



STRANGE ATTRACTOR PRESS
BM SAP, WC1N 3XX, London, UK

AN IMPORTANT NOTE

The editors of Strange Attractor Press make every effort to maintain the highest scholarly standards in our research-based publications. Hence, the present work was indeed subjected to a standard “peer-review” process, and initial responses appeared positive. Subsequently, however, it came to light that several concerned/negative reviews had been unaccountably sequestered — surfacing only when *In Search of the Third Bird* was already well along in production. Facing this troubling situation, we have elected, with the permission of the reviewers, to make these critical discussions public, in the hopes of heightening awareness of a number of serious anomalies and misrepresentations that appear to mar this volume.



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April 1, 2021

To: The Editors
Strange Attractor Press
BM SAP
WC1N 3XX, London, UK

Re: *In Search of the Third Bird* – Peer Review

Dear Messrs. Pilkington and Sutcliffe:

Please excuse the lateness of the present communication. I have been even busier than usual, and I confess that when I accepted your request that I undertake a peer review of *IN SEARCH OF THE THIRD BIRD* (edited by Burnett, Hansen, and Smith), I *significantly* underestimated the scale of the manuscript in question. It has taken me longer than I thought to peruse and evaluate this unusual work.

Let me briefly summarize my assessment here: while I had hoped to be able to give this work an easy and positive review (I know several of the authors/editors, and had every reason to expect a scholarly work of high standard) **I must very definitely recommend AGAINST publication of the present work**, which is, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, ***NOT* a work of historical scholarship in any conventional sense.**

So what, exactly, *ARE* these nearly 800 heavily footnoted pages? That is very much the question. I'll have a go at answering it here below.

The manuscript is, on the surface, an academic undertaking of a very familiar sort — a collection of previously published scholarly essays from the pages of a learned journal, the so-called *Proceedings of ESTAR(SER)*, which purports to be the publication of a learned society known as ESTAR(SER). It is associates of this body who have, it is alleged, authored these diverse essays over the last twenty years. In this sense, the volume before us is a kind of bookish “greatest hits” volume, ostensibly the best work of a generation of scholars associated with “The Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating The Society for Esthetic Realizers).”

So far so good. This “ESTAR(SER)” association would seem to concern itself with the history of aesthetics, in a general sense, and with problems of “practical aesthesis” more specifically — which is to say, with the cognitive and embodied work of experiencing what can be experienced. Or something like that, anyway. The contributors to *IN SEARCH OF THE THIRD BIRD* all seem immensely preoccupied with a kind of para-masonic cohort of “radical aesthetes” who call themselves the *Avis Tertia* (more on these eponymous “Birds” in a moment).

Conceived at once as an “anthology” and “celebration” of the Society’s work in this broad area, the book manuscript before me aims to survey a domain of scholarship, presenting pieces that illustrate methodological and historiographical issues, highlight areas of particular concentration, and trace fault-lines of contemporary contestation and debate. Replete with copious footnotes, a detailed bibliography, and an intricate publication history of the journal itself, the manuscript as it stands adheres closely (even, perhaps, *too* closely?) to the technical standards and expectations of academic convention.

But that, essentially, is where convention ends. For let me be clear. Taken in its entirety, there is very little that is “conventional” about this volume.

We can begin with ESTAR(SER) itself. The acronym brings into conjunction the two forms of the Spanish verb of being (which have different usages: one generally implying a permanent and essential condition; the other a contingent, changeable one). The wordplay is suggestive.

But does this learned body actually “exist”? I have my doubts. Yes, there is a website. And yes, there appear to be sundry conferences and even some publications. And yet, the *Proceedings of ESTAR(SER)* does not look like a “real” journal to me. It is not held in my university library, and I cannot get a proper listing for it on any research database. In their introduction, the editors allude to “anomalies” like this, and lay them at the feet of bibliographical malfeasors and shadowy (“Avian”) opponents. Such issues are taken up in full in Chapter 3 by Kyrre Mirador in what purports to be a publishing history of the *Proceedings of ESTAR(SER)*, and other closely affiliated titles of the Society, stretching back to 1883. In the middle of that chapter, for instance, we learn that ALL the copies of the only complete run of the First and Second Series of the *Proceedings* apparently “went missing” from the university library in Tübingen in March of 2010. Whether they exist now, or indeed *ever* existed, is, shall we say, a vexing historical problem not to be fully resolved in the present peer review. But you should know for the record that I have serious doubts about the “historicity” of this journal. I suppose we could say that the *Proceedings of ESTAR(SER)* “exist” now — the evidence being the manuscript here before me. But whether they did so in the past in the ways described is quite another matter.

