

Concourse of the Birds from the "Mantiq at-Tayr" (Language of the Birds)

Birds of Prophecy

Images from ARAS

Ami Ronnberg

"It is as if we did not know, or else continually forgot that everything of which we are conscious is an image, and that image is psyche." (Jung, C.G., CW 13, §75)

ARAS (the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism) is a reminder of Jung's words in a very practical sense. The Archive is an open invitation to explore psyche's language through its images. We often find when an image moves us that there is a sense of recognition, a reminder how things can be, almost like return from exile. It may only last for a moment, but there is a feeling of fullness. For this presentation it is the image of birds that has moved me. In almost every culture, birds were believed to speak the language of the soul. As poems also do – here in the words of the American poet James Wright:¹

Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
Was a wild gentle thing, the small eyes
Loving me in secret.
It is here. At a touch of my hand
The air fills with delicate creatures from the other world.



Figure 1 30,000 year old ivory sculpture of a water bird. Ach Valley (Hohe Fels) Germany

Recently a small carving of a bird was found in a cave in Hohle Fels, Germany, in the Ach Valley. It turned out to be one of the oldest works of art ever found and what makes it extra remarkable is that it is a sculpture. Until recently we only knew of the cave drawings from this early time. It is believed to be more than 30,000 thousand years old. It is

only two inches long but very powerful in its simplicity.

It is an image of a water bird in flight, perhaps just about to dive. It makes us realize that 30,000 years ago someone was able to move between the worlds – like the bird who can move between earth, air and water – from the outer world of the senses to an inner vision. Something moved this carver to begin to shape a piece of ivory into a new form, to create something new. And with this, something was changed, the world was no longer the same. It was this shift into a creative act that made us human. And it is this dialogue, between oneself and something else beyond – the carver and the bird, between the storyteller and his story, the dreamer and his dream, or humans and our gods, that keeps changing the world, bringing something new into being. The forms may differ, but the means of

communication is the same. The language is the same, consisting of that inexplicable something we call symbols. The very word *symbol*, which in Greek means “thrown together,” expresses the mystical union of matter and of spirit, instinct and image. We have many names for this dialogue, sometimes we call it art,

other times ritual or prayer. Whether the context is religion, philosophy, psychology or art, the language is symbols.



Figure 1 *A spirit bird whispering in St. Gregory's ear. Ivory. 10th century, Germany.*

In this presentation I want to follow the image of the bird in its flight, reflecting our ability to imagine, our ability to transcend, as it moves so easily between heaven and earth: the bird as the soul or anima, acting as mediator between conscious and unconscious; or the bird as the breath of the world, the world soul hidden in matter. It is also the bird that brings us inspiration, prophecy and truth; the bird that moves between the worlds as in poetry and images. Sometimes it comes as a voice from a spirit bird whispering into the ear

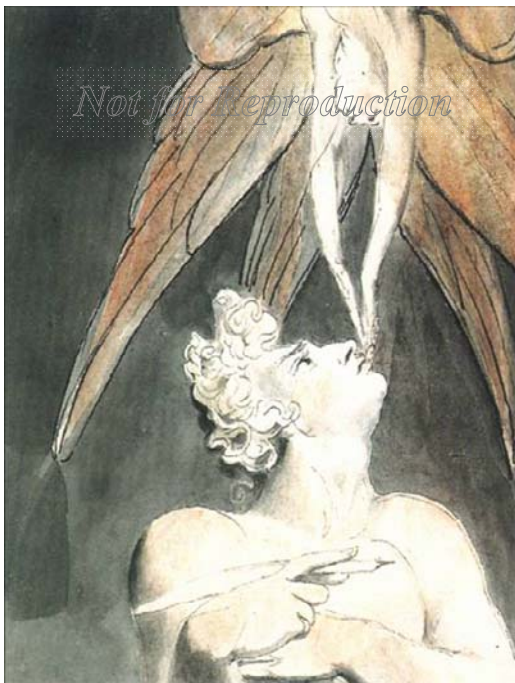


Figure 2 *An angel, 'Hope', inspiring a kneeling writer. From "Night Thoughts, Night VII." (detail), William Blake. British Museum, London.*

of St. Gregory. In a painting by William Blake, called "Hope," an angel touches the mouth of a kneeling writer, perhaps Blake himself. Blake explains: "I have written this poem from immediate Dictation." Or in the words of the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz: "I am no more than a secretary of the invisible things / that are dictated to me and a few others" (from the poem "Secretaries"). And then there is the

Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, ²who knew that inspiration also rises from below – from earth itself – from the darkness of

the body – as *duende* or the color of black sound that Lorca would invoke before speaking or writing. He once described how *duende*, a winged trickster figure, perched on his shoulder as he gave his lectures. He knew that only when *duende* is present was he moved to the heights of poetic inspiration. He also knew that

duende is related to death or to demons – or to Socrates’ daimon, our true inner voice. “The daimon becomes the figure of the petition,” writes the poet Edward Hirsch in a book on inspiration, called “*the demon and the angel*.”³ Whether inspiration or temptation – the message from the other world arrives to us on wings.

Wings lift us.
“Hope is a thing with feathers,” says Emily Dickinson. Soul and Psyche have wings. Plato declared that “The function of the wing is to take what is heavy and raise it up



Figure 3 *Studies of Wings*. Nicolas Vleughels. 1717. The Louvre, Paris.

into the region above where the gods dwell.” With wings we can look at things from both the perspective of earth and heaven at the same time. With wings we transcend the ordinary world. The Ancient Egyptians believed that our hearts must be light as a feather so that we may pass into the other world.

I am invoking all kinds of beings with wings; the white dove of Aphrodite and the Holy Spirit, the black crow and raven, the angel, half bird half man, daimon and duende, Mercury, the winged spirit of Alchemy, and the ancient shamans who flew to other worlds on their magical wings – imagination itself. What they bring to us gives meaning to our life.



Figure 4 *Bird Singing in the Moonlight.* Gouache on paper, 1938-39. Morris Graves. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Throughout his life Morris Graves, who lived on the American North West Coast painted birds. He named a painting “Little Known Bird of the Inner Eye,” making it clear that he saw his images as a symbolic language, “with which to remark upon the qualities of

our mysterious capacities, which direct us toward ultimate reality.” Another visionary, Ibn’ Arabi, the twelfth-century Andalusian Sufi master, suggested even more clearly that these “mysterious capacities” were powers that live deep within us “hidden in the faculties and organs,” which can be brought into existence through our imagination.⁴ Following this idea, a special mystical technique was developed among certain Sufis of calling forth a winged intermediary, which they called “the beloved” through active imagination.

In the most troubled period of his life, Jung also met a winged figure that came to him in a dream. Jung describes the dream in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: “There was a blue sky, like the sea. ... Suddenly, there appeared from the right a winged being sailing across the sky. I saw that it was an old man with the horns of a bull ... He had the wings of the kingfisher with its characteristic colors.” Jung called this figure Philemon and in his fantasies held conversations with him. Once, Philemon told Jung that he treated thoughts as if he had

generated them himself, but instead, in Philemon's view, thoughts are more "like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air."

Another bird-like figure appeared later to Jung, which he called Ka. In ancient Egypt, Ka was the embodied soul that took the form of a bird, the earthly form of the deceased. In Jung's fantasy the ka-soul came from below, out of the

earth, slightly demonic, while the almost God-like spirit Philemon appeared from above in the sky, as if both soul and spirit were inspired by the image of a bird.

So I find it fascinating that it was a bird image carved by that first sculptor with which we began. The very essence of being a bird. With the very lightness of thought it defies gravity and flies up into the sky and then returns to earth and can even dive into the water. The bird doesn't seem to be bound by the same laws of nature that we are, yet it has a soft animal body. But then, in our imagination we can also fly like a bird and move between the worlds.

