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BROKEN WINGS OF FREEDOM: BIRD IMAGERY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

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Lingering spirit of the dead, rise up and possess your bird of passage!
Haile Gerima, *Sankofa*

Among the several literary concepts that could be applied to Toni Morrison's novels are those of metaphor and symbol. In her book *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Susan Willis characterizes Morrison's writing as «the most metaphorical of today's black women authors» (Willis 1987: 8). Thus critics have paid attention to her use of elements like water, fire, and earth, for instance, as well as her employment of nature, whose narrative life turns it into one more character. But little critical attention has been paid to bird imagery in this writer, in spite of the fact that it is an important aspect in her narrative that effectively contributes to her portrayal of the most negative side of African American social reality in the United States. When dealing with metaphors in African American women writers, Jacqueline de Weever argues that «[t]he images that build the metaphors are culled from nature, from creatures of the earth in most cases, with creatures of the air –the bird for example– used occasionally» (De Weever 1991: 62). However, in the case of Toni Morrison, it is frequently rather than occasionally that she uses birds –and their flight– as metaphor. It is the purpose of this essay to ascertain whether the image of the bird is utilized with its usual traditional symbolism of freedom or if that association is revised. If this is the case, we will also analyze the new meaning ascribed to birds in Morrison's novels and how that meaning is rendered.

Those little creatures called birds have always attracted the attention of humans who have tried to imitate their flight not only in mythology, like Daedalus and Icarus, but also in real life. From ancient times and across different cultures, birds have always inspired a whole range of beliefs, myths, and metaphors. Because of their ability to fly and soar up in the air towards the sky they have generally been associated with the link between Heaven and Earth; they were also considered messengers from Heaven or possessors of occult secrets (Walker 1988: 396, Chevalier 1994: 86-87). In several myths, birds are associated with the sun, like the Egyptian phoenix, the hummingbird or the eagle, for instance. The Latin word «aves» meant both «birds» and «ancestral spirits» and these creatures were also symbols of rebirth and of the flying souls which ascend to Heaven after death (Walker 1983: 101). Birds were also assumed to utter warnings and prophecies, «a power derived not only from their access to omniscient gods but from their association with the dead, who were supposed to have the privilege of foreseeing the future» (Lutwack 1994: 118). As we can see, the list of bird symbols is long, although they are usually related to flight, because of their wings, and therefore to Heaven, because of their ability to fly in an upward direction.

Morrison's powerful use of birds in all her novels is often disruptive and unconventional. Insanity, hatred, terror, slavery, selfishness, and evil are all conveyed through images of birds like the hawk, the dove, the cardinal, the peacock, the rooster, the hummingbird, and the robin. Birds are always present in her novels and even in her Nobel Prize lecture she used, once again, the image of the bird. In her speech, Morrison tells us about an old black woman who is blind but wise and some young people, one of whom poses the following question to her: «Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead» (Morrison 1994: 6). Later on Morrison discloses the symbolism behind this story: the bird, she says, stands for language and the old woman represents the writer.

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison weaves an apparently simple story about a black girl who hankers after blue eyes. But the play on words the very title encloses hints at the humiliation, worthlessness, and failure that dominate Pecola's life. Even after achieving what she most wanted, or precisely because of it, she is «the bluest eye,» that is, the saddest I: «Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach –could not even see– but which filled the valleys of the mind» (Morrison 1970: 162). Pecola is thus described as a winged but grounded bird whose broken self, after incestuous rape, prevents her flight into wholeness. This paradoxical metaphor is characteristic of Morrison's narrative, which is full of apparently contradictory terms. *The Bluest Eye* shows a world where disruption is always present, where «the fall brings death, not harvest» (Otten 1989: 10), where the seeds die instead of growing (Morrison 1970: 10), where Cholly plants his destructive seed in her daughter's womb in spring, the fertility season, rendering this season into «a fertility rite inverted» (Christian 1980: 71). Pecola, the winged but grounded bird, undergoes both a spiritual death and a psychic death, as she ends up in the abyss of madness. This type of death can be summarized in the words of Martin Foss who, appropriating the famous Macbethian sentence

states: «Here life is a 'tale told by an idiot,' perverted and absurd. This isolation and perversion can be called a 'symbolic death'–not death experienced as isolation, but an isolation which can be metaphorically called a kind of death» (Foss 1966: 36).

