



Falconry - its influence on biodiversity
and cultural heritage

Urszula Szymak and Przemysław Sianko (editors)

A FALCONRY LESSON. THE EXPERIENCE OF INTRODUCING FALCONRY INTO A TRANSDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM OF STUDIES

EWA ŁUKASZYK

University of Warsaw

ABSTRACT

The article deals with problems and open questions concerning the inscription of the falconry lore in the academic institution, teaching practice and production of knowledge, referred mainly to the emergent transdisciplinary field of anthropozoology (human/animal studies). It presents the experimental falconry seminar realized at the College of Liberal Arts, University of Warsaw, commenting on its concept, outcomes, the response of the academic public, as well as the perspectives and obstacles on the way toward the permanent presence of falconry at the university.

KEY WORDS: *falconry, anthropozoology, education*

Falconry has always been a living cultural practice, transmitted from generation to generation through close observation of older masters of the art and

the direct participation of the apprentices in all what belongs to the care of birds of prey. But nowadays, especially in the modernized European societies, such a direct transmission of lore is disappearing as the process of institutionalized training becomes predominant in all areas of human activity. Thus the question that should be raised is to determine how falconry heritage can be introduced into the institutionalized patterns of training and competence recognition. Two distinct aspects of this problem and, as a consequence, two paths of transmission of knowledge can be identified. One is the practical training, now legally required in most countries, of those who desire to possess a bird of prey. Such a training is usually granted –and thus its results recognized– through the institutional network of hunting organizations. Yet on the other hand, falconry is also a heritage profoundly inscribed in the areas that belong to the traditional academic disciplines: ethnology and anthropology, history, literature, art history and studies in visual culture, etc. At the present moment, mainly those historical aspects of falconry that had once been a constitutive part of the medieval and early-modern culture are present in the academic research realized, among others, by such people as the eminent Belgian scholar Baudouin Van den Abeele, studying diverse aspects of the medieval and early-modern cynegetic (i.e. hunting) culture.

FALCONRY IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN/ANIMAL STUDIES

At the same time, falconry potentially offers a considerable contribution to new areas of humanities, such as the transdisciplinary field of human/animal studies, also called anthropozoology¹. This field of research applies the methodological approaches proper both to humanities and science in order to study the relationship between man and other zoological species. It is particularly indebted to posthumanism as a branch of cultural criticism and philosophy, dealing with the deconstruction of the human condition as defined in early-modern and modern Western thought (i.e. the assumptions of the Renaissance humanism and their philosophical and cultural consequences). It also forms part of a larger panorama of tendencies in the contemporary humanities, together with such approaches as ecofeminism, a current applying feminist principles and values to the question of interaction between human beings and the animals (cf. Adams, Gruen 2014).

The emergent curricula and anthropozoological departments that appear in many universities in Europe and the United States as the vogue of “teaching the animal” becomes a part of the academic landscape (cf. DeMello 2010) seem to offer a perfect framework for rethinking and studying falconry as a part of the cultural heritage of the humanity, involving other species. Nonetheless, at the present moment, this topic is still very feebly represented in the anthropological

bibliography and the current practice of most individual researchers and research collectivities. As one of the probable reasons, one might point out to the predominance of clearly defined ethical and ideological issues in this domain. Since its beginnings, human/animal studies were closely connected to a strongly articulated stance implying the fight for the animal rights and lack of acceptance for their suffering (cf. Singer 1975). This attitude led not only to the predominant line of criticism concerning hunting practices, fostered by the anthropozoological community, but also to the relative scarcity of approaches dealing with predatory species. A significant disproportion in the main bulk of the anthropozoological studies is easy to observe: certain species seem “better” than others, with special relevance given to great apes as the closest relatives of the mankind; paradoxically, the anthropocentric stance is thus present in this supposedly posthumanist field. Herbivore mammals, such as horses and cows, occupy the second place on the top of the ranking, while predators are rare, exception given to those closest to man, such as dogs and cats; also birds are rarely discussed, with the significant exception of the chicken, due to rising awareness and criticism concerning the conditions in which the fowl is industrially exploited. Finally, non-herbivore and non-mammalian animals such as falcons and hawks occupy the very bottom of the list as research priorities. Even if close to human, they are implied in the condemned practice of hunting... that is nonetheless part of their inalienable essence as predators.