I have a favorite image in ARAS if it is possible to have a favorite among a collection of 16,000 images. It is a bird woman from Egypt. She is about 5000 years old. This image is like a poem where matter and spirit are united. We can see the lovely body of a woman, her breasts and her rounded hips – and then when we look closer we find that she has no feet (like so many of the prehistoric images of women – as if to say she is a woman *and* spirit). And then we see that



Figure 5 *The Figure of Philemon, from The Red Book. C.G. Jung.*



Figure 6 *Egyptian bird woman, 4th millennium BCE. Brooklyn Museum*

she has a bird face with a strong beak. She is a woman and she is a bird. Her arms are raised like a bird's wings but also like in prayer – the universal prayer of lifting hands to the sun. Or perhaps she is raising her hands in a dance – or in a gesture of ecstasy. We will never know; but with her whole being she suggests a sense of transcending human limitations, of moving between the worlds, between animal and human – between heaven and earth and between body and soul.

There is another figure with a bird face, believed to a shaman in trance, from the Lascaux caves. In fact, the whole image is filled with imagery of birds and flight, including the shaman's erect phallus, which was believed to fly on wings in ancient times. There is a bird sitting on a pole, which evokes the world tree and the world axis, connecting above and below. This is also the path on which the shaman travels in his mind's flight like a bird.

In our imagination, the pole the bird is sitting on can also become a spear that flies like a bird through the air. Or like the Norse god Odin's spear, which pierced him as he was

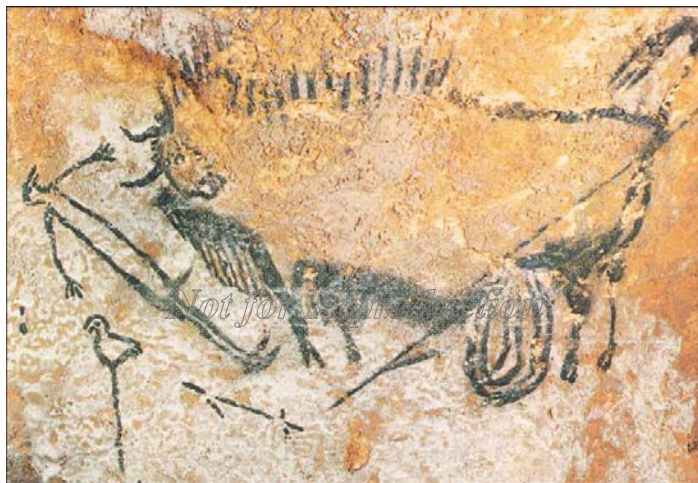


Figure 7 *"The Shaman of Lascaux". France*

hanging on the world tree, like the gallows, and "sacrificed himself to himself."

He let himself fall into the underworld and from there he brought back the runes – the alphabet of wisdom, magic and poetry, flowing from “the healing of the wound, which never closes,” as Lorca wrote in his piece about duende. It is the same spear that pierced the body of Christ and out of his wound the Church was born. Or if we look at the image of the buffalo – the same theme appears again; a spear has pierced the animal, suggesting the experience of sickness, torture and death that is part of the shaman’s journey⁵: the sacrificial death that cannot be avoided in anybody’s life, when lived fully.

It was through grappling with the mystery of death that symbolic thinking was born. In trying to understand the transition from life to death, from visible to invisible, the answers that emerged were in the form of ritual or what we today may call art, which were to accompany the dead on their journey to the next world; death giving birth to symbols and art. The poet Lorca compared death itself to the flight of a bird. ... on “a wing of my own death.”

So the bird is the image of traveling between the worlds, and of being “in between.” The image of the Lascaux shaman almost forms a triangle. Between the shaman’s bird-face and the spear that pierces the buffalo, there is the bird. The bird, like the image, exists “in between” – between matter and spirit.



Figure 9 *The Trinity.*
Attributed to Robert Campin, Flemish painter. 15th century. Hermitage, Leningrad.