I have further doubts about the existence of a number of those listed as “contributors” to the volume. (Including, I should say, the aforementioned “Kyrre Mirador,” whose name might be translated — combining the Old Norse *Kyrr* = “calm or peaceful” with the Spanish *mirador*, from *mirar* = “to

look” — as “peaceful looker.” But note that those who identify themselves as “Birds” appear to live exactly for *peaceful looking*. Kyrre Mirador? Quite!)

Take, for example, the sonorous “Lark Orlando.” I can find absolutely no mention of this person in the larger world of letters, though she is ostensibly the author of three novels, including the suspiciously titled *Why We Fly*. A Google search for “Lark Orlando Why We Fly” yields as its #1 hit a website for the “Lake Aircraft Radio Kontrol [*sic*] Squadron,” a club for model airplane enthusiasts based in Tavares, Florida (<https://larksreclub.com/>).

Similarly, “Cisco D. Laertes,” the author of Chapter 4 in the volume, who is described in the Contributors List as a “presidential historian” living in Yakima, Washington (and an apparent expert on fly fishing), has practically no professional footprint to speak of. He does, however, appear to possess a Twitter account, with (as I write), 309 followers — including, strangely enough, my colleague Stéphane Van Damme, the noted French historian of science. But Laertes has *issued only one tweet to date*, an unattributed citation on November 3, 2016, of the famous opening line of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), “Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist” — difficult to translate, but meaning something to the effect of “The world is all that is the case.”

It is certainly true that a considerable number of the other listed contributors, including all three of the editors named on the title page of the manuscript, actually *do* exist, and indeed are reputable scholars all. But questions about the others remain. At the very least, I would strongly encourage you as you go back over the text to do so with a computer or networked device on hand so as to be able to check for such — what shall we say? — peculiarities, anomalies, even *antinomies*?

If the Society’s membership and principal organ are thus in themselves difficult to locate, the object of its investigations is still more elusive. I refer here to the so-called “Order of the Third Bird,” a network of individuals across time who are allegedly committed to radical acts of sustained attention. Think of the movie *Highlander* by way of Marina Abramović. Or a cross between a pataphysical sect of the Falun Gong and a gaggle of Rotarian art-appreciators. To paraphrase W.H. Auden, “*Yes, it may be so. / Is it likely? No.*”

What is at issue in all this? Well, “attention,” apparently. ESTAR(SER) exists as a learned society, we are told, in order to investigate “the specific historicity of attention,” or, “how attention has been ‘paid’ in different times and places, for different purposes, and with different effects.”

That, in fact, is a genuinely interesting problematic and point of departure, and one which, as the editors rightly point out in their introduction, is particularly germane to our present moment, in which the so-called “attention economy” vies daily, hourly, and down to the millisecond to commandeer our senses, seducing us to literally *pay* attention in ways that undermine our very ability to focus on many other things, including ourselves. The subject of attention has, accordingly, generated a vast, and growing, scientific and philosophical literature, which the editors usefully summarize in the extensive footnotes #32-#34 of the introduction. Historical investigation of the problem, however,

has been much slower to follow, meaning that the Society's animating concern should be of real interest to intellectual historians such as myself (indeed, a number of the authors might benefit from a perusal of my own work, with which, it appears, they are less familiar than they should be; I am not cited herein, though my negative evaluation of the MS is, I assure you, unrelated to this matter; ahem).

But, despite my general sympathy for the overall historical project these scholars have, *at least notionally*, undertaken, I have the most serious reservations about what they have actually done. For the scholars of ESTAR(SER) aim not simply to study attention as a concept or phenomenon, but to do so by what I would describe as a para-historical investigation of a very hermetic kind — i.e., they pursue the history of attention by exploring the activities of their beplumed trans-historical McGuffin, *Ye Olde Thirde Birde*, whose devotees have long cultivated the “practice” of intense collective attention in group settings, particularly (though not exclusively) with respect to works of art.

Let us look more closely at these *soi-disant* Birdophiles. They take their name, we learn, from a famous account of the mythical Greek painter Zeuxis, who, having executed a work so real in appearance that its mimetic grapes drew one bird to peck them, while its mimetic child scared another away, paused to remark on the curiosity of a “third bird” (*avis tertia*), who neither pecked nor fled, but rather came to poised attention in the courtyard before Zeuxis's painting and stared at it, transfixed. Modeling themselves after the sustained attentiveness and “curious regard” of this Third Bird, the “Order” in question has apparently gathered secretly throughout the ages in various parts of the world, to enter into communal contemplation according to highly ritualized “protocols,” the many varieties of which are explained at length in the *Proceedings*' pages. And although the Society's scholars conjecture (see Yu.K. Kuznetsov's essay on Kant in Chapter 6, for example) that the Order of the Third Bird may have roots stretching all the way back to antiquity, they generally concur that “the Bird identity as such only took shape over the course of the later eighteenth century.”