In the meanwhile, precisely in the field of human/animal studies, the relationship between man and the birds of prey should be seen as an especially relevant topic. Falconry offers a unique example of a sustainable relation between man and other species, based on collaboration without domestication. Other cases of such a free partnership, for example the spontaneous collaboration between bottle-nose dolphins and fishermen, are much more difficult to observe and study. It is thus crucial to discuss the fact that for thousands of years of shared history, men and falcons continued as free hunting partners, while other cases of such a partnership, for example between men and dogs, quickly degenerated into domestication, i.e. nearly complete dependence of the non-human species. It means that falconry can actually open a unique perspective both in the cultural analysis and ethical experience, as it is an art of dealing with an independent, autonomous non-human partner.

AN EXPERIMENTAL COURSE

These arguments led me to introduce falconry into the emergent field and institutional framework of the anthropozoological studies at the University of Warsaw, against quite a pronounced resistance of several colleagues, faithful

to the above mentioned ethical stance that is usually associated with human/animal studies. The experiment of introducing falconry as an optional subject into the curriculum of studies at the College of Liberal Arts took place in 2014 in the framework of the project “Strategies of introducing and evaluating transdisciplinary curricula and research projects in universities in context of the reform of higher education in Poland” (POKL.04.01.03-00-002/11, project co-financed by the European Social Found – Human Capital, IV, 4.1.3). The experimentation has been continued till the present moment, with modified parameters. While the first undergraduate seminar, “Falconry: man/bird relationship” was centred on the anthropozoological perspective, the second edition, in 2015/16, under the title “Falconry: a global cultural practice”, is an attempt to find a different academic inscription for the topic, in this case in the field of cultural studies on globalization. Each of these seminars corresponds to 15 meetings in the classroom, a reduced charge taking into account the fact that falconry is obviously an addition to the core formation chosen by the undergraduate students. Falconry, as a part of workshop sessions, has also been present in the PhD program “On the crossroads of nature and culture” focusing on human/animal studies and transdisciplinary doctoral projects situated between humanities, science and arts. These experiments (still in progress) enable me to gather some preliminary observations and hints concerning viability of the project of introducing falconry at the university, as well as to point out the main difficulties and hindrances on the way towards its implementation.

The syllabus of the experimental seminar realized during the spring semester of the academic year 2013/2014 was divided into three parts. In the first part the students got familiar with some relevant aspects of falconry history through texts and iconographic materials belonging to different cultural contexts of the Old World, both in Europe, the Mediterranean region and Asia. The aim was to show falconry as a transcultural practice, linking together peoples that otherwise might have little in common. Stressing the transcultural aspect, I invited the students to reflect on the definition and frontiers of the cultural. A fragment of Usama Ibn Munkidh autobiography, “The Book of Learning by Example”, proved to be particularly productive for such an approach (Ibn Munkidh 1930). The interpretation focused on the burial of a falcon organized by Usamah’s friend. Reading the narration concerning Usamah’s relationship with his falcon, the students detected the traces of the “culturalization” of the natural behaviour of the bird, as observed by its human partner. Just to give an example, the Syrian falconer interpreted the fact that the falcon didn’t attack the fowl in the courtyard as the proof that the bird understood and shared the basic cultural distinctions and concepts, such as “home” and “domestic” *versus* “alien”, “outsider”, “wild” or “stranger”.