Figure 10 *Detail of The Trinity*

We see a similar trinity in Christian symbolism. Between God, the Heavenly Father, and Christ his Son, who was incarnated on earth, there is the Holy Ghost, the Third Person of the Trinity as a white dove. God is sometimes shown holding the dead body of Christ, exposing his wound, which also had been pierced by a spear. It is as if this image is in dialogue with the previous one of the shaman. But there, the movement was of ascending as the shaman transcends human limitations; he becomes like a god, the eternal man. Here the movement is reversed – Christ has descended from the eternal world to earth where life is limited by time and space and ultimately by death. God incarnates so that he can be known by man.

Jung said that in ancient religions we find that gods take the form of animals because they carry the instinctual wisdom – they know the wisdom of nature. Some of this has survived in the image of the Holy Spirit. I have always loved the fact that the stern Lutheran God I grew up with also appears in an animal body – God as a bird. Visually, this means that at most of the important Christian events, there is an animal presence. It begins with the Annunciation where an angel tells the Virgin that she will give birth to God’s son. She will be impregnated by the Holy Spirit, which is seen as a white dove flying towards her. According to the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi, the angel says: “O Mary, Look well, for ... I am an image in the heart. / When an image enters your heart and establishes itself / you flee in vain: the image will remain with you.”⁶

Centuries later, Rilke would tell us, “You must give birth to your images. They are waiting to be born.” The Holy Spirit seems to impregnate Virgin Mary through her ear, which suggests that an attitude of listening and receptivity is necessary before we can give form to our own unique vision.

It is not only the birds’ ability to fly that makes them so remarkable to us, it is also their song. Their voices are not only the voice of the spirit, as we usually think, they are also the voices of the instincts deep down in our body; the sound of blood and bone, tissue and nerves – the instincts of the animals. When we listen to the animals we know that earth is our home. The birds’ singing wakes us up in the morning, they wake us up out of our sleep, they call us to our lives. The birds know their way, they read the signs of the seasons. They know when it is time to break up and leave for the next long journey. They know instinctively where they are going; they follow the stars as they fly across continents and

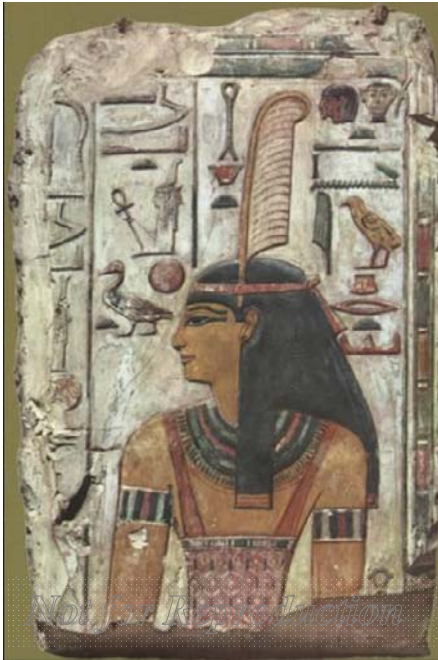


Figure 11 *Maat, Egyptian goddess of truth or right order. 19th Dynasty, Mus. Archeologico, Florence.*

oceans. Deep inside us our own instincts guides us where us to go. We know what is true. In fact, truth is often conveyed through the image of birds or feathers, as the Egyptian goddess Maat. Sometimes she is portrayed just as a single feather or, at other times, she see seen as a woman wearing a feather on her head. Another image of truth appears in an African figure wearing a feathery headdress. He appears in a Senufo ritual called Kafigeldjo, which means “He who tells the Truth.”

And we respond in turn with our own singing. “Song is existence,” said Rilke. We embody the spirit through song. It is this dialogue of listening and expressing of ascent and descent that the alchemists were able to describe so well. In an image from the *Rosarium*, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove from a star, marking the beginning of the alchemical process. Here the Holy Spirit has become an inner guide for our psychological journey.



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Figure 12 *Oracle figure. Kafigeledjo, or “he who tells the truth.” Senufo. Côte d’Ivoire. 19th-20 century. Metropolitan Museum, New York.*



Figure 13 King and Queen from *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Alchemical manuscript, 1550.

