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“Walking on my page”: intimacy and insight in Len Howard’s cottage of birds

***Abstract.** In this article, I investigate naturalist and musicologist Len Howard’s form of knowledge of bird life. Examining her presentations closely, I show that her methodology of intimate cohabitation with and observation of her subjects resulted in a unique documentary: a deeply personal and highly privileged understanding of wild birds. I approach Howard’s focus on bird individuality through Martin Buber’s lens of the reciprocity of I-and-Thou. I argue that intimacy with the birds of her garden yielded insights into their mindful world, delivering knowledge which pejorative characterizations of “anecdotal” and “anthropomorphic” fail to appreciate. I conclude by examining Howard’s work in the context of the behavioral science of her day and by posing the question of whether her contribution is or is not science.*

Key words. Anecdotal method – Animal mind – Anthropomorphism – Behavioral science – Classical ethology – I-and-Thou – Individuality

***Résumé.** Dans cet article l’auteur analyse les formes de connaissance de la vie animale de la naturaliste et musicologue Len Howard. En examinant de très près son travail, l’auteur montre que sa méthodologie de cohabitation intime et d’observation de ses sujets a résulté en une documentation unique: une compréhension profondément personnelle et hautement privilégiée des oiseaux sauvages. L’auteur approche le point de vue de Howard par le biais de la lecture de Martin Buber de la réciprocité du Je-et-Tu. L’auteur montre que son intimité avec les oiseaux de son jardin révèle des aspects de leur monde “intelligent” et une connaissance que les qualificatifs d’“anecdotique” et “anthropomorphique” échouent à apprécier. L’auteur conclut en examinant le travail de Howard dans le contexte de la science du comportement de son époque et en posant la question de savoir si sa contribution est, ou non, de la science.*

Mots-clés. *Anthropomorphisme – Esprit animal – Ethologie classique – Individualité –
Je-et-Tu – Méthode anecdotique – Science du comportement*

When they see me writing, dipping my pen into the ink pot, their favorite way of attracting my attention is to upset the ink. They do it deliberately, then escape my wrath by quick flight out the window. They have various ways of trying to divert me from writing, often hammering on my skull, and sitting on my shoulder to pull my hair or tweak my ears, this meaning they want nuts and cheese. If I refuse to be bullied into noticing them sometimes one of them will walk on to my page and carefully lift my nib from the paper, looking at me while doing it. This forces me to stop, so the Tits have won!

Len Howard, 1952

The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou. All real living is meeting.

Martin Buber, 1996

The strong sense of compassion that many women bring to the study, celebration, and love of animals has been world-changing and visionary. We can now say that the old guard of detached science is being replaced with the new guardians . . .

Linda Hogan et al., 1998

Musicologist Len Howard moved to a cottage with a garden in Sussex, England, where she could study birds at close quarters. For over 11 years, she literally came to live with those that dwelled in her garden and neighborhood. Her cottage was open to all kinds of birds, including great tits, blue tits, robins, and blackbirds. Free to come and go through the windows of her house, the birds became her familiars, transforming her house and garden into a window on their lives.

Howard authored two books: *Birds as Individuals* (1952) and *Living with Birds* (1956). Both are markedly original, replete with close observations, esoteric portraits, and evocative imagery. Her writings are documentaries of a privileged understanding of animal life – a form of knowledge that came into being through a relationship of intimacy with the animals she studied.

Howard was a musician by training, and her study of birds was inspired by an interest in their songs. But she became a bona fide naturalist along the way, immersed in the lives of animals she aptly called – for lack of a single word to capture the meaning – tame-wild. She lived alone in her Bird Cottage, but could hardly be said to have a private life; the birds were constant and close companions, both demanding her attention and offering her an insider's angle on their lives. One commentator has called her a "participant observer" (Barber, 1993: 88).

They were so central in her day-to-day life that Howard often had to postpone her writing for the evenings, because during the daytime the birds gave her little respite to work. Even in the evenings, when she finally sat down to type, the birds roosting in the house would rap loudly inside their boxes, protesting the "tap-tap" of the typewriter at the bedtime hour.

Howard's birds used sundry materials from the house for their nests, discovered all manner of roosting and resting spots, and often spent their leisure time methodically tearing through her furniture and linen. It takes a rare degree of openness, and an uncommon generosity with time, energy, and possessions, to create such a human-animal enterprise – and then write about it. Howard was exceptional that way, and she was rewarded by rare insight into a world of garden-variety birds. This world often appears commonplace to superficial perception; but through the gaze that intimacy aligns, and a relationship of interspecies communion, it is revealed to be rich and recondite.

In this article I investigate Howard's form of knowledge as an achievement. Her knowledge is a co-creation, to use a trendy but apposite vocabulary, of the intrinsic richness of bird life and of her method of studying it. By opening herself and her home to the birds – her "method" – she invited the birds to open their lives to her. Their behaviors were natural, but at the same time modified in countless ways by the unusual circumstances she availed them. Howard acquired a native's perspective into the secrets of bird life, yet her presence, and the conditions she created, also partly shaped the life she studied.

Her knowledge transcends the divide between observer and observed. The border between outside and inside her home (and life) was virtually obliterated, yielding a unique "space" within which uncommon human-bird interactions transpired, and bird behaviors defied the clear-cut opposition between wild and tame.

This space, I will argue, became the field of thick reciprocity that philosopher Martin Buber (1996) called the “I-and-Thou”. Within the I–Thou specific individuals – with all their personality characteristics, peculiarities, and emotional-cognitive make-up – genuinely meet and transform one another.

I begin by narrating episodes from the lives of Baldhead, a great tit, and Oakleaf, a blackbird – two of Howard’s favorite individuals. Beginning with these narratives gives an idea of her life with the birds, the nature of the observations she recorded, the kind of connection she developed with them, and the form of knowledge that emerged through that relationship. I go on to analyze Howard’s relationship with her birds using Buber’s I-and-Thou framework; Buber’s poetic insights illuminate Howard’s key discovery of bird individuality. I elaborate on fascinating dimensions of individuality, discussing the author’s observations of bird facial and gaze expression, and her narrations of the games that birds invent. En route, I comment on the two bugbears of animal behavior studies – the anecdotal method and anthropomorphism – charges that might be leveled against Howard’s writings. I end by contextualizing Howard’s work in the behavioral science of her day, and posing the question of whether the contribution she bequeathed to us is or is not science.

Vignettes from the lives of Baldhead and Oakleaf

Often it is the bird’s personality that Howard imparts, and the reader comes away with an indelible image of a creature that once declared and celebrated its existence from the rooftops. The great tit Baldhead was such a bird. “Occupied in strenuous song and defending [his] tree from intruders . . . cost him his crown feathers” – hence his name (1952: 26). Baldhead was passionate in all life’s affairs – curious, amorous, obsessive, pugnacious, and affectionate.

After he was fledged, for example, “Baldhead developed an unusual obsession for watching all the nesting affairs” associated with his parents’ second brood. None of his siblings took an interest, nor, Howard informs us, is such an interest characteristic of great tits as a species. “But Baldhead spent much time leaning over the nesting-hole as if trying to solve the mystery of it all” (1952: 28). He would peer into the nesting-hole to stare at the eggs, and had to be physically pushed away by his annoyed parents. Yet he was “magnetized”, and “returned again and again”.