Further reading in Usamah's autobiography, written in the epoch of the crusades, permitted to show how falconry formed a link between the sides of the conflict that opposed Muslims and "Francs" at that time. Nonetheless, the shared passion for birds managed to bring those people together, making friendships possible in spite of the conflictive circumstances. The life and works of Frederic II, an obvious reference in the context of falconry, also helped to sketch this history of exchange in times of clash and conflict. The circulation of manuscripts and transmission of knowledge was not stopped, but perhaps paradoxically fostered by the clash and conflict that characterized the epoch of the crusades. On more pacific grounds, delving into the polyvalent inscription of falconry in the medieval culture enabled the students to discover falconry as a transversal element, implied in such diverging areas as the courtly love and the formation of the scientific spirit. The study of the treatise "De cura accipitrum" by Adelard of Bath illustrated the importance of the close observation of birds of prey in the birth of the new, empirical attitude towards nature. Finally, a glimpse into falconry as a living tradition was offered through the analysis of the movie "Eagle Hunter's Son" by René Bo Hansen, a topic to which I will return below.

In the second part of the course, the students could gather some knowledge concerning the zoological aspects implied in falconry and learn about the practices that actually enable humans to train falcons, hawks, as well as other species of birds of prey, such as owls, certain vultures (nowadays used in extremal sport activities, such as parahawking) and so on. Also such facts as the presence of certain species of birds of prey, mainly *Falco peregrinus*, in the cities were mentioned. Such basic scientific notions as synanthropism were introduced. Finally, in the conclusive, "reflective" part of the course the students got familiar with the inscription of the falconry into the contemporary European society, including also the controversial aspects of this heritage. As an example of such a controversy, strongly based on misunderstandings and lack of knowledge, we analysed the reactions of the public visiting the falconry exposition in the Peniscola castle in Spain, voiced in the comments left on an internet page. Many persons described the spectacle as "sad" and generally unethical. The students could thus reflect on the ways of presenting the falconry heritage to the contemporary public and its possible impact in the contemporary culture, urban ecosystems and environmental issues.

This part of the seminar created an opportunity to inscribe falconry in the field of the typical anthropozoological concerns. On the other hand, it also implied a direct contact between falconers, their birds, and the students. We counted with the presence of Janusz Sielicki, as well as some younger activists who brought their birds into the classroom. At the end of the course, the students were asked to submit a short essay conceived as their personal "response" to the experience of the falconry seminar. These responses were predominantly favourable, although

they concentrated in the historical aspects of falconry, its dimension of “heritage” that was regarded by the students as the most important source of legitimization of the survival of this practice and its contemporary forms.

DIFFICULTIES AND HINDRANCES

As falconry has always been an elitist cultural practice appealing only to a minority of the society, the first important question is to know if there is a sufficient interest among the students to justify the existence of a suitable seminar group. This difficulty is especially acute due to the general demographic situation of the university in Poland, where lack of interested students is often a hindrance of many valuable initiatives. In 2014, the falconry seminar was made available both to the students of the Faculty “Artes Liberales” and to all the students of the University of Warsaw (as an optional class). This simple procedure proved efficient enough to bring the required number of students into the classroom. In 2015, however, the inscriptions were restricted to the students of the Faculty “Artes Liberales” alone; once again, this proved enough to justify the creation of the seminar group, but not enough to guarantee sufficient dynamics of this group during the learning process, due to considerable fluctuation of the number of students. It is also curious to observe that the initiative was noticed by the general academic public, although apparently not in positive terms. The class was quoted on a fan page dedicated to the greatest absurdities of the University of Warsaw, created by the students. Nonetheless, the fact seems to have added some impact to this initiative, accentuating the controversial aspect of falconry as a minor, off-stream topic.

Teaching falconry is an open question also in terms of the contents to be discussed in class. Practical lessons involving live birds seem to be the most desirable part of the training, although such an initiative implies several logistic problems, especially in a faculty essentially dedicated to the study of the humanities. On the other hand, this difficulty may be seen as an opportunity of launching a permanent collaboration between academia and its social partners, in this case, the falconry activists. In fact, such an involvement of the extra-mural participants is inscribed, as one of the principles, in the mission and strategy of the University of Warsaw. Still, as I see it, exploring theoretical and historical aspects of falconry, not the practical training of birds, constitute the core of this academic contribution; nonetheless, one of the main targets is to close the gap between the study of the past (falconry in history, art, literature, etc.), typical anthropozoological concerns (such as animal rights), and the living cultural practice inscribed in the contemporary world. Such a transversal perspective may help to combat many prejudices and misconceptions concerning falconry that