The image of the white bird extends much further back than Christianity. There is a direct line from the Holy Spirit to the bird of Aphrodite who is the principle of love, and to Ishtar, sometimes portrayed as a bird. We also recognize her in the ancient image of Sophia, the image of the feminine wisdom, sometimes shown as a winged being whispering into the ear of a saint.

Sophia is the spirit in matter, the anima mundi who existed before the world was created and she also appearing as a white dove, hovering over the waters of chaos. This is the divine feminine, which in the ancient view was always present in creation. “She who knows your works, she who was present when the world was made.”

In myth and religion, human intuition has perceived birds as intermediaries from the other world. We have heard their voices as the voices of the unconscious, the voices that herald the creation. As we give form to our lives, guided by our dreams and our intuitions, it is the voice of the white dove of hope and love and generation.

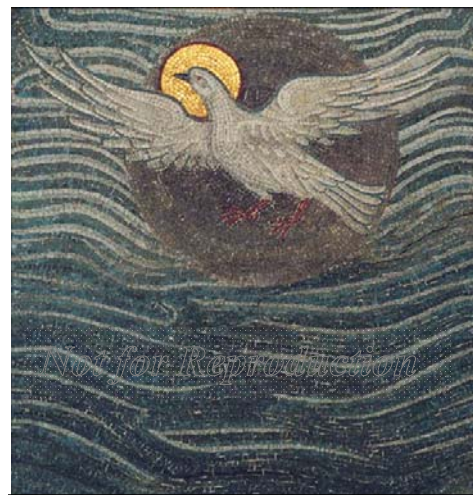


Figure 14 The Holy Spirit hovering over the waters of creation. Mosaic. St Marks Cathedral, Venice



Figure 15 *Weekapaug. Mixed media on board. Margot McLean, 2000.*

But there is also the black raven that brings the foreboding of endings as in the voice of the Celtic war goddess Morrigan who can take the form of a black raven and ends her prediction of the coming war with these words: “... death of sons / death of kinsmen / death death!”

These are the black birds, the crows and ravens. These are the carrion birds who instinctively know where food will be found, waiting with an uncanny sense for the right time when death is expected, which made people believe that they could predict the future. They bring their own message of dissolution, destruction and war.

About fifty years ago something different was happening, this time to the birds themselves – both dark and light. Not only did we seem to have less and less time to listen to the voices of the birds in the natural world, but nature herself was becoming increasingly silent. The first alarm was



Figure 16 *Crows over Pristina cemetery, Kosovo. Photograph. From Kosovo, 1999-2000: The Flight of Reason, by Paolo Pelegrin*

sounded in the early 1960s, in a book written by a scientist, Rachel Carson, which

has since then become an environmental classic. It was a book about the use of the new chemical insecticides, which the author thought should be called biocides. In chapter after chapter, she explains the devastating effect these chemicals have on the earth's soil, air and waters – on the whole web of life. The most shocking image is the mass killing of the birds. In fact, she makes their sudden silence a symbol for the new ability to control nature in the single-minded search for profit. On the title page, she quotes a few lines from Keats, the poet who wrote about the soul in nature: "The sedge is wither'd from the lake / and no birds sing." And she called the book "Silent Spring."



Figure 17 *Detail of Crows over Pristina cemetery, Kosovo. Photograph. From Kosovo, 1999-2000: The Flight of Reason, by Paolo Pelegrin*

The first mass death of birds came in 1959 after 27,000 acres in the state of Michigan had been sprayed to control the Japanese beetle. A woman reported that on her way home from church one Sunday morning, she had seen "an alarming number of dead and dying birds. She said there were no birds flying in the area ... A great many dead birds and

no live ones ..." Then followed story after devastating story of spraying across the country and with the same results. Birds were dying – as the most visible signs of much wider destruction. Rachel Carson also pointed out the connection to the

chemical weapons of mass destruction, which were developed during the Second World War, hand in hand with the insecticides, often by the same scientists. She even made comparisons with the atomic bomb, how it had altered the power between nations and how the insecticides altered the balance of power between humans and nature.

