (What Kind of Train is This)*, 2005; *Arado (Plow)*, 2009; *Gaveta do Fundo (Bottom Drawer)*, 2013; *A Noite em que a Noite Ardeu (The Night when the Night Burnt)* 2015; *Frentes de Fogo (Fronts of Fire)*, 2019; *Caderneta de Lembranças (Notebook of Memories)*, 2021. The translation of Cabral's poems was done by Alexis Levitin and myself.

to the poetic family of John Clare and Robert Frost, but in his writings he never mentions any literary tradition other than that of the aforementioned Portuguese authors. Above all, his poems are the result of a naturalist's eye, based on the attentive observation of birds. Critics have emphasized Cabral's rural and telluric background, noting that this gives his poetry an originality of its own. It is also important to note that his poetry lives from the tension between irony and melancholy, with António Guerreiro affirming that Cabral is at his most expressive when he is describing the tension between a world that is disappearing and the use of language as a source of vitality, as a way of keeping that world within the scope of the poem. Guerreiro's statement about Cabral's bestiary is particularly relevant in the context of this reflection, since the critic points out that the animals "represent a contiguity between the pulsation of living nature and the rhythm of the stanza, as if it were the poet's mission to capture the prosody of nature" (34)<sup>3</sup>. Cabral's poetic depiction of birds is based on observation and proximity, allowing the animal to preserve independence and individuality. Nonetheless, following the medieval tradition of bestiaries, and conjoining that tradition with religious and popular wisdom, Cabral also endows his birds with symbolism, as other poems show:

Obtain from the stars,  
your neighbors and your rivals,  
a warm and favorable  
disposition for us.  
Why would you fly, if not for our  
benefit (we who worship you)?  
Deposit in our yearning throats  
rare, vital gases, brought in the  
precarious container of your beaks:  
everything that comes from on high has  
a name at the sound of which we will bow down.  
The birds, the birds! Their wings, reinvigorated and  
swift, above our heads, above the valley  
of our tears, their cries filling  
the tense loneliness of our journey.

[...]

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3 In "Parábolas, palavra, poética", António Cortez shows Cabral's poetic links with the Portuguese nature poets Afonso Duarte and Miguel Torga. He also emphasizes the role of nature in Cabral's poetry, a means of translating "earth transformed into voice", as one of his verses testifies (22). On the other hand, Giorgio de Marchis suggests that Cabral's fidelity to the earth has a vocation, that of keeping it alive in memory (39). These are two critical voices that have reinforced Cabral's intrinsic link with the voices of the Earth.

Give a place to birds, the soaring ones,  
lighter, heavier than air.

Alcançai dos astros, de  
quem sois vizinhas e rivais,  
cálidas disposições  
favoráveis.  
Por que voareis, senão por nosso  
(que vos adoramos) benefício?  
Depositai-nos nas sôfregas gargantas  
gases raros, vitais, trazidos no  
precário recipiente dos bicos:  
tudo o que venha da altitude tem  
um nome ao som do qual nos prostraremos.  
As aves, as aves!, a asa refeita  
e veloz sobre as cabeças, sobre o vale  
de lágrimas, seus guinchos povoando  
a tensa solidão desta viagem.

[...]

Lugar às aves, as sobrevoadoras,  
mais leves, mais pesadas do que o ar (*Antes que o Rio Seque* 120-122).

