Paul Zimmer: A Romance for the Wild Turkey

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If alarmed, then falling out again.
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Full of blood. It bathes by grinding
Itself in coarse dirt, is incapable
Of passion or anger, knows only
Vague innocence and extreme caution,
Walking around in underbrush
Like a cantilevered question mark,
Retreating at least hint of danger.

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Dreams at night it flies high up
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Vivid in the full moon, guided always
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Over chittering fields of corn
And the trivial fires of men,
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As fearful, stupid, and unsure.

"A Romance for the Wild Turkey" by Paul Zimmer, from *Crossing to Sunlight Revisited*. © The University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Under the heading, 'Things you did not need to know about me' would be this statement: I do not dream, by which I mean I do not remember my dreams.

Well, maybe that is not true for the very recent past. For what may be the first time, I have been awakening with a memory of what I had been dreaming about. But you did not need to know this, either.

I start this way because I am perhaps not the best person to be writing about dreams. Still, there are the dreams of nighttime, which we all have but many of us do not remember, and the dreams of the daytime, which we all remember and live with – and which very often guide our lives. "Day-dreams' we sometimes call them; 'illusions' we say at other moments when we want to castigate the dreams of others. But our vision of ourselves in a future which we seem to be on the cusp of, a future that has not yet transpired: these dreams shape who and what we are. We move toward them – "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hour," Thoreau wrote in a wonderful phrase. We advance toward fulfilling our dreams whether we want to or not. For our dreams and our desires are, perhaps, one and the same.

I am going to look at a poem I discovered almost accidentally, a poem about wild turkeys by Paul Zimmer. It is about dreams. And reality. Buff and I encountered the poem on a modest hike. Along the trail in Niquette State Park were, at maybe 15 places, poems held up by sticks, white pieces of paper enclosed in plastic. We went on the hike twice: the second time the poems were different from the first, so we discovered that they were attached to the sticks by Velcro, which made them easily transferable. The poems we encountered on our first trip were memorable, including ones by Mary Oliver, William Wordsworth, Robert Frost. But the most memorable one was about a wild turkey, written by Paul Zimmer.

That it was memorable tells us something about poems. It does not rhyme, its lines have varying number of syllables, it has no meter I can ascertain. Its language is not fancy or 'poetical.' The poem has only two similes and no metaphors. Hardly a premier candidate for a 'poem.' And yet it sticks. It creates something, a picture, a thought, that is memorable. And that is, at base, what a poem is: words that are memorable and portable. Words that stick to our minds like those poems we saw in the woods, stuck to upright sticks with Velcro. Poems are, and this I know is both contrived and trite, words with Velcro.

Zimmer's poem has three stanzas. An introductory stanza, where he says he will write about wild turkeys. A longer stanza about what wild turkeys are, and how they are regarded. A final stanza about how he hopes wild turkeys dream. That's it: Not a very complicated structure. But, I think you will agree, it is

memorable, which is why I am writing about this poem. It sticks with us. Both the images of the bird, which is ungainly and, well, awful, and the hope the poet has for the bird's possible dream that it is no longer ungainly and awful.

I can't say for sure, but I imagine Zimmer had a famous poem by Charles Baudelaire in mind. Zimmer goes beyond Baudelaire, for his bird is not one captured, but actual, alive, living as an ungainly creature. And his bird is not a symbol for the poet in civilization. The turkey does not soar when let free, as the shackled albatross can, except of course when freed from its actual reality in the world, to the world of nocturnal dreaming. Here is Baudelaire's poem:

The Albatross
Charles Baudelaire, trans. Richard Howard

Often to pass the time on board, the crew
will catch an albatross, one of those big birds
which nonchalantly chaperone a ship
across the bitter fathoms of the sea.

Tied to the deck, this sovereign of space,
as if embarrassed by its clumsiness,
pitiably lets its great white wings
drag at its sides like a pair of unshipped oars.

How weak and awkward, even comical
this traveller but lately so adroit -
one deckhand sticks a pipestem in its beak,
another mocks the cripple that once flew!