We may seem god-like in our ability to destroy and to control nature. But one day as I was thinking about this, I found a quote by Jung in, of all places, the New York subway, 42nd Street station. It was a reminder of our responsibility to the world of nature, within and without. Written in large letters across the wall it said: "NATURE MUST NOT WIN BUT SHE CANNOT LOOSE."

As we were entering the new millennium, guided by a different set of stars in the Aquarian age, there were again reports of dying birds. A magazine article described how "a telltale silence enveloped Chicago and its suburbs like an insidious fog, too subtle to notice at first, too strange to ignore after a while. Residents in the affluent North Shore communities and the well-to-do western suburbs noticed. Folks in the modest suburban enclaves southwest of the city noticed. Sooner or later, in a gradual and almost dreamlike way, people all around the city realized what was missing: the sound of crows."⁷ What had killed the birds this time was a new virus, called the West Nile virus. Soon it had spread to most of the United States. It wasn't only crows that died, but they were especially noticeable, because they are so noisy. Although the cause was more indirect this time, it was the same imbalance in nature caused by one-sided overproduction, which Rachel Carson had warned about.

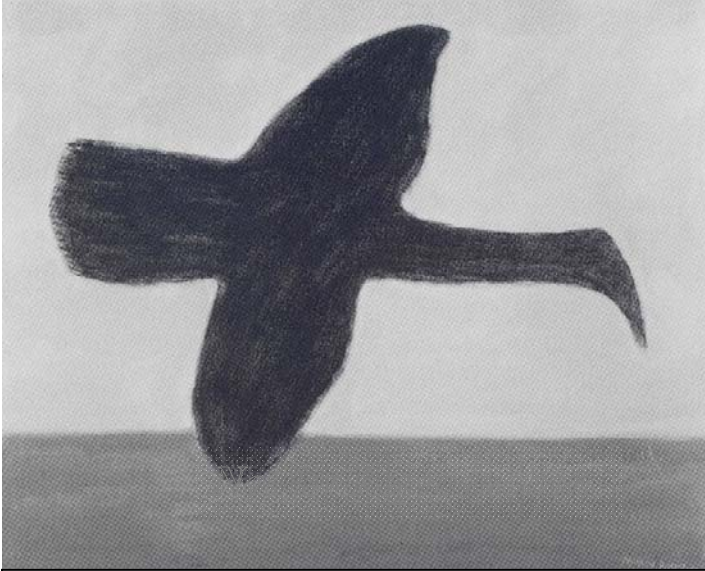


Figure 18 *Flight. Milton Avery, Oil on canvas, 1959. Milton Gallery, New York.*

It was actually in New York City that the West Nile virus started. It was in the summer of 1999, as fears of apocalyptic disasters were becoming widespread as the millenium was coming to an end. And it is interesting that most of all, it was the crows that were that were victims,

the dark birds of prophecy.

It was not much more than a year later that the black birds returned, crows and ravens, alive and well but this time they appeared in dreams and visions. This was in the spring of 2001 and later that year, as she was looking back at a gathering at the Jung Center in NewYork after the destruction of the World Trade Center, Beverley Zabriskie described the appearance of the birds in the following way: “Since last spring, I noticed black birds in patient material. Through the summer, they clustered in patients’ dreams, paintings, and poetry. They seemed bearers of bad news, compelling and suspicious, ebony shadows of the white doves of Aphrodite, or the Holy Ghost.”

On September 11th of that year, two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. The destruction of these two towers will most likely stand out for a long time – beyond political points of view – as one of the turning points that brought us into the new millennium. One guiding image of the New

Age is a dream of equality:
equality in the sense that we all
share the resources of the earth,
but also care for the earth's future
and be attentive to our inner
nature and to know the
difference. In the meanwhile our
experience is well described in
the words by William Butler
Yeats: "The falcon cannot hear



Figure 19 Two Blackbirds. Stephanie Sanchez. 1995.

the falconer; / Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." These famous lines could be followed by the prophecy in the old Norse poem Voluspá, where it says: "Brothers shall strike brother and both fall / ... A wind-age, a wolf-age, till the world ruins." This is no longer the breath of inspiration but the winds of destruction.