On the one hand, Cabral combines profane allusions—"obtain from the stars (...) a warm and favorable disposition for us"—which echoes Luís de Camões' epic poem *Os Lusíadas*, with expressions from Catholic prayers: "above the valley / of our ears", nourishing an old association between bird's song and poetry. On the other hand, the last call—"give a place to birds"—illustrates my claim that by living alongside the birds that populate his native land, and because of the poet's knowledge of those birds, which springs from close observation, the poet is telling us essentially that human voice is understood in dialogue with other beings, and we, as readers, should open up hospitality spaces to other vibrant voices<sup>4</sup>. In another early poem, the lyric voice converses with the swallows that yearly nest on the eaves of his house, calling them "sisters of fire"; years later, in the poem "Sister Skylark" ("Irmã cotovia"), Cabral once more calls that bird "his sister":

I've been longing to call the skylark  
my sister through her attachment to the earth

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4 Something that comes to mind is this passage from Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life*: "[...] the appreciation of nonhuman, as well as human, sites of vitality—of what might be called the hyperecological sense of interdependence—proceeds from and toward the principle of treading lightly on the earth" (157).

and my sister as well  
through the call of her heights.

Já me tem apetecido chamar à cotovia  
minha irmã pelo vínculo à terra  
e minha irmã também  
pelo apelo das alturas (*Arado* 34).

Although in these poems the birds figure as emblems for the writer's vocation, much in accord with ecocritical perspectives, Cabral's birds are also framed within a natural dwelling place, a habitat, a part of an ecosystem which comprises soil, plants, climate, and human agency. Moreover, the fact that Cabral's poems depict birds performing sentient acts and sharing some thoughts and emotions with humans reinforces not only Herman's suggestion of "modes of belonging and connectedness across species lines" (4), but also Paz's statement that birds and humans are "situated in and shaped by both body and environment" (562).

Cabral's latest poetry book, *Caderneta de Lembranças* (2021), includes a section titled "Bestiary with Small B" ("Bestiário com B Pequeno"), which comprises poems about swallows, skylarks, roosters, bats, flies, spiders, ants, donkeys and sparrows. In accord with Mary Ruefle, who claims that the poem is "an act of the mind" (2), and that it begins in "a phrase, a line, a scrap of language, a rhythm, an image, something seen, heard, witnessed, or imagined" (3), Cabral, now facing the limitations of age and ageing, tells us how a poem begins in experience, as in the poem "A trail of ants" ("Carreiro de formigas"):

I either sit at the table with a poem on my plate  
and grind it to the bone

or I sit on a stone in the field  
looking idly, for example,  
at a trail of ants.

In both cases I unleash the dogs  
of the imagination who, barking with joy,  
celebrate freedom (*Caderneta de Lembranças* 68).

ou me sento à mesa com um poema no prato  
e o vou rilhando até ao último osso,  
ou me sento numa pedra no campo  
a olhar ocioso, por exemplo,  
um carreiro de formigas.

Em qualquer dos casos solto os cães  
da imaginação que, ladrando alegremente,  
festejam a liberdade (*Caderneta de Lembranças* 68).

The setting of the poem corresponds to the poet's methodology, a sequence that allows me to revendicate that Cabral's poetic observations about birds are based on experiences of attention. The poet practices what is known in theory as the "animal turn", the idea that art in general, and literature in particular, seeks to imagine a different understanding of human-animal relationships. Also, emphasizing the relevance of the body to register the animal kingdom, Cabral's poetic depiction of entities other than human entails "the place of the body as the locus of intentionality, of bodily perception as a condition of thought and language" (Clark 280). In relation to this perspective, in *Bird*, Erik Anderson reminds us that when we look for reasons to "fetishize birds" (14), we ascribe to them a combination of grace and delicate strength. But human admiration has less to do with the mechanics of flight, he claims, than with the metaphysics it inspires, concluding: "humans may be all brain, but birds are all heart" (15). In the same way, Cabral's poems illustrate that by thinking with the birds, the reader will spend less time thinking with the brain and more with the emotions of the body.

