

Book review

A Contribution to Historiography of the Human-animal Relationship

Michel Pastoureau, *Le Corbeau. Une Histoire culturelle* (The Raven. A Cultural History), Paris, Le Seuil, 2021, 160 pages (French).

Morvan Perroncel

Michel Pastoureau's *Le Corbeau* was a much anticipated book. On many occasions the author had expressed his intention of retracing the raven's cultural history, as he has already done for the bear, the ox, the wolf and the pig, all animals too close to humans not to be both attractive and feared, and whose fate in Christian culture was generally the story of a disgrace.¹

The black bird's intelligence is now well-known. And yet, even recognized as endowed with superior cognitive abilities, equal to if not beyond apes, he's not rid of a bad reputation as a bird of ill-omen, prowling around cemeteries, looting crops, or setting up a dismal atmosphere merely by being there.

One would imagine this reputation to be as ancient as the relationship of humans with ravens. It is not. In one of Aesop's fables, a raven lets a piece of cheese slip out of his beak, tricked by flatteries from a fox pretending to be eager to hear the voice of a bird so beautifully feathered.² If the story leaves a poor image of the raven in modern minds, in ancient Greece people could understand it rather as a demonstration of how cunning the fox is —

1. *L'Ours. Histoire d'un roi déchu* (Le Seuil, 2007) has been translated into English by George Holoch; *The Bear. History of a Fallen King*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

2. This fable is commonly referred to as «The Fox and the Crow». Although «crow» is more often used in English for the genus *corvus*, «raven» seems more appropriate here because the representative of this genus mostly discussed in the book is the «common raven» (*corvus corax*), the largest of all «crows». Other members, closer to what is ordinarily called «crow» and more familiar to people today, such as the carrion crow (*corvus corone*), the rook (*corvus frugileus*) or the large-billed crow (*corvus macrorhynchos*), are sometimes associated with the raven, sometimes distinguished, depending on the period. This is true in Japan as well, where species of lesser size are very common everywhere in the archipelago while *corvus corax*, of which *watarigarasu* is a subspecies, is now present only in Hokkaido. As shown by bones excavated from ancient Scandinavian tombs, the

cunning enough to fool the raven. The dark reputation came later.

Along with the ox, the pig, the fox, the wolf, the bear and a couple of others forming the «central bestiary» of Western Europe's civilization,³ the raven has always had a special status. He was for a long time the only winged fellow of this company and, as Pastoureau states in the opening part of the book, he belongs to the inner core of this central bestiary, in a trio with the bear and the wolf. He is also the one whose image seems the most entirely negative, even after his long-ignored — or, more aptly, long-forgotten — intelligence has been recognized.

Le Corbeau, despite its traditional features and the explicit restriction of the study to the European area, can be read as a contribution to «global history», in the sense that it explores a field, human-animal history, neglected or disregarded by traditional historiography, and closely relates it to more familiar aspects of the past.

Antique messenger of the gods

The first chapter recounts how the raven was seen in the ancient civilizations of Europe prior to Christianization.

In Celtic mythology, the raven is a messenger and adviser of the gods, admired for its wisdom. Helping dead warriors on the way to their last dwelling place, he's rather benevolent toward humans, as also suggested by folktales. Attribute of the god Lugh, he's associated with the foundation of many cities, including London, Lyon and Lugano, and the Celtic etymon meaning «raven», *bran*, can still be found in place names and surnames.

German and Scandinavian mythologies share a lot with the Celtic. The prominent god Odin (Wotan) is assisted by two ravens, Huginn («Thought») and Muninn («Memory»), who report to him everything that happens in the world. Odin himself can transform into a raven and fly toward those he wants to punish. Not surprisingly, then, numerous raven remains have been excavated from ancient tombs in northern Europe, but very few of other birds of prey, contrary to what is observed around the Mediterranean. The raven is still very present during the Viking period (8th-10th century), in sagas, where he warns sailors and warriors of approaching dangers, or painted on banners and sails as a clan emblem or a talisman.

common raven used to be even bigger than today, ranging up to 80 centimeters long, while 70 centimeters is now considered the maximum length.

3. Borrowed from the zooarcheologist François Poplin, the concept of «central bestiary» may be applied to any cultural area or period. The members list, of course, must be modified accordingly. For details about the European one and the historical steps of its formation, see p. 9-10.

In Roman culture, although the raven is almost absent from mythology, his intelligence and memory are admired to the same degree as in northern Europe. Auguries used to interpret the behavior of many birds as signs of events to come but ravens were thought to have a special talent for prophecies. Not only was their flight scrutinized, but also their sounds, in the various inflexions of which messages from Apollo would be deciphered. Pliny the Elder (23-79), enthusiastic admirer of the raven's capacity to utter a great number of sounds, writes that this bird «seems to be the only one to understand the meaning of his predictions».