Figure 20 Black and Blue. Acrylic on paper. Margot McLean, 2004

The use of birds for auguries in order to tell the future were considered an art in ancient Greece the following quote is from an ancient prophecy in the Greek drama of Antigone. At the end of the play the blind seer Tiresias learns from the birds that a terrible tragedy is about

to occur. This is what Tiresias says, and since he is blind, it is the sounds of the birds that inform him: “Suddenly I heard it, a strange voice in the wing beats, unintelligible, barbaric, a mad scream! Talons flashing, ripping, they were killing each other.”



Figure 21 *Crows of Wheatfield. Vincent van Gogh. Answers, 1890. Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam.*

The black birds still give us a sense of dread and foreboding as it did in the past. Just before his suicide, Van Gogh painted “The Crows over the Wheatfield”.

The blue sky is darkening almost to the color of the black crows and it is as if the world of things are almost disappearing in the frenzied rhythm of the lines. Medieval manuscripts often depict birds descending over the fall of the ancient city Babylon. In a painting by the German artist Franz Hitzler we can again see a huge falling black bird and in the background there are faces with an expression of horror.



Figure 22 *Untitled. Franz Hitzler. 1988. Germany.*

At the destruction of the World Trade Center there were also stories of the birds falling, birds dying. We heard descriptions of how “the tiny sparrows and robins burned their wings and fell from the sky to the ground where their charred bodies were respectfully brushed into the gutter.”⁸ Then there were the children who in their inner eye saw the birds falling, and/or they saw the people falling, image merging with unthinkable image – falling birds and falling people. Images of birds and wings fuse with flying and falling.

In his novel *The Book of Lights*, Chaim Potok describes the scene of the first nuclear testing in Los Alamos. He lets the son of one of the scientists tell the



Figure 23 Alchemist with departing soul and spirit birds and raven at his feet. Jamsthaler, Viatorium spagyricum, 1625.

story: “After the bomb went off there were sections around Los Alamos where it rained dead birds. I saw more than a dozen birds fall into our yard. They made faint thudding sounds. I was looking out the window and saw them fall. It was

pure chance that I saw them. Pure chance, dear Gershon. I remembered what they looked like. They smelled charred. Their eyes were burned out. You know sometimes, I think I don’t mind it too much that we will probable kill ourselves.

We’re a terrible species. But we’re going to kill the birds too.”⁹

This movement is downwards, inwards – it is a movement of falling rather than flying. It is the time of blackness or the *nigredo* of the alchemists – the night of Saturn – only the black raven remains, croaking “Nevermore, Nevermore,” as in Poe’s poem. It is falling into a state of hopelessness, as we are separated from soul and spirit – shown in alchemical images as two winged beings leaving the body.

Ravens are the black birds of alchemy – they are the carrion birds cleaning the corpses to the bare bones. Again, the black birds bring with them a feeling of dread and death, but if we turn to the alchemists they have a different perspective. This



Figure 24 Ravens on battle field. J.D. Mylius. *Philosophia reformata*, 1622.

is what one of their texts says: “When you see your matter going black, rejoice: for that is the beginning of the work.” This is the darkest place – the place of *nigredo*, the night, the deepest depression. The alchemists knew that this place signals both an end and a beginning.