The bulk of the manuscript's essays, accordingly, wrestle like Jacob with his albatross angel, tugging valiantly at every shadow and specter of the winged presence in post-18th century (which is to say, post-Enlightenment) aesthetic and intellectual life. The authors of this manuscript *sense that Birdish presence* (and believe they have produced evidence for it) in a surprising number of moments and places: from the elaboration of the Kantian and Hegelian philosophies in Königsberg and Berlin; to the psychological laboratory of William James in Cambridge, Massachusetts; to the development of the literary criticism of Erich Auerbach in Istanbul in the 1930s and 40s, or that of I. A. Richards in Cambridge, England at roughly the same time. There are visits to the studios of Giacometti and the Parisian Surrealists, Jasper Johns and the Australian flower-painter Margaret Preston, and many others along the way. And there are side tours and musings about Darwin and evolution among the fossil fields and Pleistocene bone-quarries of Kentucky; peregrinations with the magical realists and Borgesian modernists of Mexico and Argentina; Transcendentalist disquisitions on the natural world, and Orientalist flutterings about the contemplative practices of various South Asian and East Asian adepts. And all the while, strange connections and coincidences are drawn between the activities of

major cultural figures and a daunting cast of colorful cranks and eccentrics alleged to have been associates of the Order of the Third Bird, but who frankly seem as unlikely to me as many of the contributors to the volume itself.

In short, the Birds, we are led to believe, insinuate a kind of Zelig-like presence across much of modern aesthetic and intellectual life — always looking on silently at the margins of crucial innovations, watching and attending closely. And while we might wonder where they were at other crucial junctures (when Heidegger sat at Husserl's knee in Freiberg, for instance; or when Max Planck met Einstein at Solvay, or when John Cage gave the world a special 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence in 1952), the essays here at least *suggest* that the Birds may well have been peeping upon all those moments too, for these secret sharers seem to pay attention to all those who have paid attention in particularly astounding or revelatory ways — above all in art, as I say, but not *only* there, or *only* there if we agree to take art in its very fullest sense, as comprising any and every thing from a Duchampian urinal or *objet trouvé* to the majesty of the work that is a (wo)man to the starry heavens above. The evidence, presumably, is out there waiting to be discovered (if it already exists), or created (if it does not), and so “brought into being” in the act of retrieval.

For make no mistake, the scholars of ESTAR(SER) show themselves to be exceedingly *inventive* in coming upon their evidence. Although they bring to that process many of the rigors of modern humanistic convention (they have honed and refined the tools and apparatus of *[Geistes]Wissenschaft* with a vengeance in these pages), they also recognize, and at times would appear *willfully to embrace*, the more imaginative side of historical inquiry and recovery. As the introduction to Part VI of the manuscript rightly explains, “An occupational hazard of historical training is a hypertrophied tendency to conjure persons, from the merest of fragmentary sources.” One is left to wonder, to what extent have these Bird-historians conjured their Birds?

Which points to a problem at the very heart of this manuscript. And it is a “problem” in two senses: on the one hand, I sense it is the “problem” with which this unusual book is concerned; and yet it is also straightforwardly “problematic” as well. I refer to the problem of truth, and how we know it. This is the problematic problem of “fake news,” to be sure. But it is also the deep problem at the heart of every crisis of certainty, every crisis of belief, every new phase in the history of proof and evidence, science and society. What is the “truth” of fiction? And what is the falsehood of our sciences? Why is it that the work of knowing so often leaves us separated from the “lifeworld” of experience?

These are weighty questions — at their heart, questions that are not merely philosophical, but even properly religious (as the authors of this volume repeatedly intimate). How even to begin to get at them with our fragile and worldly instruments?

The scholars of ESTAR(SER) certainly acknowledge that their means are compromised. As Gregg C. Toomey explains in his essay (Chapter 2), the so-called “W-Cache,” the immense body of sources bearing on the history and activity of the Birds (apparently their “complete archive”), resembles more

the library of Borges's Babel than a stable body of documentary materials. Subject to continual deprivations, dilapidations, and loss, the W-Cache seems not even to be fully accessible anymore. And where (or whether) it physically exists is ultimately quite unclear. Moreover, and this is the crucial point, the Birds themselves, who are no less interested in answering the question of Truth than the scholars of ESTAR(SER), go about it in an entirely different way — a *gnostic* way, we might say, and so appear to be actively resistant to the methods employed in the attempt to capture and freeze their flights in time.

It is as if the Birds, whose rites of radical attention amount to a quiet and continuous effort to be *present to Being* (even, we might hazard, to “become one” with it), for that very reason, absolutely resist and defy any account of the “becoming” of their work. We might say their vaulting moments of pure “SER” will have no truck with the plodding business of “ESTAR.” Birdish brushes with BEING will not be assorted in the language of mere “becoming.” But *BECOMING is the language of history*.