The picture becomes slightly darker in Greece, where the merits are counterbalanced by demerits, notably by some tendency to gossiping, quarrelling, indiscretion and, in contrast with the memorizing abilities recognized elsewhere, to forgetfulness. It turns almost entirely negative in the Bible. Even though he appears benevolent with Elijah, to whom he delivers food as the prophet is hiding from Ahab by the brook Chorath, the raven is predominantly considered impure in Judaism. Listed in Deuteronomy among birds unclean and not to be eaten, he proves to be unreliable as well in the Genesis: sent out from the Ark by Noah with a scouting mission, he soon forgets about it, irresistibly attracted by corpses floating on the waters after the Deluge.

Pastoureau doesn't comment on this opposition of northwestern Europe and eastern Mediterranean cultures, with Greece standing halfway between, but he mentions, briefly, an observation by ethnologists that the raven is generally appreciated by hunting-gathering peoples (probably for his being helpful to hunters), but cursed by farmers (probably because he's prone to feed on their fields). The opposition that emerges from Pastoureau's survey of the raven's image in ancient civilizations might therefore reflect a chronological gap as to the adoption of agriculture. Starting in the Fertile Crescent as early as 10,000 BC, cereal-growing and pasturing slowly spread westwards, reaching the Atlantic border regions by the 7th millenium, the British Isles and Scandinavia only in the 4th millenium. If true, this relationship should of course not be understood as the ultimate and sole explanation.⁴

The war waged against the raven

While rooted in the Old Testament, the European detestation of the raven is essentially the result of the Church's long-standing efforts to stamp out all pagan cults, or their vestiges, especially in areas untouched by the Christianization accomplished through the late Roman

4. The predominance of ornithomancy as a divination technique in Roman civilization certainly accounts for much of the difference with Greece as to the raven's reputation.

Empire. Many of these cults were associated with animals. German warriors, for example, had the habit of drinking raven blood before battles.

Of the dual image inherited from Antiquity, Christian commentaries almost exclusively retained the negative aspect. Augustine (354-430), who certainly stands as the fiercest animal-hater among the Church Fathers, is particularly savage about the raven and his countless vices: voracious, mischievous, filthy, destructive, liar, blood-thirsty, unrespectful of altars and temples. Contending that the croaking call «croa» imitates the Latin word for «tomorrow», *cras*, he concludes that the raven is either an incarnation of the Devil seeking to lure men astray, or has been created only to put under their eyes a living picture of the sinner who always puts off his confession until tomorrow and thus perpetually evades sincere repentance. This hostility goes so far that he even attempts, rather acrobatically, an interpretation of the episode with Elijah that could confirm the raven's uncleanness while keeping the prophet pure.⁵

Augustine's imprecation against the raven was taken up and repeated by almost all monks and theologians who spoke of the raven during the Middle Ages, implanting the sense that this bird was an absolutely impious creature. Charged with greed, reckless chattering, selfishness, dirty habits, cruelty, he was naturally enrolled among the Devil's friends.⁶ Hatred for the raven then spread widely into secular culture through books intended for a broader readership, in particular through illustrated animal books, or «bestiaries», that amply drew on religious prose.

By the late 12th century, the war against the raven had been won. Consequently, the crown of king of the air long held by the raven in northern Europe was passed on to the eagle, also present in Europe but far less common and absent from the plains. The transfer was all the more easily accomplished as the eagle was already a Christ symbol and an attribute of Saint John the Evangelist. The replacement of the raven by the eagle was so completely achieved that bird-shaped brooches (fibulas) or birds appearing in tapestries of the high Middle Ages are still usually believed to be eagles by modern scholars although, Pastoureaux argues, they had more likely been designed after ravens.

This war was not waged merely with literary and symbolic means. During the Carolin-

5. Strangely, Pastoureaux wonders, Augustine's *Confessions* provide no clue as to what event, in his young days, may have inspired him with such hatred for animals.

6. Quite elusive in the Bible, Satan had no definite shape before the high Middle ages. It is precisely during this period (6th-11th century) that a specific iconography was elaborated. Many of its elements were borrowed from animals regarded as sinful in one way or another, both to represent Satan's body and to staff his infernal company.

gian era, raven massacres were carried out from the late 8th century in the recently conquered regions of eastern Germany. Apparently undertaken by Charlemagne's soldiers, they continued, Pastoureau tells us, for two centuries, and were followed shortly after by similar campaigns in Scandinavia. These killings specifically targeted the common raven,⁷ guilty of being worshiped and reputed invincible, but not the crows.

Readers of Pastoureau's book on the bear will find little surprise in this narrative. The raven's fate in European culture parallels that of the bear, king of animals and object of some religious devotion until the Church persecuted, dethroned and replaced him by the lion. Absent from Europe's ecosystems and therefore almost entirely fictional for European people, the lion was unlikely to arouse so much sympathy as to inspire a new pagan cult and could therefore be confined to a symbolic role.