It was funny to watch his start of surprise when gaping beaks first shot up at him from the nest. He drew back then ventured another look with head held first one side then the other, as if he was making sure he was seeing correctly. It seems the naked fledglings fascinated him; he continually stared at them, always starting back at first sight, when I presume their beaks shot up at him in expectation of food . . .

When the second brood flew and one fledgling was balancing uncertainly on a twig . . . Baldhead flew up and went through an astonishing performance of Tit-antics in front of the baby, who stared at him with an expression of interest. Having turned a somersault round a twig and hung on to it upside down with one foot, swinging in the air, [he] also vigorously pulled off leaves and chucked them down. (1952: 29)

The description of Baldhead's untypical curiosity and odd cavorting conveys an image of intelligence, not in terms of a capacity to respond to a challenge through ratiocination, but in the sense of an individual's aware presence in the world – expressed as pointed interest in, and attention to, some captivating aspect of it.

Baldhead retained his distinct individuality and passionate involvement in different ways through his life, as if intensity of personality were a trait that colored all aspects of his existence. During his first breeding season (and never again, thereafter), Baldhead took two mates – though the species is usually monogamous (in a given breeding season). To begin with, the three birds led a charming coexistence, what with the consuming activities of nest-building, singing, mating, and egg-laying. “With equal attention”, Howard writes, “Baldhead guarded both of [his mates'] nesting sites, followed them about, and inspected their nests” (1952: 26). Things changed radically, however, when the eggs of one of his mates, Jane, hatched. Baldhead became completely absorbed in her nesting affairs, and in feeding the nestlings, completely abandoning his second mate, Grey. His abandonment continued even after Grey's nestlings hatched. Distressed over this, Grey quivered her wings and made baby-cries around her former constant companions, Baldhead and Jane. But to no avail; Baldhead ignored her, and Jane chased her away. Grey, however, kept up her “pathetic appeals” (1952: 27).

Howard, who was anything but a detached observer in her bird studies, helped Grey by providing food for her nestlings, but observed that Grey herself stopped eating. “Grey was apparently fretting at desertion”, she states. This level of distress is also not a species characteristic, for when a great tit's mate dies, the widowed

bird is perfectly capable of raising her (or his) brood single-handedly. But in this peculiar case things ended poignantly, even tragically.

On the morning of May 19th Grey did not come to me as usual to fetch food for her nestlings, but spent nearly all day hovering near Jane's nest, with incessant exaggerated emotional display. It became very distressing to watch her, so agonized was her wailing cry and so pathetic her appearance as she kept quivering her wings with this unnatural effort. Even her nestlings were deserted while she made her last appeal. That afternoon she died, apparently of grief. The nestlings survived only a few hours. (1952: 28)

No part of the story – Baldhead's "bigamy" (Howard's expression), deserting a mate, the exaggerated emotional response to the desertion, the mother's abandonment of the nestlings, and finally Grey's death – is characteristic of the species' behavioral repertoire. The knowledge conveyed in documenting this chapter of Baldhead's life is that the life events and experiences of a particular great tit (whether we think of Baldhead, Jane, or Grey in this context) can be more complex and surprising than we would be led to expect through knowledge of the standard behaviors of the species. These two kinds of knowledge – about the individual (conveyed via anecdote) and about the species (conveyed via abstract generalization) – are obviously not mutually exclusive; though the perspectives they yield are profoundly different in intent and effects, they can inform and enrich one another, as I will later argue.

Baldhead's vivacious personality eventually got the best of him, for he exhausted himself in territorial disputes and fighting. During breeding season, year after year, he would get injured and exhausted, and came to look downright "bedraggled". His disputes, fatigue and injuries from battle, and mode of coping are described as follows.

At midday I see him and his rival rolling on the floor, feet interlocked . . . They fly out the window, one in hot pursuit of the other. Half an hour later a lamed, ill-looking Great Tit flies in through the fanlight, landing in a gasping condition plop on my lap, unable to stand. At first I did not recognize Baldhead, so different does he look, his eyes dim with pain . . .

January 10th. Baldhead is very ill, his eyes are clouded and he is still unable to stand on either leg. He flies in at the fanlight and flops on my lap several times a day, choosing a moment when no other birds are in the room. If Inkey [his rival] enters after him he quickly hides on the floor behind furniture but I am generally able to prevent Inkey's entrance by closing all windows directly Baldhead appears. He understands the safety of this, and as if in hiding, immediately I close the windows he flies from cover and lies on my hand to feed. I keep him on my lap as long as possible . . . (1952: 51)

With this narrative the reader again glimpses the complexity of Baldhead's personality – as he moves, from one context to the next, from belligerent, blood-drawing battles over territory, to the vulnerable and affectionate offering of his body upon Howard's lap.

Another extraordinary bird whose life Howard narrates was the blackbird Oakleaf. "His song", she tells us, "compelled concentrated listening and much thought about the soul of a bird" (1952: 78). She called him Oakleaf after seeing him selecting an oak-leaf from the ground to use in combat. "Brandishing it high with a confident air", Howard writes, he "strutted right across [his rival's] territory" (1952: 77). Oakleaf used leaves as "talismans" all his life. In both games and territorial disputes, a behavior entirely unique to his person, so to speak, and not exhibited by blackbirds in general.

Oakleaf was also creative in the relationship he formed with another blackbird whom Howard named Darky. These birds invented a game together, using an apple as the object of play.

Oakleaf gave up half his lawn to [another Blackbird of his age] without fighting. They appeared to settle matters by mild, friendly games around the new boundary of Oakleaf's territory, a flower-bed jutting out as a sort of no-man's land. The new bird, called Darky because he sang into the dark after other Blackbirds were asleep, would walk toward Oakleaf, who hastily picked up a piece of apple from under the tree and stalked around the flower-bed, holding the apple high, with the head upraised and tail outspread like a fan. Darky rushed at him, he eluded the attack, dodged around the bushes and deposited the apple in Darky's territory just beyond the flower-bed. Darky ran after him, also with spread tail, upraised head and stiffly poised body. He pretended to grab the apple, but let Oakleaf intercept. Then the two birds paraded after each other in comically affected-looking attitudes, in and out of the flower-beds. They returned to the apple, which Oakleaf snatched and held erect cockily in front of Darky, who chased him back to his side of the territory, where he dropped the apple and pretended to eat it. Darky dashed at him and they flew up together, snapping at the air playfully, so it seemed. Then the game began as before. They spent many hours over it in October and November, apparently enjoying it and never suffering even a ruffled feather from their intercourse. (1952: 80-1)

This game exhibits a good deal of creativity, as Oakleaf and Darky used territorial motifs to structure an activity (playing), which is antithetical in sensibility and intent to territorial behavior. The blackbirds chose to play this game in the neutral zone cushioning their territories. Their play not only defies stereotypical images of territoriality between same-sexed birds, it also exudes a touching affection the birds had for one another. After Darky disappeared, Oakleaf never played the game again.

We can appreciate through this story, as with those narrated about Baldhead, how recounting anecdotes can deliver significant knowledge: the telling of a specific story punctures a priori ideas we project on the world – such sensible preconceptions, for example, as the proclivity of territorial males to fight, be it with their bodies or their songs.