We might assess this manuscript, then, as an experiment in something like gnostic historiography. But there is no such thing, sadly. And for this reason, the manuscript, for all its spark and charm, for all its work and play, FAILS. In this sense, the Birds are right. Their endless efforts to tweak and corrupt and erase and forestall the work of their ESTARSERian historians are entirely justified. And I suppose you could say that, while no Bird, I am prepared to join my work to theirs: and do what I can to stop this work from being published. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.

But before I leave the matter at that, allow me a moment on the question of art. The scholars of ESTAR(SER) of course, insist that they are *not Birds*, and that History is *not Art*. Conversely, the Birds, it would appear, insist that they are *not scholars*, making clear that it is precisely in their defiance of the confines of historicity that works of art are able to transcend their time and so “break free” to the eternal. Whereas art, in this account, resists capture in the “leg-hold trap” of time, history aims to set those traps, and to ensure that they hold.

Fair enough. But it strikes me that the two groups may protest too much, and in the process fail to see what, for all their differences, they actually share. Both are wrestlers, I would argue, seeking a common prize. For, in the end, artists and historians must struggle *in time* to reveal or to discover or to capture something that lies beyond it. Might it be that it is only by *coming together* that victory can be achieved?

It is true that historians might enter the ring a little more artfully, a little more gracefully, a little more playfully a times, with less *agon* and more dance, seeking to coax and feel rather than to pin down and hold. Laying traps may be a good way to snare the creatures of the forest or to immobilize beasts of burden — perhaps even to capture an occasional defiant lion. But it is surely not the way to go about the pursuit of *humans*, those freest and most playfully creative creatures, and their creations. It would be utterly wrong, surely, to set a trap for a child, just as it would be wrong to pin an angel in a hold (even if one could!). Let them crawl playfully away, let them soar, but let us notice them as they

do. Such miracles of creation are all about us — in the present and the past, and one hopes in the future too, if only we can be prodded to attend.

Perhaps, in the end, that is precisely the work that the scholars and the Birds share in common and do together, helping us collectively to catch glimpses of the eternal in time even as it seeks to escape us. And if we were to stare at this manuscript for long enough, we might come to wonder if it is exactly this that the scholars of ESTAR(SER), contending together with their Birds, have done for us here. By these lights, *IN SEARCH OF THE THIRD BIRD* may be read as offering us an alternative to the terror of Benjamin's "angel of history" — the *Bird of history*?

Is this the game?

It may be. Make of it what you will.

The authors are welcome to clarify their position on this thorny matter. But my job, here, is to write a peer review of a work of historical scholarship. And whatever *IN SEARCH OF THE THIRD BIRD* may be, it is not that, by the current constitution of the enterprise — despite the rather substantial amount of history that is in it.

Is it, then, a work of fiction? That is a different question, and one you have not asked me to answer. It certainly has some fictions in it! I will leave it at that.

I teach on the Enlightenment, and as you know, the battle cry of that era was *Sapere Aude* — "Dare to Know." This mammoth manuscript should, I think, be buried under a different motto: *Attendere Aude* — "Dare to Attend!"

That would make a nice inscription on a headstone for this deranged volume, which very definitely belongs *six feet under*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. McMahon', with a long, sweeping underline.

Darrin M. McMahon
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Co-Editor *Modern Intellectual History*

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15 January 2021

To the Press Review Board:

I respectfully decline your request to review the manuscript *In Search of the Third Bird: Exemplary Essays from the Proceedings of ESTAR(SER), 2001-2021*. I will, however, retain the copy you sent me. A few words of explanation follow.

As a historian of physics interested in the relations of art and science, I have a longstanding engagement with questions of aesthetics, particularly as they relate to historical epistemology and twentieth-century phenomenology. And, indeed, it is through those channels that I initially found myself invited to participate in one of the “attentional séances” of a group which claimed to represent a modern “volée” or “club” of the so-called “Order of the Third Bird.”

Knowing that, by tradition, no true “Birds” would openly allege such an affiliation, I nevertheless joined the Action (which involved, I believe, a legal trespass, in that the object was a then-largely-forgotten set of Keith Haring murals in a mostly abandoned upper Manhattan Catholic youth center — to which the Birds in question gained access by dubious means; the murals have since been removed, and sold at auction). I was interested in the group’s special concern with abandoned or overlooked works of art, and in their obsession with attentional “care.”

I continued to join allied gatherings for a number of years (e.g., a *sub rosa* convocation on the Glass Flowers of the Harvard University Herbaria & Libraries in 2012; an ambiguously semi-public gathering at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2014; a convocation at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City circa 2017; an experiment with the “Corona of Care” in 2018, etc.). Indeed, my 2019 lecture at Mass MoCA (on the history of Captcha, ReCaptcha and “I am not a Robot” HIPs) was, in fact, a “Birdish” intervention on attentional problems.