Both raven and bear, Pastoureau notes, have also managed to regain a better reputation in modern times, albeit quite differently: whereas the raven sees his intelligence recognized, the bear has become a toy, his real existence and character being pushed into the limbo.⁸

Toward an objective reappraisal?

Even during the medieval period, ravens and crows were dealt with in discourses other than religious. Fables, the main genre in which animals are featured, do not really give a better image of the raven, but there is at least some accuracy in the distinction between species — raven, crow and jackdaw are not confused. In the meantime, bestiaries or treatises (on hunting, medicine or agriculture) show unquestionable efforts to increase knowledge based on observation.⁹ Their detailed descriptions laid grounds for the modern natural history that would emerge in the 18th century.

Did this trend toward a more objective apprehension of the raven in profane literature take a decisive step with the rise of scientific thought in the early modern period? Not necessarily. Even in Buffon's *Natural History* (1749-1786), the description of the raven ends

7. See note 2.

8. See *The Bear, op. cit.*, p. 247-248. The reintroduction of the bear in areas where it was extinct for about a century, like in the French Pyrenees, is a cause for serious tensions between authorities and shepherds, somehow troubling the image created by young children's favorite toy since the early 20th century. Recent concern over the fate of polar bears exposed to consequences of global warming is another way through which the bear may come back in the real, but the victim status seems much more compatible with that of harmless stuffed animal.

9. Interestingly, medieval bestiaries devote most of their chapters to birds, and in natural encyclopedias (or «de natura rerum») these occupy between two thirds and three quarters (see p. 78-94).

up disparaging his character and dirty habits. This moral portrayal, largely drawn from a centuries-old tradition, rather suggests how slow in effect was the transition from medieval knowledge to modern science.

Is the process toward an objective reappraisal more advanced today? Probably so, to some extent, but this may be due more to the fact that two centuries of intense urbanization, hygiene policies and evolution of customs regarding death have greatly reduced the chance of seeing ravens and crows gathering around the corpse of a sheep or of a man hanging at the gallows, than to the diffusion of scientific knowledge in society. Besides, while the influence of religion has declined, in the mean time the raven's sinister image has been taken over by Romantics and their followers. Most interesting is the last chapter, discussing how in the modern period, from the early 19th century, the raven's image has remained sinister but, for this very reason, now renders him attractive. This started with Romantic painters and poets, who mobilized a dark-haired or dark-feathered bestiary in which the raven took first place, and endured until today under various forms, especially in popular culture. Like in Poe's famous poem, the raven has recovered his ancient role as a messenger of the other world, as Pastoureaux puts it, «so close and yet out of human reach».

Such fondness for the black bird is understandable considering the reputation he already had, but Pastoureaux has no explanation to offer as to this recent predominance over other animals long assigned to the dark side of the bestiary. It may have been favored by the simple fact that ravens and crows are birds. Unlike bears or wolves, birds are still familiar to modern city dwellers, to whom they have become the most evident representatives of wild-life.

Animals in global history

Michel Pastoureaux's entire work, including his previous books on other animals mentioned above, may be regarded as an important contribution to the globalization of historiography.¹⁰ Although globalness, in historiography as well as in the general opinion, is often equated with world-scale approach, or with attention to transnational phenomena, the notion of broadening that it implies does not necessarily require a geographical extension of the research field. Such is the case when scholars explore fields of which the importance has long gone unnoticed, thereby curtailing the privileges of issues hitherto considered as of

10. The same can be said of his work on colors, another of his lifelong subjects. Like animals, history of colors was not considered worth studying for a «serious historian» when he started to explore it, as he frequently recalls.

overwhelming significance.

Pastoureau does not claim his work to be «global history» and he would probably dislike this label. Nevertheless, despite his investigations being limited to Europe, as he openly admits,¹¹ his contributions to the cultural history of animals are indeed a brilliant example of this exploration of new topics identified by Mizushima Tsukasa as a characteristic of global history.