exist in the society, including views on the very process of training the bird of prey that is frequently misinterpreted as an equivalent of any circus training, and judged incompatible with the bird's welfare. Fostering proper understanding of the uniqueness of falconry as a relationship between autonomous subjects, human and non-human, is crucial in this domain.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is improbable to expect that hunting as such might find a permanent place inside the academic institution, due to the fact that university is supposed to enforce the strictest ethical standards in the first place. Yet on the other hand, its mission is essentially connected to agonism, i.e. creation of propitious conditions for debate and rational confrontation among those representing contrasting interests and views, for example hunters and radical ecologists or defenders of the animal welfare. Such is also the expectation of the undergraduate students forming the academic public for falconry seminars. Many of them, if not the majority, appear in the classroom out of sheer curiosity or in order to discuss the controversial issues proposed to them, even if they are personally against hunting as a practice in the modern society and are unlikely to actually become falconers. Their presence is nonetheless crucial for rising social awareness of what falconry actually is and what kind of cultural significance it represents.

Proper understanding of the expectations and necessities of this academic public should be reflected in the choice of topics and materials forming the syllabus of studies. The crucial point is to comprehend that falconry is not a value in itself for these students. Most of them never had any previous contact with it, and they face it only as an episode among many in their academic formation. It should also be properly understood that this "serendipitous" manner of facing the educational process is the specificity of our College of Liberal Arts, offering an extremely diversified range of transversal courses, performative experiences, such as theatre experiments, courses of minor languages, such as Nahuatl (the Aztec language), etc. This formula put into practice in the Faculty "Artes Liberales" in Warsaw is the utmost consequence drawn from the general idea of liberal education as an elitist model of formation offering a general orientation in a wide range of topics, as well as fostering the personal development of the student, who is seen, at least by the early American defenders of this paradigm, as an individual in such a privileged social position that he or she may feel dispensed from the necessity of learning a recognized profession. The falconry seminar doesn't actually seem exotic in this context, but it appears as a challenge among many others. It should thus become in its turn a way leading to the discovery of other values and areas of interest.

SIGNIFICANCE IN THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDENTS

The crucial question that should be answered by any person wishing to teach falconry in such a context is: why does falconry actually matter? Several answers to this question may be proposed, both in reference to the past and the present. In my own approach, falconry is a window that offers a glimpse into another form of life, be it in a distant historical epoch, or a distant cultural conditions (or both at the same time). Through falconry, the seminar group may thus come close to a cultural context in which the students lack basic coordinates, such as historical information or specific conceptual tools. Such an approach permits to build up an attractive, motivating class in which falconry is a means to bring about not only knowledge and awareness concerning the relationship between man and other living beings, but also an insight into the human condition and existence as such. As a sample material to foster such an approach, I can recommend a cinematographic text, such as the “Eagle Hunter’s Son”, directed by René Bo Hansen (2009). This movie was unanimously considered by the students as the most fascinating and thought-provoking part of the programme.

In most cases, the discussion on this movie was the first meaningful insight into the culture of Kazakhstan, a country on which the students had little or no information. At the same time, analysing the network of relationships between the adolescent hero, Bazarbai, his father, his older brother, the eagle on the one hand, and the people from outside the closest family circle on the other, the students could build up a personal understanding of what is a traditional society as opposed to the modern society in which they live. Such notions as nomadism, crucial in cultural studies, could be exemplified and so to speak filled in with a human, emotional content. In fact, I noticed that the discussion on this movie was remembered among the students for many months after the class, which is normally not the case for any class dealing with apparently marginal and inessential pieces of information as those concerning Kazakh culture. The suggestiveness and potential inscribed in the image of the bird of prey undoubtedly brought about these motivational and intellectual implications of the learning event.