My decision not to undertake a review of the present ESTAR(SER) manuscript is not due to a conflict of interest (I believe there is none). Nor am I put off by the byzantine heft and ostentatious (para? pseudo?) erudition of the text. No. In surveying this unusual manuscript, I have decided that the most appropriate form of commentary on it is...to provide none.

The legacy of the late genius Stephen Hawking includes discovering one of the main properties of our universe. In the course of his investigations into black holes, Hawking came to the general proposition that *valid scientific hypotheses need to “protect chronology,”* and, thereby, make “the universe safe for historians.”¹ As Hawking’s illness worsened, this great cosmologist determined that his crucial principle could only be salvaged if black holes were discovered to emit something, perhaps some kind of radiation, back to space. Otherwise, he once lectured to a packed audience at Harvard’s Sanders Theater, “the history books and our memories could just be illusions.” But this would be devastating, he pointed out, since, “It is the past that tells us who we are.”

In another work, Hawking quoted a line from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to describe the stakes: “One could well say of the event horizon what the poet Dante said of the entrance to Hell: ‘All hope abandon, ye who enter here.’”

Although the universe may in fact not be a totally safe place for historians, my expertise as a scholar requires that I study the history of physics. Black holes are included in this history. But to be their historian, I have an obligation to do what I can *not to fall into one*. And this means taking a hard pass on peer-reviewing the present document, which looks to me to have passed too close to information-swallowing/distorting sources of mischievous energy.

Given the confluence of those circumstances, the appropriate route of action vis-à-vis your request is neither to peck at the luscious manuscript nor to fly away from it in panic, but simply to let it sit on my bedside table, where I will contemplate it from time to time, perusing (from my comfortable perch) the concealed wisdom of its seven-hundred-and-sixty-eight pages — windswept leaves that sometimes let the light pass through; and at other times quite block it.

Sincerely,



Jimena Canales

¹ Hawking, “Chronology Protection Conjecture,” *Physical Review D* 46, 603 – Published 15 July 1992.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

June 26, 2021

Dear editors,

I have now completed my read-through of the manuscript *In Search of the Third Bird*. Below I summarize my overall impressions and recommendations as to publication.

Briefly, I will state here that this book should not be published in its present state. In the pages that follow, I will explain my reasoning. While in some cases one might advocate for a “revise and resubmit” treatment for a manuscript at this scale, **my own view is that this project as a whole is beyond salvage**.

While there is certainly some actual scholarship in these pages, there are also numerous infelicities, misinterpretations, and, most troubling, *copious* evidence of **disqualifying factual errors**, a number of which I place in evidence below.

That alone would justify my negative review. But I will add that the prose style is mostly, in my opinion, downright insufferable: at points intentionally cryptic, almost occult (as if Dame Frances Yates had been thrown into a blender with Umberto Eco and the resulting smoothie seasoned with Fernando Pessoa); at other times, the tone is syrupy-quirk (*The Life Avian with Steve Zissou*). That’s leaving aside, of course, the sections that read like a rejected draft of Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, rewritten by a Nabakov narrator.

A wall of antiquarianism and trivia; a torrent of Pynchonian in-jokes and possibly paranoid speculations; a veritable *bartizan* of multilingual GRE words; a frappé of falsehoods, with a little dusting of veracious sprinkles on top. Ick!

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that this text is what is colloquially known as a “dog’s breakfast,” *but the truth is, I cannot imagine the dog that could stomach it* — not even if the ream of paper on which it is printed were to be liberally basted in chicken fat, and each page interleaved with a slice of fine Spanish ham.

So what is this indigestible sheaf “about”? “Birdism,” I suppose. *In Search of the Third Bird* purports to be a high-quality history of the so-called Order of the Third Bird, that gentle cult of attentionistas.

And honestly, a proper history of the *Avis Tertia* would be very welcome. We are very much in need of a true work of deep and disciplined intellectual history in this area, a work displaying the erudition and grace of an Anthony Grafton or a Lorraine Daston, a Martin Jay or Marina Warner. *But this is not that!*

What we have here, rather, is a decidedly sub-Graftonian collection of tendentious claims and questionable citations, the whole tied together by a series of heavy-handed editorial interventions that frequently devolve into eccentric and, quite frankly, *gossipy* asides about putative forgery, group in-fighting, and various neurotic and theatrical characters who, very suspiciously, almost entirely lack Wikipedia pages.