The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds
riding the storm above the marksman's range;
exiled on the ground, hooted and jeered,
he cannot walk because of his great wings.

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For Baudelaire, the poet is like the albatross: ungainly in the world of men, but soaring when released and capable of flying into – what was it Shelley called it? – the empyrean.

In one of the most famous poems of the nineteenth century, and in my view one of the best, Matthew Arnold considered dreams. For him, dream enchants us,

but the reality we must live in is otherwise. (For a fuller examination of Arnold's poem, you can read what I sent out a year ago on "Dover Beach.")

Dover Beach

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand;
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In this great poem, Arnold the poet stands with his lover. He commands her to come to the window and look at the English Channel spread before them in night-time. Ah, he says, we can not only look but hear, and what we hear is the sound of the waves crashing, again and again on the shore. It is a sad note. So ends the first stanza.

The second stanza says it has always been thus: at the dawn of Western civilization, Sophocles heard the waves as well, and he wrote of what he heard, dramas "of human misery." Tragedy. And although Sophocles heard it by the Aegean Sea, Arnold and his lover find tragic thoughts far north, by the English Channel.

What they hear are the waves upon the shore as the tide is going out, and here Arnold reads the natural world as a symbol for, or index to, the world of human history. Once people believed ("The Sea of Faith was once too at the full") and wrapped the globe in belief's golden raiment, but "now /I only hear Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." The world is dreary when faith ebbs, when belief disappears, when our hope is diminished that life can be fine and golden and wonderful.

In the concluding stanza the poet pledges fidelity, "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!" But this is only the start of the stanza. On to dreams, which is why I am reconsidering this poem, here, in an assessment of Paul Zimmer's poem about wild turkeys. The world *seems* dreamlike, but the actuality is something else. That glorious final stanza is worth repeating, as I repeated it in my earlier essay, because it counterpoises the world we dream of with the reality we encounter: That balance of one against the other is stunning.

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Our dream is of a varied and beautiful and new world. But the sound of the waves intrudes on the dream, and reveals that there is neither – has there ever been a run of negatives to compare to this? – "neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Oh, oh, oh. Thus we are prepared for that final metaphor, in which the sphere of human existence is darkness, clanging sounds, and warfare. "Ignorant armies," knowing neither why they struggle nor what they are dying for. That is reality, and dreaming otherwise is just that – dreaming.

Walt Whitman thought of dreaming differently. His great poem of the night-time, "The Sleepers," is filled with violence and death and sexuality, for he recognized half a century before Freud that in the realm of dreams what we desire and fear rises into the imagination, uncensored by the mechanisms which make our thoughts acceptable in the 'everyday.' But in addition to the individual's own fantasies of death and sexuality, Whitman's poem also recognizes that dreaming makes us whole: that in the dreamworld we deal with anxious things so that on awakening we can put our anxieties aside. We are refreshed, made whole again.

For Whitman there is a democracy to dreaming. He catalogues a great variety of dreamers, and then declares in Section 7 that in sleep they are all the same:

I swear they are averaged now . . . . one is no better than the other,
The night and sleep have likened them and restored them.

I swear they are all beautiful,
Every one that sleeps is beautiful . . . . every thing in the dim night is beautiful,
The wildest and bloodiest is over and all is peace.

According the Whitman, dreams free us to live our lives. Unlike Arnold, he does not see them as weak and false alternatives to reality, but as necessary adjuncts to the lives we live. More than adjuncts: necessities if we are to arise and face the world on each succeeding day.

I am not sure that Zimmer sees things precisely as Whitman did, though we shall return to Whitman as a forebear to this poem later. For now, let's look at Zimmer's poem and see what he says about 'reality' and 'dreams.'

Here are the turkeys.

> They are so cowardly and stupid
> Indians would not eat them
> For fear of assuming their qualities.

The opening stanza is not one that would lead the reader to admire wild turkeys. Quite the opposite. They are "cowardly and stupid," and so 'subhuman' that the Indians were afraid of acquiring their qualities by incorporating them if they ate the bird. We do not want to be anything like the wild turkey; we do not want to 'assume' those horrible qualities of cowardice and stupidity.