In a previous essay about A. M. Pires Cabral, I used one of his verses ("I know of places where stones talk to me" ("Sei de lugares onde há pedras / que conversam comigo") (*Arado* 61)<sup>5</sup> because it is an image the poet associates with the process of his own poetic creation: he observes, interprets and responds, imaginatively, to the world. Indeed, thinking with animals has been a constant in his work. In his latest book of poetry, *Caderneta de Lembranças*, Cabral once more writes about two of his favorite birds, the swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) and the skylark (*Alauda arvensis*). There is a certain restlessness in these poems, as if something has changed since his earlier poems. The poem "Swallows on the ground" ("Andorinhas no chão") is particularly significant, as it shows the birds in a changed state, both in their bodies and in their moods:

What has changed in the swallows'  
changeless world—that drives them  
to difficult places of sedition?  
What inner voice brings them to the ground,  
their wings retracted, renouncing flight,  
denying themselves, betraying their original vocation?

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5 See Alves, "I know of places where there are stones that talk to me": A. M. Pires Cabral's *Arado* through the lens of Ecocriticism".

What impulse banishes them from flight?

Que coisa terá mudado no imoto  
mundo das andorinhas — que as empurra  
para os difíceis lugares da sedição?  
Que voz interior as traz para o solo,  
de asa retraída, renunciando ao voo,  
negando-se, traindo a vocação original?

Que impulso as expulsa do voo? (*Caderneta de Lembranças* 61)

The poem reveals that swallows are on the ground due to the scarcity of insects; the birds are looking for food alternatives on the soil, a situation that indicates that this is a disorienting time to be a bird, a time that demonstrates that humans “cause more sorrow in the animal world than celebration” (Anderson 3). The poet is inconsolable that the swallows, “[t]hey who were born facing the air; / they, who are pure flight” are now “wings motionless, on the ground / like crawling creatures of the earth!” (“Elas, que nasceram viradas para o ar; / elas, que são voo em estado puro; (...) /— vê-las assim, de asa imóvel, apeadas / como rasteiros animais da terra!”) (*Caderneta de Lembranças* 61-2). If the poem can be read as an illustration of human arrogance and careless action in the destruction of ecosystems, it has also helped the poet to reflect on the limits of the body. One understands that the lyric voice is facing aging, and thus the body, diminished by age, has lost the ability to fully encounter life through the senses; like the swallows who enjoyed feeling the world—the light and the wind—through the body, the lyric persona is now facing physical mortification by a figurative immobile wing, which makes it more difficult to ascend to creative heights. Nevertheless, I argue that the poet’s view is not merely anthropocentric, but is defined by a more inclusive understanding of the animal species, illustrating that the existence of “bodily sentience is a shared feature of all living things, a certain basic common intelligibility between creatures” (Clark 281). Cabral’s understanding of the behavior of swallows indicates not only his embodied knowledge of the species, but also a “new kind of relationship and new accountability to others” (Dooren 9). Implicit in his poems is the possibility of the bird’s disappearance and the resulting awareness of loss and death. Ultimately, the poet emphasizes the mortal fate of the species, hopefully leading “to genuine care and concern” (Dooren 9), and re-enacting the ethical demands of the act of writing, whether in prose or poetry: “stories can connect us to others in new ways” (Dooren 10).

Likewise, in the poem “And a skylark” (“E uma cotovia”)—the conjunction “and” is used to continue the poet’s conversation with the aforementioned poem “Sister Skylark”

("Irmã cotovia"), published in *Arado* (2009)—, the bird is no longer associated with vitality and singing, but with the ripening and dying vitality of autumn:

a skylark, high in the air  
of the fresh, melancholic morning  
is extracting from the skein of her voice  
the last threads of sound, or perhaps of light  
(in autumn, sound or light are all the same).

uma cotovia, que lá muito no alto  
da fresca, melancólica manhã  
vai extraindo do novelo da voz  
os últimos fios de som, ou talvez luz  
(para o Outono, som ou luz tanto lhe faz) (*Caderneta de Lembranças* 63).

The season is captured in the poplar yellow leaves and in the humbler fruits—blackberries, wild plums, late figs and grapes—but to the poet this is a sign of an overall feeling of nostalgia about the passing seasons and the coming darkness. In opposition to the unconcern of the bird toward the coming winter—birds must constantly adapt to whatever each day brings—the poet feels the weight of his own mortality.