And the errors! Let’s look at a few of the more egregious cockups that surfaced in my perusal — of the introductory material alone:

p. 19: Edward A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds: An Inquiry into the Origin and Distribution of some Magico-Religious Traditions*, is a hoary old collation of avian (in the sense of the animals with feathers) folklore. It has nothing to do with the para-masonic cult of art-appreciators known as the Birds, and does not anywhere call the associates of that body “creepy” (as a footnote in the introduction suggests).

p. 57: J. J. Hall, “Ancient Knowledge of the Birds Now Known,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 235-39, is correctly cited in Tage-Ravn’s essay on “‘Birds’ as a Historical Problem” (Chapter 1 of the MS); however, this essay on historical taxonomy of the *Aves* has *exactly nothing* to do with the “metempsychotic nature” of the “systole/diastole of extravagant self-loss in the object and (ideally) eventual self-re-possession” — the proposition for which it is unaccountably referenced!

p. 69: Further on in Tage-Ravn’s essay, we find an allusion to “The Eastern Brotherhood” of devotees of the “Order of the Third Bird.” The footnote directs the reader to an article by one David Eller, given as “George Wolfe and the ‘Far Eastern’ Brethren,” which, it is claimed, was published in the *Illinois Historical Journal* (volume 80, no. 2 [1987]: 85-100). In fact, no such article would seem to exist. At that location in that journal we *do* discover an article by a “David Eller” — which is in fact entitled “George Wolfe and the ‘Far Western’ Brethren,” and describes not an oriental sect of hieratic aesthetes but rather a quirky group of nineteenth-century non-conforming full-immersion *Baptists* in Illinois who called themselves the “Dunkers” and farmed the banks of the Mississippi in little enclaves of religious fervor. Needless to say, there is some considerable “confusion” here.

p. 72: In a similar vein, I note that Peter Bakewell's "On Pioneering Wings in France" (in the *Southwest Review*, volume 95, no. 3 [2010]: 479-500) is not about the "Order of the Third Bird" among the devotees of Saint-Simon and Fourier in the period before the revolutions of 1848 (as Eigil zu Tøge-Ravn would have it), but rather offers, we learn on closer perusal, a charming essay about the early experimentation with heavier-than-air flight by French engineers working in the wake of the Wright Brothers.

p. 75: We are told, a little further on, that disputes among North American associates of the Order of the Third Bird are the subject of ongoing research. But the text cited in support of this claim (Robert M. Zink and John Klicka, "The Tempo of Avian Diversification: A Comment," *Evolution* 60 [2006]: 411-12) actually contends that the late Pleistocene was not, in fact, a period of particularly important avian speciation — as some studies of mitochondrial DNA have recently suggested. Suffice to say, durational practices of sustained attention are nowhere mentioned.

I could go on, but I hope this is sufficient to give the editors a sense of the scale of the confusion at work here. With this many bizarre and elaborate "mistakes" in merely the first seventy-five pages, can you imagine what bibliographical nonsense suffuses this gigantic manuscript?

Confronting errors of such complexity, we are obliged to pause. Could all this be something other than carelessness? Are such baroque contortions a "plot" of some sort? The Birds at work, resisting their own history? Or perhaps *historians at work*, resisting their profession?

Let us return, then, for a moment, to Frances Yates. Since I'm reminded of her study of Johann Valentin Andreae, the creator of Rosicrucianism (or the revealer of it), who described his intellectual project as "the *ludibrium* of the fictitious Rosicrucian Fraternity." *Ludibrium*, meaning *ludus*: a trivial game. But just a game? Dame Yates rejected the translation of this word as "farce," and instead suggested something more like a "*divine comedy*" — playful and game-like, but also somehow urgently serious, form of allegory.

Is *this* what's going on here?

It's not impossible.

But if it so, my reaction is much the same as your reaction may well have been, while reading my learned paragraph above: *Get to the point!* For that is what we seek in proper scholarship. THE POINT. And the "point" here is...*not here!* If the authors have allegory on their minds, they belong in a different field.

What we want is *solid history of the Birds*. And that is work that remains to be done.

Let me put a nail in the coffin: the authors and editors of this volume have assembled a bibliography of nearly *five hundred items*. And yet, they have overlooked one of the most basic sources in the history of the Order of the Third Bird. I attach a copy here, from JSTOR, as Appendix A. Feel free to send it to the eds., with my negative evaluation.

I believe they will understand.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ben Breen". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Benjamin Breen
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Appendix A: “Possible Authentication of A. Curvo Semedo’s *Observações e Segredos*: a Rejoinder to Prof. C. R. Boxer,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain, the Isle of Man, and the Bailiwick of Guernsey*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (September, 1938), 956-60.

