Meditations for the Birds

David Wills

This chapter muses over the status of a recorded bird song in order to raise certain questions concerning non-ratiocinative utterance, and concerning forms of repetition or response. Are the birds making music, or simply mimicking, parroting or aping themselves? Is their song a call and response, a chant, or simply a repetition? Is it a theme and variation, indeed an improvisation, or rather a mechanical repetition, or indeed reproduction? Those questions are examined in the context of Derrida’s call for “another thinking of life, of the living, within another relation of the living to their ipseity, to their autos, to their own autokinesis and reactional automaticity, to death, to technics or to the mechanical [machinique]”; and they are developed through analysis of Descartes’ mechanical imaginings in the Second Meditation, and of the hauntings of reaction in response in his writings more generally. If, for Descartes, it appears that one comes to be by thinking only against a certain background of inanimation, one has to understand that over and against the more general difficulty, which we are only beginning to deal with, of distinguishing auto-motion from automatism.

1. Original realistic plush beanbag birds with authentic sounds

I recently learned that “a gentle squeeze is all you need to brighten your day with […] natural [bird] songs.” What is not stated, however, is the fact that you have to repeat the squeeze over and over, many many times, should you wish to brighten your whole day. Unless you be one of those cheerful souls whose whole day can be brightened by a single avian utterance lasting just a few seconds. Even then, however – and it is here that the problem really begins – it isn’t immediately obvious whether what you have heard can in fact be defined as a single utterance.

What you get from that one gentle squeeze sounds like a single repetition of a musical phrase or bird call. But the sounds produced by one squeeze do not perhaps constitute a single repetition; what one hears may indeed be a single bird call or a single performance of that call which consists of a single repetition of a series of notes. For example, in the case that will be my paradigm, a certain bright red plush beanbag bird, when squeezed, emits eight “notes” (it is doubtful whether the standard Western chromatic definition of a note applies), then pauses, then again emits the “same” eight notes. To determine whether what one has heard is one or two calls, one would have to research the literature and understand differences among call, song, repeat and serial singing behavior.¹ In the meantime, however, we have to accept and interpret the decision of the Cornell Ornithology Lab, for it is thanks to
that institution that one hears the “repetition” just referred to, it being the source of the genuine recorded sound for incorporation in certain toy birds produced in association with the National Audubon Society and Wild Republic.\(^2\) You squeeze once, and the bird sings once, but its song is half composition and half repetition, or a composition that is pure pleonasm, a series of notes followed by its own redundant and tautological repetition. I have verified that repeatedly, by squeezings of Cardinal, American Robin, Common Loon, and Blue Jay. I consider the number of repetitions of the experiment, that is to say my repeated squeezing of Jay, Robin, the Cardinal and the Loon, to be sufficient for me to have scientifically proven the fact of that tautological repetition in the case of the Cornell/Audubon/Wild Republic birds.\(^3\) You squeeze once, but they always sing their song twice they always sing their song twice. Or at least, what they utter once, they utter twice. Or, differently put, they utter once what twice they utter, they utter once when twice they utter.

A whole series of questions comes thus to be raised: is that song a verse, or rather a refrain? Are the birds making music, or simply mimicking, parroting or aping themselves? Is their song a call and response, a chant, or simply a repetition? Is it a theme and variation, indeed an improvisation, or rather a mechanical repetition, or indeed reproduction? For those questions come down to the question of what life is in it: what amount of life in the sense of what form of life comes out of such a squeeze? How can we answer that question given that these are toy birds rather than real birds? And given that they utter recorded real sounds rather than real live sounds?\(^4\)

The fact that live sound means something different to a bird than it does to a human has obviously led to a distinction between a “dumb” animal and thinking human, rather than to an interrogation concerning the definition of life. But we should perhaps think again, as Derrida advises in terms that we shall return to, think “another thinking of life, of the living, within another relation of the living to their ipseity, to their autos, to their own autokinesis and reactional automaticity, to death, to technics, or to the mechanical \([\text{machinique}]\)” (The Animal 126). Short of resolving the question of the life of sound, however, we might consider the matter of vision and appearance. The squeezable birds are said to be “realistic,” their sounds “authentic.” Yet we know that a certain level of realisticness is sufficient for an artificial bird to be visually recognizable by, or trustworthy for, others of the same, or similar species. As long as a wooden decoy can stand in for a duck, I feel sure that the original realistic plush beanbag toy would be able to function as a visual simulacrum of the cardinal, robin, loon or blue jay. But such self-deception is not limited to birds. Descartes, we also know, accepted, in principle at least, to be deceived by human decoys in the form of mechanical androids let loose in the streets of seventeenth-century Holland: “But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I