A plague of robins flying and dying announces the return of Sula, the witch-figure, in Morrison's second novel:

> Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning. Nobody knew why or from where they had come. What they did know was that you couldn't go anywhere without stepping into their pearly shit, and it was hard to hang up clothes, pull weeds or just sit on the front porch when robins were flying and dying around you. (Morrison 1987b: 89)

Also, four dead robins in front of Eva's house announce the arrival of the prodigal daughter in Medallion after ten years, thus acting as an omen, as Eva herself admits: «I might have knowed them birds meant something» (Morrison 1987b: 89). Here again we are witnesses to an aborted flight; like the dying and dead robins, Sula tries to find freedom in her metaphorical flight from the strictures of her community but finally returns to die in it. She is not willing to be just a mother and a wife. Her pride and her determination to be only her self, and nobody else's, is curtailed by the black community for whom she is but an evil that must be averted. This is the main example of bird imagery we can find in *Sula*. According to Barbara Walker, Robin Redbreast, or «Cock Robin,» was a bird form of Robin Goodfellow, one of the common names of the so-called god of the witches. The red-breasted bird of spring was Cock Robin's soul. The robin's red breast is also related to the blood of Christ since, according to another legend, a robin tried to pluck away the thorns from Christ's crown piercing its own breast, which thereafter became red (Walker 1983: 858). Therefore the robin symbolizes Sula because she is considered as a witch who plays havoc with the members of the community, stealing husbands and breaking rules. Once again, Morrison utilizes a bird image to represent not freedom but lack of freedom, not life, but death.

The motif of flight is crucial in the next novel Morrison writes, *Song of Solomon*. At the end of his trajectory, Milkman Dead surrenders to the air and rides it in a metaphorical flight of spiritual freedom. But the image of flight is already present in the novel from the beginning, where Milkman's birth takes place in the same hospital from which Mr Smith, an insurance agent,decides to jump. One day after this unfortunate event Milkman Dead is born; when he is four he discovers «the same thing Mr Smith had learned earlier –that only birds and airplanes could fly» thus losing «all interest in himself» (Morrison 1987a: 9). The Dead are a family dominated by material possession and accumulation detached from lower class blacks. The selfish materialism embodied by Malcolm Dead is symbolized in the last name «Dead» which alludes to spiritual death based on alienation. The ritual Sunday rides on the Packard try to show off the whole family and its success:

> These rides that the family took on Sunday afternoons had become rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man. It was a less ambitious ritual for Ruth, but a way, nevertheless, for her to display her family. (Morrison 1987a: 31)

Interestingly, the only thing Milkman can see from his seat is the «silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard» his father drives (Morrison 1987a: 32). The irony of this episode is clear: this image is but a direct allusion to flight. However, the metallic composition of the small statue and its rigidity and lack of movement symbolize an aborted flight. The impossibility to fly affects the Dead family. Moreover, the Packard Macon drives so slowly is identified by many as «Macon Dead's hearse» (Morrison 1987a: 33). Pilate, Milkman's aunt, is the hero's guide/pilot in his quest for identity. His physical journey to the South in search of a bag of gold is turned into a spiritual journey in search of selfhood and cultural identity. After a long and complicated process he finds who he really is and where he comes from, as well as the important value of his ancestors. «He journeys from spiritual death to rebirth, a direction symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight» (Lee 1985: 353). Pilate's death at the end of the novel is related to another image of birds; after this death, we are told that one bird «dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away» (Morrison 1987a: 336), that is, Pilate's earring where she kept her name in a small box. This symbolic scene represents Pilate's rebirth; after her physical death, Pilate's soul is carried to Heaven by a psychopomp or spirit-guide –the bird.[1] It is then that Milkman realizes that «[w]ithout ever leaving the ground, she could fly» (Morrison 1987a: 336). She is not dead because now she belongs to the world of the ancestors who are not physically present but are spiritually alive. We can say that *Song of Solomon* is the novel where birds are used in a most positive way in that they symbolize rebirth and freedom with the exception of the winged but grounded woman on the Packard. All in all, the lingering image we will have when we finish reading the book is Milkman's flight, which represents the freedom of his soul from materialism and his spiritual rebirth (Julien 1996: 39). In order to fly Milkman has to give up his material possessions and his greed that weighed him down like a peacock hindered by its tail (Morrison 1987a: 179). The peacock, which is related to Osun, the Yoruba orisa of Love, Art, and Sensuality, as a symbol of her beauty, is also a reminder of the risks of overindulging possessions and wealth (Neimark 1993: 143). Like his aunt Pilate, and like his ancestor, the flying African Solomon, Milkman can finally fly:

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1. This image of the bird as soul-carrier brings to mind Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*, which also includes the myth of the flight back to Africa. When Nunu,one of the slaves on the plantation,is killed by her son, people say they saw a big buzzard coming down and taking her back to Africa. And at the end of the film we can hear Shola telling us how she flies back to Africa taken by a big buzzard too.

> Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees –he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (Morrison 1987a: 337)

Thus the novel ends with the hero's spiritual rebirth granted by his acknowledgement of his legendary past.[2]

At the end of *Tar Baby*, Jadine's flight back to Paris on the man-made bird, the plane, is quite different from Milkman's metaphorical flight, as it takes her away from the possibility of closeness to her ancestors and her culture. Instead of staying in the Caribbean and keeping a connection with the roots that would empower her present and her future, she flies to Paris to join her well-off partner and continue her life of grandeur, destroying «any relationship to community in herself» (Christian 1985: 243). This is another case of spiritual death brought about by cultural alienation, similar to the one we could see in Milkman before his double journey.

If there is a novel where Morrison makes a vast and extraordinarily powerful use of bird imagery, that novel is *Beloved*. Morrison utilizes different types of bird in this story, namely the rooster, the cardinal, the dove, the hawk, and the hummingbird. Their representation in the narrative is such that they are closely associated with the horrors of slavery and the ensuing alteration of human nature.

The first bird that appears in *Beloved* is the rooster. Among its numerous meanings and associations we can mention its classification as a solar symbol because its crowing heralds the dawn and announces the end of darkness (Chevalier 1994: 209, 211). Sudanese people of Mali relate its foot to the symbolism of the cross-roads because of its shape. This bird is also one of the many symbols associated with Christ, in the New Testament story told in Matthew 26, and Mark 14. As Christ had predicted, Peter thrice denies his discipleship before cockcrow, hence its association to the death and resurrection of the Saviour (Walker 1988: 397). It also symbolizes pride (Alonso 1995: 183) and masculinity as shown in its phallic representations in Roman sculptures (Walker 1988: 397). When Paul D digs into the past and describes his humiliating imprisonment, he does not consider the pain and degradation caused by the iron bit he was forced to wear in his mouth. What he found most humiliating was the stare and apparent smile of Mister, the rooster whom he had helped to hatch: «He

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2. Jacqueline de Weever points out an interesting inversion of the myth of the flying Daedalus: «unlike Daedalus, who flies because of hubris, the hero Milkman flies because of love» (De Weever 1991: 4),love for Pilate and for his ancestors. In a similar manner, Deborah Guth makes a distinction between Solomon's original flight back to Africa to escape slavery and Milkman's flight at the end of the novel: «In this one moment he [Milkman] finally repossesses his mythic heritage. More than that, he gives it new meaning. For Solomon's original flight defined freedom as an escape from the present; but as Milkman leaps into the air and into the arms of the 'brother' poised to kill him,he embraces the present as well as the legendary past and defines freedom as a complex connectedness» (Guth 1993: 584). This is an example of Morrison's simultaneous use and revision of myth.

sat right there on the tub looking at me. I swear he smiled . . . Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was...» (Morrison 1988: 72). The image of the rooster staring at Paul D is fraught with irony in that the man is not only dispossessed of his manhood but also of his humanity through slavery. His condition is such that he even somehow wishes to be in the position of Mister, not as much because it is king and mister/master but because its nature has not been degraded:

> Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (Morrison 1988: 72)

Instead of announcing daylight, the rooster heralds complete darkness for Paul D. He wonders: «How could a rooster know about Alfred, Georgia?» (Morrison 1988: 229); the foreknowledge attributed to this bird is inverted here as it is not light but pain and darkness that it foretells.

The next bird Morrison introduces with highly symbolic connotations is the cardinal. «Beloved turned around and left . . . pausing to watch a cardinal hop from limb to branch. She followed the blood spot shifting in the leaves until she lost it and even then she walked on, backward, still hungry for another glimpse» (Morrison 1988: 101). This bird of bright red plumage in the male and sweet voice here stands as a reminder of the blood shed when Sethe cuts her baby's throat. The «blood spot» Beloved hankers after probably signifies her thirst for revenge mixed with love for her mother. Later on in the novel, the image of the cardinal is again related to blood from killing. This time Stamp Paid sees something similar to a red cardinal feather on the bottom of the river; as he tugs at it, he realizes that it was actually «a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp» (Morrison 1988: 180). Once again, the horrors of slavery are conjured up through images of birds. What could be a beautiful cardinal feather turns out to be the remains of a lynched black person.

The dove has always been one of the most emblematic birds, representative of peace and love. Its white plumage has conveyed the idea of purity; even in the New Testament Jesus refers to doves as «innocent» (Matthew 10:16). The dove also represents the Holy Spirit who descended upon Mary to impregnate her through the ear. In Morrison's novel the positive symbolism attached to this bird is inverted and disrupted. We first hear of doves when Paul D is chained-up in the prison camp:

> The dew, more likely than not, was mist by then. Heavy sometimes and if the dogs were quiet and just breathing you could hear doves. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them

> wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none –or all. (Morrison 1988: 107)

This is one more inversion of traditional bird imagery; far from being a peaceful and loving situation, it seems to be a part of the world gone awry: black men kneeling down waiting for their intake of semen from their white oppressors. «Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves'» (Morrison 1988: 108). The striking and ironic comparison between the guard's grunts and the doves' sound reminds us of the disruptive condition of slavery, which meant «[l]istening to the doves . . . and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon –everything belonged to the men who had the guns» (Morrison 1988: 162).