POSSIBLE AUTHENTICATION OF AURELIO CURVO
SEMEDO’S *OBSERVAÇÕES E SEGREDOS*:
A REJOINDER TO PROF. C. R. BOXER

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As readers of the present journal will, by now, be well aware, Professor Charles Ralph Boxer has argued both in these pages and elsewhere that the newly-discovered copy of Aurelio Curvo Semedo’s *Observações*, a book long thought to have been lost, is “a very probable forgery.” Certainly, there is much occasion for skepticism whenever so enigmatic a text resurfaces after so long a period of time in obscurity. Nevertheless, the aim of the present essay is instead to present what this author considers to be fairly definitive proof of the authenticity of this remarkable text.

A brief resumé of the facts. The *Observações e Segredos Medico-Chimico-Essentificatio-Apologetico-Apollineo, ou, Ninhos Para Conceber: preciosas para os Magnates, & para os Plebéos: divide-se em Duas Partes* (1698?), a medical text attributed to one Aurelio Curvo Semedo, does not appear in any catalogues of printed works from the Iberian peninsula. No extant copies are known to exist in research libraries or in private hands. Strangely, however, an Inquisitorial writ of approval, or *licença* – of the sort commonly attached to the front matter of medical and scientific texts published in Baroque Portugal – *does* exist, as a miscellaneous scrap of paper presently held at the BNP. Thus, it has long been assumed that the full text circulated in manuscript form only, with perhaps one copy printed as a so-called “printer’s dummy” for correction by Aurelio Curvo Semedo, after which, presumably, the Inquisition renounced this initial approval and destroyed the text.

The work was assumed to be lost for good until the summer of 1934, when it resurfaced in a back room of the Livraria Bertrand in Lisbon as a quarto edition, handsomely printed, with the same Inquisition writ of approval

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included, alongside a rather obsequious, oily dedication (on which see more below), and some three hundred pages of medical recipes, secrets, and observations of other “most singular matters” [*coisas rarissimas*]. The text has been the object of disagreement ever since. One party, led by Prof. Boxer, has argued that it all evidence points to forgery. Others have disagreed, the present author included.

Aurelio was clearly inspired by contemporaries such as Joao Vigier (who entitled his own book of secrets *Thesouro apollineo, galenico, chimico, chirurgico, pharmaceutico*) in his choice of a cascade of modifiers for his somewhat eccentric title. Of special note here is the use of the word *Essentificatio*. It would appear that this usage is the word’s first documented appearance in Portuguese, perhaps borrowed from contemporary works such as Jacob Barner’s *Chymia Philosophica Perfecte Delineata* (Nuremberg, 1689). Professor Boxer rightly points to title’s use of novel vocabulary as presenting grounds for some skepticism as to the authenticity of the work as a whole.

But Professor Boxer’s claim of inauthenticity really rests on a truly exceptional feature of this text: Semedo’s continual digressions regarding what enthusiasts of the present-day would call “bird watching.” Semedo is at pains to make clear that he is not describing the naturalistic study or observation of birds – indeed, such a concept was not yet available to a natural philosopher or physician of his day. Instead, Semedo refers to the “marvelous conceptions” generated by “essential observations” of “small birds [*passarinhos*] or other suchlike creatures [*bichos*]” in whose “nests,” Semedo writes somewhat cryptically, “the dancing dustmotes of Lucretius may well be seen” and “occult secrets [*segredos occultas*] are most abundant, as was well known to the learned Ausonius.”

In the estimation of some, including Professor Boxer, these references are something of an in-joke on the part of the supposed forger, as they apparently relate to what Boxer calls an “obscure Rosicrucian offshoot” of the present day – to wit, the *Avis Tertia* or “Order of the Third Bird.” Others see various reasons to insist that the numerous allusions to birds are perfectly consistent with period authenticity, pointing to the long precedent of language regarding “hunts” and other natural metaphors in medieval and early modern alchemical writings.¹ By these lights, the *Avis Tertia* need have nothing to do with the matter.

¹ In this connexion see Cawley, Robert R. “Sir Thomas Browne and his reading,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1933): 426-470 and the recent work in progress of Ms. Frances Yates of the WARBURG INSTITUTE, LONDON. Also of note are the curious carvings to be found on the grounds of the QUINTA DA REGALEIRA in SINTRA, PORTUGAL, particularly those at REGALEIRA CHAPEL; at the so-called INITIATORY WELL;

Some additional light may have been thrown on these problems with the surfacing of a key link to another contemporary manuscript, first published in an Italian learned journal in the 1870s but not reaching the present author's eyes until recently. This manuscript is by a Venetian nobleman of late seventeenth century, one Ambrosio Bembo. It appears to clarify things considerably. Indeed, it is my contention that the authentication of Semedo's account positively *hinges* on the journals of Ambrosio Bembo.