I-and-Thou in the world of Howard and her birds

Howard's bird studies were not the fruit of an eccentric woman inviting wildlife within observational proximity by offering food and shelter. She developed with her birds what philosopher Buber (1996) called an I–Thou relationship – a reciprocal relationship which is entered into with one's whole being. Buber juxtaposed the I–Thou to an I–It connection. Though the philosopher's interest was in the realization of humanity's highest potential – which he believed can emerge only in the encounter of I and Thou, through the "primacy of relation", as he put it – he used the example of relating to a tree to illustrate his distinction between the divergent modalities of relating. Borrowing and embellishing from Buber's example of tree, I substitute bird to clarify the distinction between relating to "It" and relating to "Thou".

1. I can look at a bird as a fleeting object – an animal that flits about which I rarely have reason to pause and examine.
2. I can observe the bird as an aesthetic experience – as animated movement, colorful or drab, coming and going to the feeder or the tree outside my window.
3. I can classify the bird as a member of a species, possessing no individuality (of interest), everything it does being apprehended as an expression of an inborn or acquired blueprint of its kind (or an exception to it).
4. I can subdue the bird by caging it, killing it, or destroying its habitat.
5. I can relate to the specific bird in the present moment, in all its peculiarities, as primarily an individual being, with a life as independent, full, and elaborate as my own – a life which always already is only partially knowable by me, but which I may still hope to "genuinely meet".

Descriptions of 1 through 4 describe I-It modes of relating. The other is objectified, and viewed from a literal or abstract distance. The distancing inherent in the I-It often has to do with an absence of attention, interest, or care. Relating (or, perhaps better, non-relating) to the other as "It" is inherently part of life; it involves a separation from the other which is not necessarily negative or destructive. At the same time, the objectification intrinsic to the I-It connection is presupposed in acts that harm or destroy the other – such as caging, killing, or habitat destruction described as case 4 above.

That the distancing between I and It is not intrinsically negative can be seen in connection with institutionalized science: distancing, in this case, has been associated with the attainment of "objectivity". In behavioral science, in particular, the I-It modality is regarded as necessary for studying behavior that has not been altered by a relationship between scientist and animal. The I-It modality enables the researcher to classify behaviors abstractly – as belonging to a species, rather than to particular individuals. In behavioral science the animal(s) observed must be related to as It, in order that methods, experiments, and observations be replicable. Indeed, the moment an animal is regarded as a Thou – as a specific individual with whom I am in mutual relationship – idiosyncratic elements come into play which resist standardization or quantification. In a sense, the phenomena become ineluctably concrete, and, as a consequence, more fluid, exclusive, unpredictable, and unrepeatable.

Case 5, above, of "relat[ing] to the specific bird in the present moment, in all its peculiarities, as primarily an individual being, with a life as independent, full, and elaborate as my own", approximates an I-Thou modality of relationship which, according to Buber, is experienced as encounter or genuine meeting. Encounter is not just about being co-present, nor does it refer to prefabricated or conventional forms of interaction. Buber's "encountering" involves a mutual engagement of subjects in ways that are unpredictable in detailed form – engagement structured by the flow of the moment, the subjects' common history, and contingencies arising in that point of time, endogenous or exogenous to the relationship. Encounter or genuine meeting between I and Thou may transpire fleetingly, but, more typically, unfolds and evolves over time. In encounter, the participants have one another in mind, in their particular being, and turn to each other with the intention of establishing reciprocity. Encountering implies mutual transformation.

If life is intended as a transformational journey toward deeper understanding and being, and if such transformation occurs, as Buber believed, more readily in and through relationship, we can understand why the philosopher epitomized the I-Thou in his famous adage – *all real living is meeting*.

Howard's works attest that her years of living with the birds may be described as genuine meeting. The dichotomy between subject/observer and object/observed in which the "other" is distanced and objectified – the hallmark of the I-It connection – is not only absent from her work, it is actively eschewed. There is only relation, reciprocity, interpenetrating lives, and what Buber called "exclusivity" – which we might interpret as the non-reducibility of I-and-Thou to a general system of concepts or theories. Thou, Buber wrote, "appears in space, but only in an exclusive confrontation in which everything else can only be background from which it emerges, not its boundary or measure" (1996: 81). Thou "knows no system of coordinates" (1996: 81). Indeed, there is no generality about birds that Howard sets out to prove, beyond the general point that an animal acts and responds as a specific individual, rather than as a blueprint of some concept – be it "species", "territorial", "intelligent", "monogamous", or what have you.

Howard's form of knowledge – of conveying the rich tapestry of bird life before, or outside, theory – is built on the grounds of I-and-Thou. The key epistemic element of this knowledge is individuality, and, to the extent that she is able to follow a bird's life from cradle to grave, biography. The key relational element of this knowledge is intimacy, and the trust on which intimacy is always founded.

Individual birds are members of species, no doubt, and Howard often describes species' characteristics. But within the species every individual is different. Some birds are full of life and determination, while others are timid and fearful; some are self-conscious and gentle, others are demanding or testy. Birds play differently, have different tastes in food, practice territoriality and mating displays in divergent ways, and have distinct preferences for nesting sites or roosting spots. In taking food from Howard, some birds change their manners from demanding and urgent when feeding their nestlings, to well-mannered and patient when the meal is for themselves. Some birds invent their own songs, while others crib songs and may even imitate snippets from the song of a different species or human

music. There are birds who sing with passion and birds who cannot be bothered.

In Howard's lived perspective of relating to each bird (according to its proclivities for human companionship), there is not a single dimension of being that does not bear the unique fingerprint of the individual bird. But what enables this knowledge of individuality to emerge from the observations that comprise it is that the observer, herself, is perceiving and recording the data inside a relationship.

The epistemic and relational components of her knowledge are thus mutually constitutive. Howard is not simply primed to see individuality in birds – as though actively seeking to detect it, or bent on making a theoretical point of it. Significantly, she developed the connection with them that allowed their individuality to be revealed. The knowledge she created is ineluctably bound up with the relationship she attained with the birds she studied – a relationship of intimacy in which there was freedom for their personhood to be expressed, perpetual opportunity for their individuality to be witnessed, and the kind of love that tunes the eyes to detail and diversity.

Intimacy and insight: creating knowledge through relationship

The achievement of intimacy fostered certain kinds of observations in Howard's work – observations which in turn constituted the building-blocks of the knowledge she created. The full experience of intimacy emerges only in the reciprocity of I-Thou, wherein each regards the other as a subject with a distinct existence autonomous of, and as rich and deep as, one's own. Intimacy is about seeing and being seen, sustained within a field of trust and respect; the more wholehearted the trust and respect, the deeper the intimacy.

In an intimate relationship a field of continuity is formed, whereby the other's past and present behaviors, and ways of being, acquire coherence and familiarity. An intimate companion comes to be known as possessing a unique style of acting and responding. Within the relationship there is relaxation, joyous ease, and open expression. Intimacy implies making oneself fully available to one's companion, because nothing in the relationship is threatening or impeding in any way – but, on the contrary, the companion's exuded openness is an invitation to unselfconsciously display oneself to be seen.