Although nostalgia about the passing of time is a permanent theme in Cabral's poetry, the main tone of his poems is irony and satire, alternating with lyricism. Having devoted attention to birds, the poet thinks with them about his own life, his life as a poet. He is very particular to blackbirds (*Turdus merula*), an admiration he inherited from Guerra Junqueiro (1850-1923), who described the bird as black, vibrant, bright, early riser and joyful, characteristics that Cabral uses to emphasize the cruelty of those who capture its body and its singing behind bars. In "The blackbird and the poet" ("O melro e o poeta"), for example, the blackbird is described as cautious because of the cats; the poet, on the other hand, sings carelessly and shrilly, attracting the cats that will eventually catch him:

Attentiveness—the raw material from which  
the blackbird comes.  
[...]

So, too, the poet's  
Wariness. But no: his song  
careless and strident in equal parts  
attracts cats that easily catch him  
since the intense, inept beating of his wings  
(if by chance he possesses wings) cannot keep him in the air.

Precaução — eis a matéria-prima  
de que é feito o melro.  
[...]

Assim fosse precavido  
o poeta. Mas não: o seu canto  
incauto e estridente em partes iguais  
atrai gatos que facilmente o colhem  
porque o seu intenso, inepto bater de asas  
(se acaso tivesse asas) o não sustenta no ar (*Frentes de Fogo* 25).

But the poet is a kindred spirit to the blackbird, as illustrated by the form of the poem. Divided into three parts, it unveils the enactment of the poetic labor itself: like the bird, that after confirming that there are no cats around, flies away and laughs (in the poem a synonym for song), returning afterwards to silence and shade, so too the poet, who assailed by doubt and anguish, releases his song (usually sarcastic), retreating into silence and shadow. Once more, the poet dialogues with a former poem, "The blackbird in the cage" ("Melro em gaiola"); once again, the laughter of the bird that, seeing his space drastically reduced, even though "sings—that is, laughs—as if he were lord / of a reasonable slice of the world" ("E canta – isto é, ri-se – como se fosse dono / duma fatia de mundo razoável") (*Arado* 26). The last stanza presents the poet's assessment:

And yet,  
the laughing of the blackbird in the cage  
tears me up inside  
as if instead of laughter there were tears.

For I am just like him:  
someone has reduced the yard  
to what you see  
—and I, defending it with bursts of laughter.

Just like the blackbird, like him, that's me.

E todavia,  
as risadas do melro na gaiola  
fazem-me rasgões por dentro  
como se em vez de riso fossem pranto.

Porque eu sou como ele:



alguém me reduziu o tamanho do quintal  
até o quintal ficar isto que se vê  
– e eu a defendê-lo a golpes de riso.

Como o melro, tal e qual (*Arado* 28).

Yet, the poem also offers modes of relationality between the poet and the bird based on knowledge, respect, and intimacy. As James Paz indicates, “[b]irds are nonhuman thinkers, with their own spirits, minds, and psychologies, who also prompt deeper thinking in human beings” (562). As shown, in Cabral’s poems, birds possess “living spirits and minds” (563), having a status not only of allegory but of creatural, that is, “a status of being a creature, subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body” (Herman 3). In this sense, in Cabral’s poems the reader is invited to approach birds taking into consideration bodies, psyches and environments, the embeddedness of human and nonhuman creatures. Moreover, as claimed by Paz, “[i]n the act of thinking with animals, we merge with them and transform both human self and nonhuman other” (556).

On the other hand, Cabral’s poems illustrate Lawrence Buell’s idea, that to think environmentally means to look at place. This category is central for ecocriticism because it helps to articulate eco-ethical problems in particular places whilst fostering “an awakened place-awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place molds us as well as vice versa” (253). As mentioned previously, Cabral’s main landscape is the inland northeast Portugal; however, he also wrote profusely about another specific place, the Douro River. The poem “Heron” (“Garça”) (*Ardea cinerea*), included in *Douro: Pizzicato e Chula*, depicts the peaceful life of the bird on the margins of river Douro:

And then a heron rises, taking flight.  
Slowly it flaps its great wings,  
flying hunched over,  
as if the air were suddenly  
merging with water.