«Global history» should not - and in fact, cannot - be enclosed in a definition that would confine it to retracing the historical steps and process of what is today called «globalization», that is, to the history of ever-expanding connections between all the areas of the world. Instead, global history should be understood as a cluster of trends, often intertwined but not necessarily consistent with each other like in a theoretical system.¹² Among the main trends observed, Mizushima includes the extension of investigations to «unexplored» objects left out of sight by previous historiography. In this light, «global history», rather than representing a new approach, simply continues what the movement of modern historiography has been since at least the 1920s, when social and economic history issues were included in a field formerly dominated by political history. Animals were perhaps not among the unexplored objects Mizushima had in mind, but they surely have gained in legitimacy as a subject of historical research over the past decade, as epitomized for example by the publication of the *Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* in 2018.¹³

The lack of globalness we may feel in Pastoureau's work on animals is less about the geographical restriction than about its focus on culture — that is, on human culture. Pastoureau's raven is essentially the reflection of the bird in human culture. The reader will catch but very few glimpses of what we may call the real ravens, of flesh and feathers, as if the reality of their existence was not a matter of importance compared to their representations. More detail about raven-killing campaigns, for example, and about how they account for today's distribution of the common raven, would have been appreciated.¹⁴ If the gap between what was said of ravens and their real behavior is alluded to, at times, it is always very

11. In *Le Corbeau* sometimes a side door opens on non-Western cultures, mainly those of North American and Siberian indigenous peoples. Pastoureau has to close it within two or three sentences, apologizing for not being able to go further in that direction. Regretfully, the three-legged raven of East Asian mythologies, known in Japan as «Yatagarasu» (the eight-span raven, or crow), is never mentioned.

12. Mizushima Tsukasa, *Gurobaru hitusori nyumon*, Yamakawa shuppansha, 2010, p. 1-4.

13. Hilda Kean and Philip Howell ed. In Japanese, let us mention the four volumes of *Hito to dobutsu no Nihonshi* (Human and animal history of Japan), Nishimoto Toyohiro, Nakazawa Katsuaki, Suga Yutaka, Nakamura Ikuo and Miura Sukeyuki ed., Yoshikawa shuppansha, 2008-2009.

briefly. However surprising, and frustrating, may be the paucity of insights into what ravens were and are, this is consistent with the view often expressed by Pastoureau that «cultural history always wins out over natural history». But if «natural history is simply one branch of cultural history», as he also has it, then why not bring more of it in a book about cultural history?¹⁵

Like Pastoureau's previous books on animals, this one is as solidly documented as it is richly and beautifully illustrated, and written in a highly accessible style. Much room is given to contexts and to connections with general trends of each period. But the choice of relative briefness and the requirements of the collection apparently forbade the insertion of documents other than iconography — maps or charts would disfigure, unquestionably, the art book that *Le Corbeau* also is.¹⁶

Even someone who is not much of an animal-lover will easily admit that, since its inception, human society has been heavily reliant on animals. This is almost too evident in regard to food resources (evolution from apes to genus homo was linked with scavenging, later with hunting, and the invention of agriculture entailed animal domestication). It used to be evident in regard to clothing (the weaving of natural fibers never eliminated leather and furs) and should be more widely known for the numerous other uses animals were and are put to, from workforce, until the mid-20th century at least, to medical uses, in the past as well as today.¹⁷ But animals are of vital importance not only for the physical subsistence of humans. They are vital for their cultures as well. While real animals are increasingly absent, or invisible, in most modern people's lives, with very few exceptions — pets, insects and a couple of bird species, the rest showing up only on screens — animal representations are, literally, everywhere.

14. The killings carried out in Germany during the Carolingian period (p. 54) and those of recent periods (p. 141) are treated too cursorily. Besides, were they connected so intimately, as Pastoureau seems to think, by the same hatred? Arguably, the latter were primarily motivated by a necessity of protecting crops against the black birds and had little if anything to do with theological arguments.

15. *The Bear*, *op. cit.*, p. 35. See also *Le Corbeau*, p. 11.

16. Pastoureau excuses himself (p. 10) for not devoting to the raven a bigger book, as thorough as *The Bear*, in which a little more attention was paid to ecological history.

17. The improvement of livestock species or the creation of various breeds of dogs by means of artificial selection and crossbreeding are well-known facts. Recently, much efforts have been made to create dog races adapted to metropolitan life and to adapt cats to a demand for pure pets by selecting individuals whose character resembles that of dogs — playfulness and kindness to humans — rather than those who have the half-wild dispositions long considered typical of cats. No matter how artificial it may seem, this trend can be regarded as a mere continuation in our time of the millennia-old process of domestication that started in the Neolithic period.

At a time when DNA-based research is in full expansion and would seem to be the only way to approach animal history, Pastoureau reminds us that science will never be humans' last word about animals. Medieval discourses may sound entirely anti-scientific, typical of an era caring little about positive facts, ridiculous even when compared with modern knowledge. Yet our contemporary representations of animals similarly have a high degree of autonomy. They depend only little on positive facts, and even less on scientific findings. Furthermore, modern knowledge itself, Pastoureau thinks, is bound to be so largely revised that the people of future centuries and millennia will certainly «cry with laughter» at what we believe to be true, as merrily as we do when reading in medieval books the catalogue of vices imputed to animals presumed friends of the Devil. Accordingly, modern knowledge should be used with modesty and not be systematically mobilized to correct or complement discourses of the past.