The birds Howard lived with expressed their full repertoire of behaviors, for they trusted Howard – in many cases, completely. The trust expresses itself in different layers of the human–bird relationship that often have to do with the ways the birds made their bodies available to her: for example, flopping into her lap, sunbathing on her knee, or hiding from rivals behind her hair. The trust is also recounted in telling episodes, such as when the great tit, Beauty, brought Howard one of his offspring whose leg was injured and who was thus unable to stand. Howard writes that “Beauty at once handed her over to me and she [the fledgling] accepted the human stranger from the first moment of her arrival as if knowing why she had been brought here. While she lay on my hand Beauty fed her with cheese” (1956: 88). The story illustrates not only Beauty’s trust in Howard, but the osmotic transference, so to speak, of that trust to his 10-day-old offspring. Typically at the Bird Cottage, after parent great tits fledged their offspring, they would “hand them over” to Howard (1956: 118). Clearly this was a learned (not instinctive) parental strategy, and advantageous (in a world with too many free-roaming cats) for offspring survival.

Howard’s provision of food and shelter relaxed the birds, and her presence never hampered them. Close, daily contact trained Howard to read the minutiae of their bodily and facial expressions, and allowed the birds to express their inner being, viz. their cognitive or emotional experience at the moment. Not surprisingly, Howard describes mindful birds – not instinctual automata (as she insists), nor behavioral instantiations of any theory. Her immersion in a world of animal mind was a consequence neither of a penchant for anthropomorphism nor of having a theory of animal mind (or consciousness) to promote. Rather, mindfulness comes into clear view (both for her and for the reader) because mind itself largely manifests in and as relationship – as opposed to being an “objective fact” that is amenable to be discovered or proved. In other words, the mind of the other is something more readily witnessed and experienced within an I–Thou relationship than it is recordable and measurable within an I–It connection.

Howard’s predilection for biographies and biographical snippets, as illustrated above with stories from Baldhead’s and Oakleaf’s lives, could be branded “anecdotal”. Indeed, anecdotes abound in her writings – her method of presentation is largely providing stories about birds. The anecdotal method fell into disrepute in the late 19th century with the work of George Romanes, who was seen as

promoting unreliable, extraordinary reports about animal abilities. Anecdotes in behavioral science came to be regarded as unsubstantiated stories, or nonreplicable observations, that singled out extraordinary behaviors, usually of a strikingly intelligent character (see Richards, 1987; Mitchell et al., 1997).

Howard's use of anecdotes, however, is not a device to capture underappreciated intelligence or unusual abilities. Her anecdotes are intended to deliver bird individuality – her central discovery and thesis. Moreover, her stories do not tend to be about cognitive feats: they are about the everyday life of birds, their activities and interactions, in which each bird participates with its quirks of personality and its distinct style, likes, and dislikes. Anecdotes communicate clusters of experience in Howard's work, and are narrated in order to reveal the richness of life and the profound diversity of behavior that exist in the world of birds.

Even when her descriptions demonstrate mindfulness, they are usually intended to show not how intelligent birds are, but how they differ in their predilections. Describing the great tit, Joker, for example, Howard tells us how she “liked amusing herself quietly”, and tells us the following story:

[H]er passion for examining things carefully in detail led her to discover that the metal band on top of the bird cage would turn round. (The cage was hung to the bird-table and always open.) To do this, she had to raise the band, thus releasing the pressure on the wires that it covered. It was fascinating to watch her at this occupation which she pursued for many days with intense concentration. With careful movements she gripped the edge of the broad band in her beak, lifted it, then moved it round about a tenth of an inch before gently replacing it on the wires and letting go her hold . . . [O]ccasionally the band fell back without her having moved it at all. When this happened she used even greater care next time, and with slow, firm movements, accomplished her task. She found this pursuit so absorbingly interesting that she kept at it for half an hour at a time, returning to it two or three times a day . . . Her reward for the continuous concentration she put into this pursuit must have been a sense of achievement in exercising her skill. (1956: 121)

The point of the story is to illustrate Joker's individuality, which manifested itself in the ways she directed her mind – her practices of concentration – to detailed aspects of the material surroundings. The story secondarily illustrates something about the single-mindedness of great tits “to know what they want and how to get it”. With the egalitarian mindset characteristic of naturalists, Howard deplores: “Humans who are over-conceited about the cleverness of

mankind should live with Great Tits so as to see things in proper proportion!” (1956: 127).

The anecdotal method has been criticized as delivering unverifiable stories about singularly observed behaviors or events. Telling anecdotes thus became discredited as a means of knowledge-building, for it allegedly could provide no general truths about the behavioral repertoire of a species. With Howard’s work, however, a profoundly significant generalization emerges through the anecdotal method of reporting biographies or biographical vignettes: that there exists tremendous diversity of behavior among birds, both consequence and expression of their individuality. In that sense, even a singularly observed behavior is a datum worth reporting for its general significance. The following, for example, is a beautiful anecdote with extensions not into the intelligence-faculty of bird mind, but into its seeking experiences of pleasure. It recounts a great tit behavior, consistently exhibited by one individual, that Howard never witnessed before nor after in another.

Another [Great Tit] fledgling had an original idea about sunbathing. He always liked to do it hanging upside down from a twig, his wings and tail fully spread, his head turned to one side and his beak half-open in the normal sunbathing gape. He had to find a suitable, thin, horizontal twig for this suspended sunbath, with space below and no leaves above, then he swung himself into the pose, his golden breast feathers fluffed out . . . I have never seen any other bird sunbath in this manner, which was sensible if not comfortable, for they cannot lie on their backs with both wings outspread so the sun does not get to their underparts in the usual sunbathing poses. (1956: 140–1)

Howard was able to witness many bird “original ideas”, for the birds carried out their affairs undeterred by her presence – as opposed to the fear, caginess, and elusiveness that most wildlife exhibits in the human presence. In his Foreword to her 1952 book, biologist Julian Huxley noted the importance of this point:

[F]ear inhibits normality of behaviour. Only when birds have come to lose their fear can a human observer really begin to be let into the secrets of their lives, and discover the degree of their intelligence. This point . . . is to be taken to heart by professional biologists. (1952: 9)

The concept of “tame-wild”, so profoundly missing from the human experience of wild nature in our time, comes to life in Howard’s oeuvre. “Tame”, here, is not the tame of domesticated birds. It is the tame of birds free to express their wild ways. There is a deep message in Howard’s *Bird Cottage* about humanity’s potential connection with the wild; we will not hear that lesson if

we regard her story as eccentric and view its telling anecdotally as a case-study.

The games that birds play

A dramatic expression of individuality in bird life is conveyed in Howard's descriptions of their games. These descriptions are among the most memorable and delightful, for they encompass significant ontological and epistemological implications: the inventiveness of birds, and thus, indirectly, their imagination and intelligence; the sheer joyfulness that birds can express; and the intractability of such innovative animal actions to mechanistic explanations of behavior. Indeed, the narration of bird games strengthens Howard's critique (recurring in her books) that birds do not "react automatically in set patterns of behavior according to the stimulus" (1952: 142). Not only does she attack the quasi-automaton portrayal of bird behavior, she also counters it with a thesis of human-bird mind continuity. "After the incidents I have witnessed during eleven years of observation of individual birds at close quarters, I cannot think that their mind is so remote from ours." After noting that there are also "many differences", she concludes by stressing similarities: "Birds have a language of their needs, they have recreations, even taking the form of definite games like ours . . ." (1952: 142-3).