Other texts dealing with falconry may also bring similar insight into the human condition and raise the self-awareness of the students, independently of any other charge of information implied in their analysis. A recent falconry best-seller, “H is for Hawk” by Helen Macdonald (2014) is another great example proving that enriching and intellectually stimulating value of falconry is by no means confined in distant history. This autobiographical book is uniquely enriching as a testimony of the process of mourning, caused by the premature death of the author’s father. The relationship with a hawk corresponds to the exploration of the emotions belonging to the Jungian “shadow”: rage, revolt, terror and grief of the

bereavement. The inner “wildness” of the narrator corresponds to the untamed nature of the hawk. At the same time, the traditional falconry practice, including close observation of the bird through all the senses but the sight, is transformed into a way of patient and laborious rebuilding of the inner balance through a progressive depletion of the ego:

“The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the gloom. Her beak is open. She breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burned stone. Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I’m holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready to flight. I don’t look at her. I mustn’t. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there*.” (Macdonald 2014: 66-67).

Similar value of the relationship with a bird of prey as a way of solving serious psychological problems seems to appear constantly in the autobiographies of falconers that form quite a distant genre of writing. Through his apparently maniacal identification with the figure of Frederic II, the narrator of Tim Gallagher’s “Falcon Fever” manages to overcome the trauma caused by the fact of having been born as a son of a mentally unstable father. The figure of an emperor who lived several centuries ago becomes a vital compass permitting to establish the hero’s own path:

“I view Frederick as an old friend. Through his book, written in the thirteenth century, he taught me how to train falcons. I made my first jesses (the thin leather strips put on a falcon’s legs) from his patterns. I took my first game with a falcon using his carefully written advice. But more than that, I think Frederic II – and the sport of falconry he championed – helped me through some of the most trying times in my life. I believe if it were not for falconry I would not be alive today.” (Gallagher 2008: 7).

Such a strategy of offering to the students not only the specialized knowledge, but first of all the strategies of coping with all sorts of unexpected problems, perhaps including also traumatic life events, is inscribed in the philosophy of liberal education. Falconry can contribute to such an open formula of formation as a process of “soul shaping” and “growing in wisdom”, rather than gathering more or less structured knowledge.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

The experiment presented here proved that falconry may be present as an enriching and intellectually challenging topic at the university. At the same

time, the introduction of the experimental falconry seminar opens more and more questions, in parallel to the further development of the transdisciplinary anthropozoological studies in the framework of close collaboration between various faculties that is currently taking shape at the University of Warsaw. Undoubtedly, many outreaching activities involving secondary schools, social, institutional and entrepreneurial partners, as well as the general public, can be developed beyond the incipient stage achieved till now. As falconry is a global practice, more international links may be created around this topic. Paradoxically, the most obvious obstacle making such a collaboration quite difficult is the uniqueness of the University of Warsaw in the context of other academic institutions, especially among the faculties of humanities. If other universities started to promote similar initiatives, networks of transdisciplinary collaboration at the level of postgraduate students, researchers and professors could be built more easily. On the other hand, this initiative implies bringing together worlds that are very far away from each other. The hermetism of advanced humanities, as well as the ideological stances often defended in this context, may seem very distant from the falconer community, its preoccupations, aims and worldview. Bringing both realities into a dialogue may seem an artificial and utterly impossible task. Nonetheless I believe the cause of falconry and its place in the general consciousness of the societies in Europe and worldwide has much to gain with the development of this perspective.

Much work is thus yet to be done, but the general perspectives seem to be bright. There is in fact a reasonable perspective of transforming falconry into a permanent part of the academia, especially if the anthropozoological platform, initially hostile to the topic, is to be used. Inscribed into the ever-transforming trends of contemporary humanities, the falconry heritage may regain a new lease of life, enriching the present generation and creating a new legacy to the forthcoming ones.

NOTES

- 1 Alternatively spelled also “anthrozoology”; such is the form that appears, among other occurrences, in Wikipedia. I will nonetheless use the form “anthropozoology” as it seems philologically more justified.

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