The next stanza indicates just how awful these birds are.

> The wild turkey always stays close
> To home, flapping up into trees
> If alarmed, then falling out again.
> When shot it explodes like a balloon
> Full of blood. It bathes by grinding
> Itself in coarse dirt, is incapable
> Of passion or anger, knows only
> Vague innocence and extreme caution,
> Walking around in underbrush
> Like a cantilevered question mark,
> Retreating at least hint of danger.

This is a catalogue, I think, of what *not* to be. Afraid of venturing forth into the world, hiding yet not hiding ("flapping"), falling again and again back into danger. There is no grace to its death: a wild turkey when shot "explodes like a balloon/Full of blood." An image too awful to contemplate, isn't it?

And the awfulness continues. The birds seem terribly dirty, for the turkey "bathes by grinding/Itself in coarse dirt." Many birds clean themselves with dirt and dust, an often-successful effort to rid themselves of parasites. But note the verb and the adjective: these are not sparrows bathing in the dry soil, playfully dusting themselves, for the turkey "grinds" itself in "coarse" dirt. Unlike us, unlike many animals, it is "incapable of passion or anger." Its innocence is not pure (as with Blake's lamb, in his famous lyric "The Lamb" where the innocent creature has a "tender voice" and is wonderfully appropriate as the symbol for Christ) but "vague." Ah, back to the beginning: the wild turkey is cowardly, full of "extreme caution…retreating at the least hint of danger." No certainty here,

only uncertainty: in a simile which physically conjures up the turkey with the long neck surmounted with a head and wattles, he is a “cantilevered question mark.”

Let’s not leave this stanza behind too quickly. There are no, repeat no, positive qualities ascribed to wild turkeys here. Dull, stupid, ugly, distasteful in a the extreme. Emily Dickinson wrote about the terror she felt at seeing a snake in her wonderful poem, “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass,” saying in memorable lines how she communed with much of nature:

> Several of Nature’s People
> I know, and they know me
> I feel for them a transport
> Of Cordiality

Ah, but not wild turkeys. No cordiality here. Cowardly, disgusting creatures, according to Zimmer. I cannot think of a stanza in a poem that is more disparaging of its subject than this one. Turkeys are not large enough to be evil, nor even memorably awful: they are sacks of blood, stupid and cowardly as the poem’s opening proclaims.

It is perhaps fair to interject that in recent years I occasionally have seen a flock of wild turkeys across a pasture, where the trees meet the open grass. Vermont wildlife programs have, after wild turkeys were almost extinct, worked to replenish the species. Now they appear to sight across the state. And my heart always rises up: the wild is manifesting itself to me, and modernity has not wiped out all that once was. So when I see wild turkeys I am happy.

But Zimmer plunges deeper than most of us will go: just what are these avian creatures? The cantilevered question marks are stupid and cowardly. I am stunned to get this news, and yet I honor Zimmer for his anti-romantic truth-telling. (There is an irony in the title of this poem, “A Romance for the Wild Turkey.” The core of this poem is, as I just said, anti-Romantic. But the dream that concludes the poem: it is a Romance, in that it goes beyond the everyday into a quest for an idealized world.) I may be happy when I see the wild turkeys, but I do not think about what I am seeing, I do not think, although this poem by this poem urges me to think about what I see.

For Zimmer, the wild turkey is the emblem of all that is out of joint with the world. And yet, as the final stanza reveals, he has hopes, hopes that lie in the realm of dreams. “I hope when the wild turkey/ Dreams at night” he begins the stanza. And the rest is the hopeful dream of and for the wild turkey, at night,

unseen, untethered in sleep from the earth on which it dwells. Where the previous two stanzas were about cowardice and stupidity and coarseness, this final stanza is about "gladness." Consider the adjectives:

"high up…vast…vivid…full….radiant…high (over…the trivial)".