Bird games include the simple and familiar (such as chasing or nipping each other teasingly); the droll (for example, picking up objects and dropping them off table edges, or spilling Howard's ink); the unusual (one great tit was observed playing with a bumble-bee, following the distressed insect on the ground and tapping its furry body); and the charming (taking turns sliding down Howard's pillow, on her bed, in "alpine sport").

In what follows, I reproduce long portions of bird game descriptions. It is impossible to convey the spirit of these games – and the lyricism of presentation that echoes and transmits it – simply by means of paraphrase or shorter renditions. Birds mostly play within their own species, but Howard notes many exceptions to this generality.

Bird games are played individually, in pairs, and collectively, so I have chosen an example to represent each.

In the early hours of a wild windy morning . . . I saw a young Blackbird with adult plumage not yet complete, performing a very unusual dance on [the] lawn. She chose a sheltered strip, surrounded by flower-beds, with a rose pergola behind it. Lifting her wings high so the pale undersides were seen, she flickered them rapidly and gave a little leap into the air, then darted forward a few paces on the ground and, with more quick wing flickers, turned sharply round, darting, leaping and turning again, with occasional light wing-flicking. Every movement was at lightning speed and full of airy grace. Suddenly she stopped and pecked the lawn vigorously, scattering small clods of clay soil. Snatching one, she threw it with a sharp twist of her head, darted after it, seized it again and threw it as if playing a rapid game with a ball. Again she made a springing leap, and flicking high-raised wings at intervals, she whirled around three times in a circle of a few feet, keeping to the ground but with motion too rapid to know if she was running, hopping or propelled forwards by the curious wing-flicks. Suddenly she stopped, her body sunk on the ground, her head upturned.

It was the most surprising performance, for the dancer's movements were not typical of a Blackbird. (1952: 79)

There is a dreamlike quality to this story conjured through the "wild windy morning" setting, the solitariness of the performance, and the almost shamanic quality of the dance, seemingly striving to express something deeper than joy. Most captivating of its qualities, however, is the meaningfulness we intuit, even as we are thwarted by the opaqueness of its meaning. Seeing this dance is encountering being, recognizing it as being – but also finding our interpretations foiled and our mind forced to acknowledge the partial inscrutability of the other. Characteristically, Howard underscores that the movements observed were not "typical" of the species.

The next passage describes the interaction between two male blackbirds, whose territories were in separate places. These birds created a game of pretending that a tree-stump was disputed territory; they played their mock-territoriality game regularly, and only with each other.

For three years, at all seasons, one Blackbird in my orchard played with a neighbor bird at owning a small tree-stump . . . [T]his was not dispute for land but a game that both birds appeared to enjoy spending much time over every day. Even in nesting season they played for a short while in the evenings. If the neighbor did not turn up, my Blackbird flew next door and they returned together to the tree-stump. The game began by typical Blackbird stalking, taking turns to be leader and follower. Then one bird flew onto to the tree-stump, the other quickly chased him off and perched there himself, with tail outspread, head upturned and humorous cockiness in his erect posture. In his turn he was chased off, and stalking began again and the game was repeated, often continuing for hours with slight variations. There was some resemblance to the children's game of "I'm King of the Castle". I have seen many other male Blackbirds at similar play, always

with a chosen friend, other neighbors just as accessible being treated differently and generally chased right off the territory. (1952: 108-9)

Just as in the case of Oakleaf and Darky's game with the "disputed apple", described earlier, the interaction of the male blackbirds not only is incongruent with stereotypes of male territoriality, but in the exclusivity, regularity, and long hours of the encounter intimates a bond of friendship between the birds. Notable, also, is how the human eye, beyond perceiving that this is an invented game (in which a lot of pretending is transpiring), also captures its affective quality – the comradeship, the joy, the humor, the love. Phenomenologists call what we see beyond direct perception, *apperception*: what we *apperceive* is often, paradoxically, of deeper and more memorable significance than what we just see.

The following passage describes a team sport – a number of swallows playing an invented game together, using a feather.

I have seen Swallows play a wonderfully graceful game of catching a feather. It was one August afternoon when I was sitting at the top of a steeply sloping farm field in the uplands of Devon that I noticed more Swallows than usual were wheeling close together over one part of the field, presumably an abundance of flies on the hot, sunny day being the cause. Ducks and Geese roamed in the field and the grass was sprinkled with a few white breast-feathers. I then saw a Swallow dip to the ground and sweep upwards with one of these feathers held in his beak and, circling above the other Swallows let it fall. As it floated down it was caught by one of the wheeling birds who then rose above the rest and again the feather was let loose, to float down through the many circling Swallows. This time it nearly reached the earth, then one bird swept down with graceful dip and flicker of wings, rising aloft with the feather, to drop it once more. Sometimes their wayward toy would fall uncaught, perhaps too worn for further use; then quickly a bird swooped to the grass, seized another feather while on the wing and the play continued as before. It was a beautiful game to watch in the setting of hills, with a background of wild moorland and far away the blue haze of distant sea meeting the deeper blue sky. (1952: 106)

The singularity of this observed episode of play, far from rendering it insignificant, is the very source of its potency. It teaches that while life activities tend to stay on mundane tracks (for example, swallows wheeling through a swarm of flies to feed), sometimes action veers off the expected course into new-found terrains of expression. This catching of the feather, we can imagine, was a game that joined the birds' attention and intention, requiring an in-the-moment "wonderfully graceful", yet on-the-spot improvised, coordination with respect to whose turn it would be to dip, catch, and drop. It is no stretch that Howard calls the feather a "toy", for what else could it have been?

The single report, again, punctures reasonable preconceptions about animal behavior. The swallows were wheeling above the field, on that afternoon, not on account of “an abundance of flies”, but for the sake of an out-of-the-ordinary engagement: to play a game of “catching a feather”, a game that possibly had not been played before, and would never be played again, by those resident swallows (or any others). “I have seen”, Howard begins this story – and we might append, as a conclusion, *it was like nothing I expected*.

The last example involves games played spontaneously by great tits on Howard’s bed, during a time when she was taken ill.

One winter, when I was ill for two or three weeks. Tits amused themselves on the bed every day in a variety of ways. Some played at possession of me, so it seemed, and displayed by walking about all over me, tails fully spread, wings half-opened and drooped, heads stiffly held up, their beaks pointing to the ceiling. They muttered queer language to each other while displaying, and their expressions were so humorous it was impossible to watch without laughter. It was obviously all in fun, the birds entering into the game were not at that time disputing territory, for it was early winter. Another amusement was to slide down the slopes of my pillow, which miniature alpine sport some seemed to enjoy. They climbed to the top, then slowly slid down without moving their feet. (1952: 117)

This lifeworld of birds frolicking on Howard’s body and bed, playing at possession of her and sliding down pillows in alpine sport, resembles a fairy-tale scene. Yet it is not a realm of make-believe: it is the world of reciprocity, of I-and-Thou, the sweetness of which is the wand that transforms life into magic.

