

July 29, 2015

Having returned once more from my travels, I am delighted to find another Bird choosing a name as he continues in the practice. The choices of Mockingbird, Albatross, Peacock, and Buff Orpington are all open to you. I would rather not interfere in the matter, but the last carries a special appeal.

I am thinking in particular of Billina the yellow hen, in the 1907 *Ozma of Oz* (with its various theatrical and film interpretations) and her special role therein. Billina is forced to witness the terrible Nome King ruthlessly transforming her friends into ornaments to be added to his vast collection. Imagine a still, silent Rothschild interior deep in a cave shaft, with walls deeply scored as in quarry tunnels: this is the scene. The King offers anyone at all the opportunity to free his prisoners – provided that they correctly guess which ornaments were once living persons, saying their names out loud. If they guess wrongly, they are transformed into ornaments themselves.

He and his museum have only one vulnerability: eggs. Eggs are poison to the King and to all his magic. And Billina, by laying an egg (an egg being, as it were, the zero degree of creation), defeats the King and frees all the would-be ornaments at once. I imagine that you discern, in this digression, the beginnings of a meditation on the important questions you raise in [your message]. Let me say, first of all, that while announcing that one rejects studium, one quite often reserves to oneself the privilege of holding studium in reserve, like a fine and expensive seasoning to be tasted with moderation and discretion. And those who reject studium, again, must first have it in order to reject it – a great privilege, and a rarefied satisfaction.

As for those who have only love, or only desire, and are less frequently satisfied? There are things the amateur knows that others either more and less naive do not – for example, to borrow from Barthes, the amateur knows how a piece of music can be minor when you listen to it, and tremendous when you play it. He also knows that love is a language of the body, and perhaps in his heart of hearts he wishes not to look at a painting but to play it – if even haltingly to sight-read it. On the other hand, the lesser self of the Sunday painter is as capable of obscuring what is most important about this loving relationship as is the lesser self of the self-negating, studium-rejecting academic. Loving does not exclude studium; but it is not perfunctory or crass either.

So – Billina the yellow hen, seeing the friends she loves behind the façade of all the ornaments and irrelevancies, lays an egg.

There is the difficult question of whether this form of seeing of hers is absolutely veridical, or hermeneutic, or (*jusqu'à nouvel ordre*) illusory, or more resembles the kind of meta-seeing that you invoke in your letter, the seeing that sees what it sees and what it doesn't. Instead of answering this question, I can only say I believe that hermeneutics can be cultivated as a form of love (just as it must be rejected when it takes the form of contempt, suspicion, or blindness), and that both self-deception and disillusionment can be forms of love too.

Whatever the case, Billina doesn't bother guessing and naming names – though this would certainly trouble the relationship between faking and making, belief and irony (at the moment I say the correct name, just before the flash of light when the spell is broken and the ornament is revealed as my loved one, in that precise moment, am I telling the truth or telling a lie?). In any case we cannot help but constrain ourselves by

our myths and spells, particularly when we make a specific effort not to. And so there is no reason to stop asking questions, naming names, making myths, or to stop looking, or to stop studying – even if every now and then we push all that aside and do what yellow hens do best.

I hope you will excuse the length of this communication, in your understanding that questions on the nature and purposes of the Order concern and often trouble me deeply. Please do not hesitate to be in touch with any further thoughts.

My best to you,

M. Gylhmat
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Order of the Third Bird