As if those elements, at odds  
since the beginning of the world,  
joined now, might generate  
something new, severe and  
unforeseen by the Greeks.  
But then,  
the fragmentary flight is frozen

in a bit of swamp  
where it will hunt for frogs.

And when it lands,  
it splinters my astonishment.

Then, without a heron's flight  
to catch my eye,  
I go back to spelling out  
the river's unintelligible song.

Garça

Então, uma garça levanta voo.  
Bate com vagar as grandes asas,  
voando em corcovas,  
como se o ar fosse  
de repente fundir-se com a água.

Como se os dois elementos desavindos  
desde o princípio do mundo  
unindo-se gerassem  
uma coisa nova, ríspida e não  
prevista pelos gregos.

Depois,  
imobiliza o voo fragmentário  
no pequeno pântano  
onde perseguirá rãs.

E pousando me estilhaça  
o espinho, o espanto.

Então, sem garça a voar  
que me prenda os olhos,  
retorno à soletração  
dos ilegíveis cânones do rio (*Douro: Pizzicato e Chula* 41).

Once again, Cabral reflects on his poetic process, which is nourished by beauty—the flight of the heron, the fusion of water and air, the indecipherable song of the river—but once more, it is the poet's attention to the seemingly insignificant details of the heron and its habitat that allows the poetic voice to reconstruct in words the aquatic ecosystem in which the heron lives, by the reeds and the frogs.

The habitat that pervades the edges of the Douro, the vineyard landscape of grapevines, fig trees, thistle and cicadas, home to vultures, is also known to the poet. In "A strayed seagull" ("Gaivota tresmalhada") we read: "Poets / know little about birds / especially those with a harsh flight" ("Os senhores poetas / pouco sabem de aves, / sobretudo das que voam, cruas") (*Douro: Pizzicato e Chula* 37), an assertion that contrasts with Cabral's own position, always stretching his imagination to cross borders and approach other species, plants and other forms of life. Accordingly, in his poems birds are vital realities for observing and portraying; through them, the poet also contemplates the world and its long emotional architecture: queries, fights, beauty and love. Through them, he may inspire readers to change their thinking and to become agents of transformation, a process that has always come from a loving reverence for the earth on which he has lived.

Another bird, the kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) is all beauty:

It slashes easily across the space  
before our eyes  
like colors bursting out, one after another—  
and yet one might suspect it wished  
to go unnoticed,  
I don't know if from shyness,  
or disdain.

So fast, it rapidly blends  
into the branches of the willow trees.

An elusive glowing thread,  
a weave of green and blue—that's all  
that lingers in our eyes  
of the kingfisher and its flight.

Such a burst of color  
in such a tight small body.

Such a resolute flight  
in such flaming colors.

Pica-peixe

Risca facilmente o espaço  
em frente dos nossos olhos,  
como cores a deflagrar uma após outra –

e contudo dir-se-ia que quisera  
passar despercebido,  
não sei se por timidez,  
se por desdém.

De tão veloz, depressa se confunde  
na rama dos salgueirais.

Um fulgurante fugidio fio  
de lhama verde e azul – eis tudo  
o que nos olhos perdura  
do voo do pica-peixe.

Tão desmedida cor  
num corpo tão restrito.

Tão resolutivo voo  
em cores tão de incêndio (*Douro: Pizzicato e Chula* 48).