Reading facial expression and the quandary of anthropomorphism

Through the intimate knowledge of her birds, and connection with them, Howard was able to read their faces. Her writings are replete with descriptions of facial and gaze expressions, both as the birds carried out their daily affairs and in face-to-face interactions with her. Facial expressions, as well as feelings conveyed through the eyes, are portrayed as “worried”, “eager”, “demanding”, “angry”, “glaring”, “cross”, “expectant”, “intent”, “pleading”, “absent-minded”, “dazed”, and the like. Many of these expressions convey emotion, and are interpreted by Howard through a combination of reading the face itself, the context of its expression, and her intimate tuning into, and understanding of, the individual bird.

Her depiction of facial and gaze expressions is pervasive, and the reasons for this are significant. First, such expressions are tied to individuality, and their portrayal underscores this point. In similar situations, different birds respond differently. If cheese were withheld from them, for example, certain birds would get angry, while others would exhibit pleading expressions. One self-conscious bird named Curley would alternate looking at her own feet and looking into Howard's face. A bird's response, especially its emotional response, is completely tied to its personality; while responses differ between birds, a particular individual's response tends to be consistent, since, like human personality, bird personality has stability and continuity.

Second, the depiction of expression was important for Howard in conveying an inner or mental life, a world of experience in bird life. She was aware that the scientific literature of her day shunned "animal mind" – the idea that birds, for example, have intelligence, emotion, or thought. Without exaggerating bird abilities, Howard disagreed with the dominant perspective: she knew well that the birds she lived with were mindful creatures. The mindfulness is primarily conveyed in the way the birds live their daily lives – with (varying degrees of) attention, deliberateness, and care in defending territory, courtship matters, raising their young, and the like. For example, Howard recounts parenting stories in which the birds attend to the difference between their fledglings perched in exposed positions and in the safety of tree cover (1956: 49). The presence of mind is also witnessed in matters of taste; for instance, Howard argues that for a certain female great tit it seemed "clear that the individual male [she chose as her mate] must have a special attraction" to her, beyond territory possession (1956: 52). In the behavioral literature, this kind of observation comes under the auspices of "sexual selection", a concept much disputed among professional and amateur scientists in Howard's day (see Burkhardt, 2005: 93ff.). Howard does not theorize female attraction to potential male mates, but witnesses it as an aspect of taste that is not fully transparent, in its specificities, to a human observer.

The views of classical ethology, gaining ascendancy at the time, stressed the importance of instinctive behavior – of innate packets of fixed behavioral sequences (Burkhardt, 2005). Howard believed that overemphasizing the fixity of behavioral patterns resulted in a lopsided portrayal of behaviors as uniform and automatic. Her

own emphasis on individual variation and emotional expression in birds conveyed a mindful lifeworld, rather than a world of mechanically and homogeneously expressed behaviors.

Finally, Howard's depiction of facial and gaze expression in birds was inexorably connected with the intimacy she shared with them. It is only in the context of a relationship that a "piercing stare" (1956: 54) can be read as a form of protest, or "looking at me with an uncertain air" (1956: 58) can be interpreted as a lack of comprehension of what is expected, and "giving me a prolonged look", in specific contexts, can be understood as meaning "help me" (1956: 154). Without close daily contact it would not be possible for her to come to know bird expressions so well. Nor could she omit such descriptions from her writing without excising a vital dimension of her experience. Sometimes the birds' body language was fleeting and ambiguous, and not easy to interpret. Nonetheless, Howard would share such intimations, as when she reports about Beauty, a great tit, returning to her garden after four weeks' absence:

I had the delight of seeing Beauty fly up and perch on my hand. He gazed up into my face for a few moments, examining it all over as if to make sure it really was me, and giving me the feeling that perhaps he was pleased to see me again. (1956: 87)

Howard communicated with the birds in the language of the senses – eye contact, glances, touch, and vocalizations. The birds lingered around her when she sat at her typewriter or to eat; they played with her on her bed; they had intimate physical contact with her, as in the example of Baldhead collapsing into her lap, but also perching on her shoulder and head, nipping at her hair, ears, and the backs of her feet and knees. Some birds enjoyed her caresses and others took to sunbathing on her. One "timid" bird named Monocle would hide under Howard's hair at the back of her neck at the approach of her rival, another female, named Star (1956: 48). Howard maintains that the birds clearly understood her tone of speech, and sometimes even her words, and responded appropriately. Immersed as birds and Howard were in the language of the senses and bodily contact, it was entirely natural that she would write about what she saw in their faces and eyes.

On one received perspective, reading emotion or any cognitive response in an animal's face raises the quandary of anthropomorphism – of whether such reading is accurate insight or wishful projection (see Mitchell et al., 1997; Daston and Mitman, 2005). Indeed, Theodore Xenophon Barber believes that ornithologists in Howard's

day “discounted her work as anthropomorphic” (1993: 96). Howard was entirely aware that she was opening herself to the charge of anthropomorphism. For example, she describes one great tit she knew well, Jane, as pausing at the threshold of her nest after feeding her nestlings “with a worried expression on her face” (1952: 25). Jane had just lost her mate to a cat, and was forced to do all the parenting alone. (Typically great tits cooperate in raising the young.) Howard comments that seeing a “worried expression” on Jane’s face might be construed as “anthropomorphism”, but she goes on to insist on the accuracy of her interpretation, stating that

her whole manner as well as her look showed she was worried. In my close observations of Tits I have learned to tell by their looks and manner if they are troubled by something, and I am satisfied that in this instance it was the case. (1952: 25)

Howard’s defense against the charge of anthropomorphism entailed virtually no elaboration: it essentially consisted in repeating that Jane’s entire demeanor indicated that she was worried, and defending her assessment as stemming from intimate knowledge of her birds. Insisting on the ability to accurately perceive emotion will hardly count as proof for the skeptic. At the same time, what can prove worry on an animal’s face? Rather than taking on the hopeless task of placating the skeptic, a more fruitful angle may be investigated: understanding how reading worry in a bird’s face is interlaced with the I-and-Thou relationship that Howard shared with her animals.

The I–Thou is experienced, Buber averred somewhat cryptically, “with the whole being”. “Whole being” might signify a variety of things, depending on the relationship under consideration, but in this case it can be fruitfully interpreted to mean that the senses, body, heart, and mind are all involved in the relationship. Knowledge born within an I–Thou relationship ineluctably has a sensual-physical, affective, and cognitive component. Instead of fretting over a bird’s “worried” look as potential anthropomorphism – which amounts to undermining the credibility of the observation – it is more meaningful to understand it as a form of perceptual knowledge, knowledge, in other words, available through the eyes, but not amenable to proof by formal procedures of measurement, rational argumentation, or even thick description.

Perceptual knowledge belongs to what philosopher Michael Polanyi (1966) called the “tacit dimension”, by which he meant that we know more than we can tell (or account for) in language.

In the case of fellow human beings, we are often certain we know what a facial expression means, and yet we are unable to disclose how we know. The inability to articulate the “how” makes perceptual knowledge ineffable but not mysterious: knowing emotion in a face is based on evolutionary homology (absolute with people, more distant with birds), prior experience with a particular individual, and the occasion or context of expression. A slew of elements thus come into play in perceptual knowledge, resulting in an often unfaltering reading of the language of body via the medium of body – the expression in a face or gaze captured by the eyes.