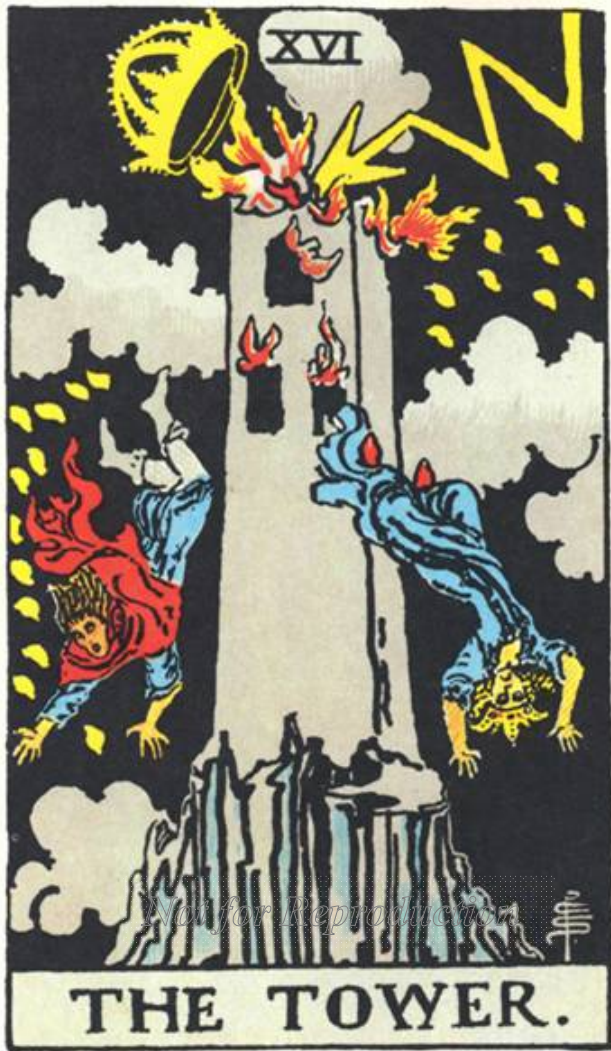


Figure 25 *The Tower from the Rider-Waite tarot deck.*

It was also the towers that fell on September 11th. It was easy to think of the Apocalypse – the end of the world. Of course we were reminded of the Tower of Babel, wondering whether we had reached too high. But the image that was the most evocative was the Tower card in the tarot deck. In the Rider deck we see that the lightning has just hit the tower, fire is scattering and two people are falling down as the crowned tower is about to collapse. The deeper meaning of the Tower card tells us about a time of change. But we will need the perspective of the

future to know what this change will be. The two people falling have been described as Adam and Eve – in other words, representing humankind – or sometimes they are seen as spirit and soul – no longer winged as they appear in alchemy.

It was two airplanes that destroyed the towers – like two great winged steelbirds. In a painting by Anselm Kieffer called “Lilith’s Daughters” we see a dress suspended in air; it is covered with ash and out of the sleeves two airplanes

are emerging. This is one in a whole series of paintings of Lilith done by this artist. It is easy to imagine Lilith, Adam's first wife, ash-covered, as an image of nature being exiled. She is the patron goddess of a world from which the sacred has



Figure 26 *Lilith's Daughters (detail), Anselm Kiefer. 1990, Oil, emulsion, shellac and ashes on canvas with human hair, lead aeroplanes, copper wire and ash-covered dresses*

withdrawn. Lilith could turn herself into a bird, a screech owl, while her daughters are becoming agents of revenge, as shadow figures of nature's dying birds. The earth is out of balance. Perhaps it is only by listening to nature's winged beings we will have a future. Even Fate has wings! And so do images and poetry.

In another painting by Morris Robert Graves called "Message" we see two birds. One bird hovers in the darkness while another, larger creature stands in the light. According to Graves' biographer, Ray Kass, it is intended to represent "the progress of the self toward the goal of higher consciousness." If we listen carefully to nature, we may hear yet another message – that the light is there whether we see it or not. And sometimes it takes something so ordinary as the

flight of a bird flying entering the light, as in Graves' image, for us to know this.

The poet Guillaume Apollinaire says it this way:

Come to the edge he said
They said: We are afraid
Come to the edge, he said
 they came
He pushed them ... and they flew.



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Figure 27 Soaring Wings. Margot McLean, 2004

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