In this poem, the emphasis on color, and the repetition of the adverb and determiner “so fast”, “such a burst of color”, “such a resolute flight”, “such flaming colors” stands for the intensification of the bird’s magnificence, also reminding readers of the urgency to take notice. Indeed, the juxtaposition of layers of significance in the poem is both aesthetically and politically vocal, with the poet intensifying this one message: one should listen to these nonhuman voices, who in their singularity are inviting us to communicate with—and relate to—other beings, thus enlarging and enriching human lives: “If we retain just one lesson from birds it must surely be that when we reconnect with nature we lead richer lives filled with new, unexpected sensations” (Dubois and Rousseau 20).

### **3. “I’ve noticed that I lose / when measuring myself against whatever animal at all”: Appreciation of the primordial dignity**

In the concluding part of the essay, I question how the globalized, urbanized modern citizen can pay deeper attention to the natural world. As artists, writers, philosophers, and critics in the environmental field have thoroughly been demonstrating in the last decades, the answer is to recognize that Earth is alive. We must, literally, listen to the songs and stories of all the beings seen and unseen that inhabit the living Earth. Also, for us involved in telling and retelling of stories, we must imaginatively restore agency and voice to nonhumans. For too long, we have imagined that only humans were able to

think and communicate; now, with open minds and hopeful hearts we must pay attention to "the terrestrial intelligence", to use Linda Hogan's words (109).

Poetry is a field of possibilities, its total meaning resting upon the entangled aspects of meter, rhythm, words and music. I agree with Clara Dawson that entanglements are "an alternative way of seeing and thinking our hyper digitalized world, inviting, the reader instead, to access a more dynamic interplay between humans and the plants, animals and other life forms" (596). At the same time, the core of this reflection is to show how Cabral's poems about birds "prompt introspection (looking inwards to reflect upon the self) as well as extrospection (looking outwards to understand the other)" (Paz 556). A. M. Pires Cabral's works are inextricably linked to the landscapes he inhabits, those of the rural region in the northeast of Portugal, where he has lived for the last eighty years. The birds that populate his poetry coincide with those that inhabit the landscape he has been establishing relationships with throughout his life. In a recent interview, when asked why there are so many animals in *Caderneta de Lembranças*, the poet replied:

I have lived with animals all my life: this is a privilege of living in a rural environment, close to nature. Besides, I think I have a trace of Saint Francis of Assisi, and, thus, I look upon Noah's ark with sympathy. [...] I recognize the right of all animals [...] to be respected for the simple fact of their existence. I strive, in my poems, to leave implicit this message of appreciation for their primordial dignity ("A. M. Pires Cabral. Prosa e poesia: uma pulsão criadora" 10)<sup>6</sup>.

Twenty-five percent of the earth's ten thousand bird species are threatened with extinction by the end of the twenty-first century. As Dubois and Rousseau remind us: "we are at a crossroads. Our destiny is in our hands, like a chaffinch almost crushed in our grip, its heart beating fast, desperate to fly away. We can decide whether to open our hands and let the bird fly free, or smother it completely" (157). An urgency that Elizabeth Kolbert echoes in *The Sixth Extinction*: "Right now, in the amazing moment that to us counts as present, we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed" (268). Further, when criticism in the humanities insists to call the reader's attention to a particular author or text, what is at stake has been summed up by Lawrence Buell:

environmental writing does not literally repair the biosphere, does not literally do anything directly to the environment. But [...] it tries to practice a conceptual restorationism in reorienting the partially denaturalized reader not to a primordial nature, which he cannot

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6 "Toda a vida convivi com animais: é um privilégio de quem vive em ambiente rural, na proximidade da natureza. Além disso, acho que tenho uma costela de São Francisco de Assis e olho toda a arca-de-Noé com uma simpatia [...]. Reconheço a todos [...] o direito a serem respeitados pelo simples facto de existirem. Esforço-me por, nos meus poemas, deixar implícita essa mensagem de apreço pela sua dignidade original" ("A. M. Pires Cabral. Prosa e Poesia: uma pulsão criadora" 10).

recover either in fact or in fantasy, but to an artifactual version of environment designed to evoke place-sense (267).