Though one can have, or feel, absolute certainty about the meaning of a facial or gaze expression seen in an animal, it is impossible to prove such a claim for another, or to communicate methods for making the same observation. The inability to formulate how perceptual knowledge is attained, and to provide guidelines for the repetition of its attainment, has resulted in the excision of perceptual knowledge from behavioral science. Descriptions of animal facial expressions are rarely found in ethological or behavioral-ecology writings. Perceiving expression may be operative in the field, and can be used in understanding what is transpiring, but it is not reportable knowledge. The exclusion of perceptual knowledge is an important reason why animal mind became (and remains) a problematic topic for science, for facial and gaze expressions are often tied to the manifestation and perception of mind. But such expression cannot be “propositionalized”, because sensory experience is not translatable into language. When Howard states that the robin named Dobs “glares angrily” at a male newcomer (1952: 92), she transmits a distinct visual image to the reader, though there can be no description of how “glaring anger” is seen, or seeable, in a bird’s eye. Because this form of knowledge is propositionally “unaccountable”, the observations that underlie it are eschewed from formal science.

The I-and-Thou relationship, following Buber’s insight, is experienced with the whole being: Howard’s work is saturated with perceptual knowledge, for she tunes sharp eyes and ears onto a world that is replete with meaningful, often emotional expression – in bird gaze, face, posture, and song. Sometimes it happens that the content of meaning is unavailable, for the world of I-and-Thou is not one of identity; it is a world in which the other, as other, is genuinely encountered. This world is filled with significance, even when it is not fully decipherable.

I once saw two Herons sunbathing in a buttercup meadow, near a river. Their long necks were stretched out to the full and pointed upward with heads held aslant and beaks open, their half-spread wings held low and away from their sides. Against the golden background in the bright sunlight these queer, white, snake-like necks, toning into pale grey at the back, looked indescribably odd. They remained motionless for so long that it seemed they were not birds but some form of symbolic statue, expressing something weird and remote. (1952: 110)

This passage expresses a dream mood characteristic of certain of Howard's descriptions. It is a singular event – "I once saw", she begins – yet in its beauty eminently reportable. Despite the herons' postures being immediately understandable as "sunbathing", there is something else, "weird and remote", resonating more with a symbolic reality.

The involvement of the "whole being", within the I-and-Thou, means that not only the senses but also the heart is intrinsic to the resulting knowledge. Howard's love for the birds flows unabashedly in her writings, from feelings openly expressed and gestures tenderly offered, to castigating the destruction that cats inflict on birds. Within the receptivity that love engenders, she witnesses the full gamut of bird life and expression. What she sees – worry, disgust, joy, hopefulness, contentment, anguish, and the like – is consequent to her being open to see it, rather than being projection, speculation, or wishful thinking. This is Buber's meaning in identifying the I-and-Thou as reciprocity. In a human-animal relationship, Buber's point can be interpreted as follows: if one is not open to seeing emotion in an animal's face, one will simply not see it. Skepticism regarding the perception of animal emotion – or mind, in some form or other – can thus be understood as a form of closure to certain manifestations of the world. As Stanley Cavell so beautifully put it, "Here, what we do not know comprises not our ignorance but our alienation" (1976: 69).

There is a sense, then, in which the claim that animal mind is unavailable to objective observation is true. The understanding of mind involves not only who expresses it, but also who perceives it. Hence the bizarre paradox of an animal world overflowing with mindfulness and feeling, and a skeptical contingent (whose shrillness and dominance are thankfully shrinking) avowing that proof of such will-o'-the-wisps is lacking. The I-It relationship, Buber explained, is never experienced with one's whole being. By excluding what we know with the eyes, and feel through receptivity, in the experience of animal behavior, and taking as real only what is reportable,

repeatable, and measurable, the terrain of animal mind is largely obliterated.

Howard's reports in the context of classical ethology

Howard's work did not appear in a historical vacuum. She followed in the tracks of a well-established, British naturalist tradition of studying bird life. Prominent among her predecessors and contemporaries were Edmund Selous, Julian Huxley, and Henry Eliot Howard, who wrote books and papers on bird behavior predating her studies (Selous, 1901; Huxley, 1914; Howard, 1964). This naturalist tradition in Britain traced its lineage to Charles Darwin's works on animal behavior and mind understood in an evolutionary context. In the absence of an established biological discipline for the study of naturally occurring behavior, naturalist studies of animals remained marginal to institutional science.

Len Howard's oeuvre can be placed in this tradition, although among Britain's naturalists she has received little attention. Howard herself may have contributed to her obscurity, by neglecting to cite works and debates on bird life concurrent with, as well as preceding, her own. She often alludes to ornithological and naturalist studies, but a self-effacing attitude may have kept her from openly engaging professional and amateur behavioral literature. Combined with the fact that she was a musicologist and a woman, her non-engagement of people and texts in her writings conspired to virtually erase her contribution to behavioral studies during her own lifetime. Timing is another likely explanation of why her writings were largely overlooked: the discipline of classical ethology – the biological study of behavior – was becoming established between the 1930s and 1950s, overshadowing her work; all the more so since Howard's understanding of bird behavior challenged the main tenets of classical ethology.

Partly through the inspiration of early 20th-century naturalists, and in alignment with a Darwinian perspective on behavioral patterns – as traits subject to natural selection like any morphological structure – the field of ethology emerged in the 1930s primarily through the works of Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen (see Lorenz, 1957; Tinbergen, 1989). Among the preoccupations of these pioneer scientists, two were prominent: to institutionalize the study of naturally occurring animal behavior, so as to bring it

within the fold of respectable biology, and to foreground the importance of instinct, so as to distinguish the new discipline from comparative psychology, which emphasized learning and behavior modification (Burkhardt, 2005). Both preoccupations had formative consequences for the content of classical ethology.

In order to make the scientific study of naturally occurring behavior legitimate, ethologists introduced a technical vocabulary. Part of this vocabulary was new, and part – in particular, the idiom of stimulus-response (S-R) – was appropriated from established science. The S-R frame was taken from behaviorism, and incorporated into the nascent science. But instead of investigating processes of conditioning, classical ethologists bent their attentions to the role of stimuli, which they called “releasers”, in triggering the expression of innate behavioral patterns. The use of the S-R idiom went a long way in mechanizing the presentation of animal behavior, as I have elsewhere elaborated (Crist, 1999), by intimating an image of a reacting quasi-automaton, which, impinged on by external releasers, discharged ready-made responses. Ethologists’ emphasis on the ostensible species fixity of instinctive behaviors – “fixed action patterns” – stood in stark contrast to the individual diversity that Howard saw in birds of the same species.

The focus on innate behavioral patterns had consequences for the portrayal of animals in classical ethology. The desire to prove that animals came into the world with an instinctive behavioral repertoire – and, especially in the case of birds, that they acquired a set of behavioral responses via “imprinting” – led to a highly stereotyped portrayal of instincts. The technical term “fixed action patterns” semantically underscored the ostensible uniformity of expression of instinctual patterns. This portrayal of behaviors, as rigidly preexisting and predictably released, which animals simply enacted (without awareness of the behavior’s function required), worked synergistically with the S-R idiom to further “automate” the image of how animals act in their natural environs.