I hope when the wild turkey
Dreams at night it flies high up
In gladness under vast islands
Of mute starlight, its silhouette
Vivid in the full moon, guided always
By radiant configurations, high
Over chittering fields of corn
And the trivial fires of men,
Never to land again nor be regarded
As fearful, stupid, and unsure.

Let's start at the end. In dream, ungrounded, high above the earth, "never to land again," the turkey is free of the human and so will nevermore "be regarded as fearful, stupid, and unsure." Unbound by both the constraint of the earth on which it spends it days, and the regard of humans – even going back to those "Indians' who enter at the start of the poem's second line – the wild turkey can be free. In Zimmer's "hope" they are the opposite of the birds who, in Wallace Stevens' brilliant closing of "Sunday Morning," sink toward darkness rather than rise in it. Stevens' poem is about a woman thinking of death, Zimmer's is about the poet thinking of what life can be. Here is Stevens:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

In Zimmer, the turkeys fly high in the darkness, soaring in what he hopes they dream at night. "In gladness." Above them, in their dreams, is a new continent of stars: "under vast islands of mute starlight." Why mute? Because even in dream the stars are far off, beyond sound; yet they are there nonetheless, as the stars in our night skies are there even though we cannot hear them.

In its dream the wild turkey is not fearful of being seen. It is not the ugly and ungainly bird of the daytime. In dream it presents itself proudly, "its silhouette/ Vivid in the full moon." Here, in night and dream, it is "guided always/

By radiant configurations." That mute starlight rules even if it is not heard. Far beneath them sounds of the earth may be heard, even in their dream: but the fields of corn are "chittering," making meaningless sounds that cannot compete with the mute starlight.

In dream the turkey is far beyond "the trivial fires of men." In dream those "cowardly and stupid" qualities asserted in the opening, which is the judgement of men and not the self-conception of the turkeys, no longer applies. They turkey flies high, in dream, "never to land again" and so never "to be regarded/As fearful, stupid, and unsure."

The poem reverses itself totally. Dreams remedy reality. They allow the world to free itself from human judgment, so often cruel and final. The turkey, in dream, is liberated from human judgment and can be itself, or itself as it would be if its desires had a firm purchase on the world we live in. That is Zimmer's hope: that dream can remedy the deficiencies encountered in the 'real' world.

I find Zimmer's poem particularly poignant today. We have a President who lashes out at people of color as "infestations." (Charles Blow, the columnist, suggests that the remedy to infestation is extermination. From vocabulary to genocide… so goes the linguistic logic of Trump's world.) Masses of people cluster on our borders, denied access to freedom and the pursuit of happiness and, it is clear, to personhood. They are seen and treated by our federal state as 'less than human.'

Zimmer shows us the limits of sight, for in seeing we too often judge. The wild turkey is one of the creatures with whom we share our planet and our nation's territory. Seeing them as we do, noting their ugliness and beastliness, ignores their desires to be free, and free from judgment. They have a right to this freedom. Even though they are birds.

Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet written to help raise money for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Its lines are inscribed on a brass plaque on that pedestal. Several lines of the sonnet at often quoted: "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Lazarus wore, notwithstanding how memorable these lines are, a poem that is not a great one. Yet Zimmer says something similar, I think, as an undertone to this poem we are considering. We yearn for liberation, like the turkey: to fly free, to move beyond castigation ("fearful, stupid, and unsure") into a realm of romance.

I’ve moved into a political discourse about immigration for a reason. Too often we see, and label, the dirt and ugliness of other creatures, and especially human creatures. Not just birds, but those seeking to emigrate into our nation. And nowadays we cage those we judge to be less human or less smart or less clean than ourselves. Although if we follow the logic of the Trumpian ‘infestations,’ ultimately it is not caging but eradication that we are heading toward.

Zimmer’s poem reminds us that, as in Whitman’s poem, all creatures *and all humans* yearn for wholeness and acceptance, and that in our dreams is to be found who and what we truly are. Wild turkeys, humans: it is not just the outward, and the humanly judged, qualities that show what we consist of. What is within us, what we dream, is the index to who and what we are.