Our next encounter with another type of bird occurs in the most heartrending scene in the novel: Sethe's murder of her baby daughter to save her from slavery. Stamp Paid associates this enraged mother with a hawk: «her face beaked . . . her hands worked like claws» (Morrison 1988: 157). The hawk was the totemic form of the Egyptian god Horus and the pharaoh's funeral ceremonies «often included the release of a live hawk to depict the dead king's soul flying away to its home in heaven» (Walker 1988: 403). But it is its condition of bird of prey that is used in its relation to Sethe, with a special focus on the beak and claws.[3] In this episode there is a second equation of the maddened mother to another bird: the hummingbird. When Sethe sees Schoolteacher and the other men approaching,

> she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings . . . She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them . . . where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (Morrison 1988: 163)

These small birds with long beaks «look like well equipped warriors . . . The beaks resemble built-in piercing weapons; some species have thin, curving beaks that are longer that their bodies» (Benson 1989: 4). They are aggressive birds. Because they can fly straight up and down, forward and backward and they can hover in place,

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3. The same image of beaks and claws that Morrison employs in *Beloved* appears in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. Ursa has a dream where she notices «that my belly was swollen and restless» and also feels «the humming and beating of wings and claws in my thighs and I felt a stiff penis inside me...His hair was like white wings and we were united at birth» (Jones 1986: 76-77). Here Corregidora, the Portuguese slave master who haunts the women of her family, is equated with a bird of prey.

they are associated with the Sun, that seems to perform these movements too (Hunt 1977: 67-68). The hummingbirds are highly territorial and will defend their grounds «vigorously, whether or not the intruder is of their own family, and quite regardless of size» (cited in Hunt 1977: 67). In this case, the aggressiveness of the hummingbird, together with the guarding of its territory seem to fit Sethe in her most unbearable experience. Like the bird, she defends her ground at all costs; and like the hummingbird, she wins as successful warrior in that Schoolteacher will not have her baby. However, what she loses is her own past, as she will keep it at bay in the dim recesses of her mind. The episode of the hummingbird is repeated at the end of the novel, when Sethe takes Denver's employer, Mr Bodwin, for Schoolteacher, trying this time to kill him instead of her daughter (Morrison 1988: 262).

While Paul D wants to keep the unbearable past where it belongs, «in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be,» Sethe keeps «beating back the past» (Morrison 1988: 72-73), a past too horrible to relate. These are the unspeakable things unspoken Morrison speaks about; she rips the veil that covers the truth. With this novel, Morrison demonstrates that it is possible to come back from the recesses of history to «exorcise one's ghosts»; Beloved is not only Sethe's daughter but also the ghosts of those sixty million and more slaves who perished under slavery and through the Middle Passage. Thus Morrison inverts Beloved's fate: instead of remaining silenced the ghost is made flesh and comes out to relate how it feels to be in darkness.

Like the Egyptian phoenix, the ghost of the past resurrects itself. Morrison, like many other African American authors, reconstructs the past through the «imaginative act,» as she puts it (Zinsser 1987: 112) and uses that past to improve the present and the future. This union of past and present embodies the essence of the bird sankofa, which in the Akan language means «returning to your roots, recuperating what you've lost, and moving forward» (Woolford 1994: 103). So for Morrison it does not seem just a question of nostalgia for the past, but a necessary retrieval of it to help understand our present better.

After this analysis of bird imagery in Morrison's works we can conclude that they constitute one more example of inversion in this writer. Through her fiction, she turns the world upside down, in clear reflection of the irrationality of the system and environment that engulfed African Americans from their early experience in the Americas. Disruption and inversion of human nature were at the heart of slavery and racism and this is what Morrison intends to portray in her novels. If human beings are turned into animals, then birds can be grounded with broken wings. We have seen that in many of the cases we have studied, birds are often fraught with negative meaning, one of suffering, pain, humiliation, madness, and death, in keeping with the disruptive character of nature that is present in this author, as it happens at the beginning of *Sula*, for instance. Only in a few cases does Morrison abide by the traditional equation of birds/flight and freedom or rebirth.

What we have left is the hope of spiritual regeneration and, like the bird sankofa, the possibility of moving forward after exorcising those haunting ghosts from the past, even if that past is full of dying robins, smiling roosters, bloody cardinals, grunting doves, predatory hawks, maddening hummingbirds, and grounded birds.

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