Howard was carrying out her studies and writing in a time when this straitjacket view of naturally occurring behavior was coming into the limelight. Interestingly enough, she challenged it at every turn, both empirically and through explicit criticism. Her main thesis about birds was the very antithesis of the ethological paradigm. She did not draw a sharp distinction between instinctual and learned behaviors; she did not corroborate that innate behaviors are stereotyped or uniform, but rather discovered them to be

variable and flexible; and her “unit of analysis” tended to be the individual rather than the species.

Bird individuality manifests itself on two separate levels in her work. First, birds regularly exhibit behaviors that are simply not part of the species repertoire, as illustrated by Baldhead’s “bigamy” and Oakleaf’s use of leaves “for purposes entirely his own” (1952: 143). Second, even behaviors belonging to the species repertoire bear the stamp of the bird’s own expression. Regarding the quality and inventiveness of bird song, for example, Howard notes that “a thrush may sing better for having heard a Nightingale and the Robin whose home has been where Warblers sing, sometimes blends a little of the beauty of their songs into the phrases of his own” (1952: 168); she also writes that “one Blackbird sang a Bach phrase, which may have been copied upon hearing me play Bach on the violin” (1952: 186). Underscoring the ways that song varies according to individual talent, personality, season, and circumstances, Howard draws the following conclusion:

In bird-song there is so much that is beyond the limits of automatism, and those who have not a sensitive ear or opportunity to acquire really intimate knowledge and understanding of bird-song are much hampered in their power to estimate bird’s nature. The fact that musical talent varies individually – within species – as much as among human performers of music is not compatible with the theory of minds that only work automatically, without individual intelligence. (1952: 169)

A species exhibits a range of behavioral patterns that can be compiled as what ethologists called an “ethogram”. But Howard insisted that only individuals actually behave, and their concrete and unique behavioral expressions should not be confused with an abstracted scientific inventory. In his well-known investigations into raven life, Bernd Heinrich makes an observation that vindicates Howard’s thinking:

General results [about behavior] emerge in terms of averages and differences about a mean, but no matter how thorough, such information can never reveal one very important attribute: *individual* differences. These differences, perhaps even “personality”, are more than a variation about the mean. (1989: 138, emphasis original)

Heinrich wryly comments on the approach of behavioral science: “For the most part, however, individual differences are considered a bothersome variable that tends to be minimized because it gets in the way of ‘consistent’ results or ‘averages’” (1989: 138). A commentator examining recent findings about birds cites Heinrich’s work,

among others, as indicating that "the scientific data have now caught up with Howard's intensive, intimate, naturalistic observations" (Barber, 1993: 96).

Is Howard's work science?

Julian Huxley, a key player in the emergence of ethology, wrote the Foreword to one of Howard's books – an ambivalent Foreword, if only for its extreme brevity. He goes on record as "commending Miss Howard's observations . . . to my professional colleagues as well as to the general public", lauding her commitment to studying birds "at such close quarters", appreciating that the birds' fearlessness enabled unusual insights into their lives, and praising her "attention to the songs of her birds" (1952: 9). But he closes his brief endorsement on a patronizing note: "Miss Howard will not expect professional biologists to accept all her conclusions. But they will be grateful for her facts; and I personally can testify to the enjoyment and interest her book has provided" (1952: 10). "Enjoyment and interest" are fine attributes of a piece of writing, but may well be assigned to the reading of a novel.

While it is not trivial that Huxley found Howard's work worthy of acclaim, he commended it more as a good read, with interesting observations, than as a contribution to behavior science. His ambivalence speaks to the problematic status of the genre of Howard's work. It did not fit with any tradition or field that Huxley could easily identify. Perhaps because he could not place it – yet at the same time recognized its value and originality – Huxley both endorsed it and found ways to distance himself from it.

Her work did not fit well even within the amateur tradition of bird studies prominent in Britain. Naturalists tended to go into the field to carry out their studies of naturally occurring behavior, rather than bringing the field into their home. The knowledge Howard created, moreover, is as much knowledge about human-bird relationship as it is knowledge about the behavioral repertoires of birds. Influential naturalists like Edmund Selous and Henry Eliot Howard were interested in theoretical problems of biology, for example the theory of sexual selection and the nature of territoriality. Howard's studies, on the other hand, were not aimed at creating theoretical knowledge. The only explicit reference to academic

ideas that Howard made, with some degree of consistency, was to dispute mechanical views of behavior.

If Huxley could not easily align Howard's works with the naturalist tradition, it was all the more difficult to fit it into a scientific context. Neither her mode of presentation nor her specific conclusions were in agreement with the views of the behavioral science of her day. At the same time, her studies were aligned with the realistic intent of science, in aiming to document actual bird life and behavior.

So is Howard's work science? Huxley's Foreword does not pose the question explicitly, but the dilemma is obvious. The question does not have a simple answer, which may be why Huxley did not tackle it directly. Her work is science in intending to deliver a true representation of bird life, but from the perspective of having academic credentials, complying with scientific protocol (style of reporting), conforming to how behavioral science was done, and agreeing with what it averred in her day – her contribution is not scientific.

Why even pose the question of whether her writings are science? The value of her work resides in its originality and uniqueness, rather than in any epistemic label that might be attached to her contribution. Two reasons justify asking the question: one, Howard's oeuvre implicitly challenges the exclusivity, or privileging, of formal-scientific approaches to attaining knowledge about animal life; and two, her work could have been, as it is now, an invaluable resource for behavioral scientists.

Howard's work highlights that the method of studying animals, and the relationship one forms with them, will shape the resulting knowledge. The truths yielded through detached, methodologically stringent, and quantitative analyses of animal behavior will distort the realities of animal life, if such analyses are taken to be exclusive truths, or fruit of a singularly privileged perspective. With its emphasis on general knowledge – the need to replicate findings and transfer methods – behavioral science perforce screens out such dimensions as individual variation, and eschews such observations as, for example, facial expressions. The elimination of particular dimensions of animal life from science is not a consequence of censorship, it is an inexorable result of its methods. On the other hand, naturalist studies include aspects of animal life that behavioral science inadvertently effaces; naturalist studies thus enrich and

complement scientific insights. Moreover, alternative ways of knowing animals are of great value to those scientists who remain open to perspectives beyond those that dominate in their time. Indeed, there is a wealth of findings and detailed observations in Howard's work still waiting to be mined and taken in novel fruitful directions, by behavioral scientists and/or cognitive ethologists.

Conclusion

Howard's portrait of birds is a lifeworld which, for all its differences from human life, is just as concrete and rich in quotidian content. Each bird's biography – the vicissitudes of its fledging, learning to fly and sing, acquiring mates, foraging tactics and preferences, fighting over territory, playing games, etc. – exhibits original, even surprising variations. Howard's lifeworld is far from romanticized: in this diverse world, saturated by untheorized modalities of mind, there is affection and callousness, absentmindedness and wit, tragedy and joy, cooperation and competition, human–animal continuity and otherness. But it is a lifeworld of individuals accessed through the intimacy of I-and-Thou, not a realm of automata, reified species, or animated theories.

Howard's world of birds is not romanticized, yet it is permeated with love. About the animal "and its contemplation", Buber entreated:

Believe in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe, and it will dawn on you what this waiting, peering, "stretching of the neck" of the creature means. Every word must falsify; but look, these things live around you, and no matter which one you approach you always reach Being. (1996: 67)

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