In this line of reason, I hope to have shown that "in the act of thinking with animals, we merge with them and transform both human self and nonhuman other" (Paz 556).

Ultimately, and reviving an idea central to ecocriticism, I have tried to show that by reading Cabral's poems the reader becomes aware of the affective presence of the species in his or her life, and of the way in which, by becoming entangled in the words, the reader also becomes emotionally entangled with the species and thus more open to the Other, which includes, in Aldo Leopold's terms, soils, animals, plants, water, air. A vision, I claim, of most importance for Portugal, where, like in many other European countries, forest fires have been destroying ecosystems permanently, impacting the way species interact with each other. It is only in recent years that the Portuguese society has become aware of the loss of diversity, pollution and acidification of the oceans; only recently have scientists and scholars begun to demand for action in university curricula. The Portuguese society has been slowly facing Rachel Carson's question in *Silent Spring*: what if human action results in environments that are devoid of melodious birdsong? The answer to our "disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times" (Haraway 1) stays with the idea that we should learn "to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic past and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). This perspective accepts the intelligence of the nonhuman world, as referred by Linda Hogan, and that we acknowledge creativity and agency in the other-than-human world around us. This is the perspective, not only of David Herman, who invites us to reflect on how the creatural condition of human and nonhuman animals results "in forms of responsiveness that cut across species lines" (6), but also of David Haskell, who invites us to listen to the sounds of birds because sounds, traveling through and around obstacles, will teach us "the language of belonging". According to Haskell, "over time, this embodied knowledge of place tells us what is changing, what is gained, and what is lost". My claim has been, precisely, that A. M. Pires Cabral's poems about birds will lead the reader to enjoy her/his nonhuman kin, whilst asking about changes and choices. In a lyrical voice, Cabral tells stories: his own, but he also makes the voices of others heard, and, in my view, this falls into the category of caring. As a poet, he is asking his reader to pay attention, to take notice, to take care (Rose, "Take care" 102), and, at the same time, showing that "the structure of mutual care is local and bounded" (100). Cabral's poems about birds forge relationships and create new stories; stories that, as Deborah Rose claims, "have the potential to promote understandings of

embodied, relational, contingent ethics" ("Slowly ~ Writing into the Anthropocene" 9). In this case, poets and critics seek to "pull readers into ethical proximity" (9) with birds.

To conclude, at the end of the aforementioned "Sister skylark", the poetic voice recognizes that, if he was to measure himself with animals, he would lose:

But—alas—the skylark  
has more wings than I.

Not to mention her voice:  
clearer and sharper,  
purged of metaphors and tropes,  
that is to say, stripped clean of craft.

(In any case, I've noticed that I lose  
when measuring myself against whatever animal at all)

Porém – ai de mim – a cotovia  
tem mais asas do que eu.

E da voz nem se fala:  
muito mais nítida e chã,  
expurgada de metáforas e tropos,  
isto é, muito menos ardilosa.

(De resto, tenho notado que perco  
sempre que me meço seja com que animal for) (*Arado* 34).

However ironic (poets use metaphors and tropes to intensify the visible and invisible worlds), the poem demonstrates Cabral's acceptance of the interrelated lives of humans and animals, as well as the agency of non-human beings. As we have seen, Cabral endows birds with symbolism, but at the same time the lives of birds are intertwined with soil, weather and place, proving to be living forces, expressive and dynamic entities that transform the poet's life and spirit, making it richer and more open to the perception of birds and their meaningful language. To paraphrase Thom van Dooren, Cabral's birds are "alive" in their "commitment to the continuity of diverse ways of life, and in their attempt to enact stories as interventions into existing patterns of living and dying in an effort to work toward better worlds" (10). It is to be hoped that Cabral's poems on birds will be a stimulus to the reader's perception of human and non-human relationships as part of a larger, richer, and more diverse world, now and in the centuries to come.

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