Bembo, exhibiting an uncommon degree of wanderlust, visited the city of Aleppo in the 1670s en route to the Indies. Here he closely observed "a curious entertainment": the keeping of doves by avian devotees. The Turkish bird keeper, Bembo relates, had trained their doves to seize others as "prisoners... at a signal from their master," who then "takes the bird as a hunting prize and enjoys it in glory and usefulness."

The sort of usefulness Bembo had in mind here was an earthy one – the owner, he tells us, then "eats or sells it." But there was another use for these birds. Or rather, for a special subset of them, called either doves "'of Baghdad' or 'of Babylon'" (pg. 81). Bembo writes: "they are of the type that used to carry letters in ancient times from Baghdad to Aleppo, and from Aleppo to Baghdad, [but they have now] lost the instinct of that journey. But some Franks have some of them, which they use to obtain the earliest information about the arrival of vessels at Iskenderun."

Now, here is where things become interesting. For the other piece of bird-related news that Bembo mentions is the arrival of a man who seems to be identical with the hitherto-misidentified dedicatee of Aurelio Semedo's text. I now quote Bembo at some length:

By means of one of these pigeons that belonged to the Frenchman Monsieur Forestier, we had news of the arrival in Iskenderun (which up to now we have referred to by its Turkish name of Scanderona) of the English ship *Girasole*, which had left from Livorno. On the ship was a Portuguese Franciscan who was going to the East Indies with the title of Custodian of the Province of Goa. When he arrived in Aleppo, he made the customary visits to the consuls, and he was often the guest of my uncle. His name was Friar Giovanni Seabra of the Trinity [and he was] tall and of dignified and somewhat pretentious in appearance, as are many of his nationality, given to exaggeration and boasting, although we did not discover it until later.

— Bembo, *Travels and Journal*, "From Venice to Aleppo," pg. 81.

at the so-called "TERRACE OF THE CELESTIAL WORLDS"; at the EASTERN GROTTO; and in the environs of the SUNKEN TENNIS COURT.

This “Giovanni Seabra,” as Bembo calls him, can be no other than the João de Seabra to whom Curvo dedicated his manuscript – and *not* the “João de Seabra de Sousa, Fidalgo que foia da Casa de Sua Magestade” (as he is described in the *Diccionario Aristocratico* of 1840, pg. 18) to whom Boxer assumes Semedo’s dedication was addressed. Crucially, Aurelio Curvo Semedo makes reference to “conceptions from birds” in this dedication. And indeed, birds are mentioned also – in a *decidedly* negative capacity, as enjoying a putative “empire... over the despicable abortions of nature” – on the Inquisitorial license for the book itself (see the aphorism at bottom of page, reproduced as **FIG. 1**).

Now, as to the question at hand: why this talk of birds and nests and “abortions of nature”? Aurelio’s possible brother, nephew, or perhaps illegitimate father, Dr. João Curvo Semedo, is of value in elucidating this connexion. This better-known Semedo wrote of a “virtude occulta por concebir” in the following entry on edible bird nests, available in the 1735 Spanish compendium of his so-called “Curvian Secrets,” *Secretos Medicos, y Chirurgicos del Doctor Don Juan Curbo Semmedo, traducidos de Lengua Vulgar Portuguesa en Castellana* (Madrid: Juan de Zuñiga, 1735), pg. 118:

Los nidos que las aves de la China hacen en las rocas del mar... echados en agua hirviendo, y dexados en infusion por tiempo de veinte y quatro horas, haciendo conserva de ellos con azucar y comiendo dos cucharadas de ella muchos dias, tienen una propiedad oculta para facilitar el concebir.

The nests that the birds of China make on the rocks of the sea... when cast in boiling water, and left to infuse for a time of twenty-four hours, made into preserves with sugar and eaten two tablespoons at a time for many days, have a hidden property to facilitate conceiving.

The reader will likely interpret this last word – *concebir* – in the context of fertility. A reasonable assumption, given the preceding sentence (“El polvo de la madre de la liebre, echado dentro de la boca de la madre, o dado a beber muchos dias sucessivos, tiene virtud oculta para fecundar las mugeres”). But let us remember that the verb *concebir* (from the Latin present active infinitive of *concipiō*) has two distinct meanings, to wit:

- 1) to conceive or become pregnant
- 2) to understand or comprehend.

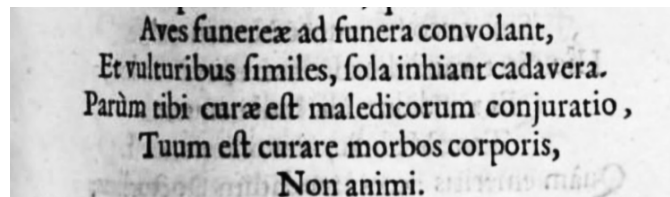
Given the presence of Aurelio Curvo Semedo’s dedication to the same João de Seabra as well as the cryptic Inquisitorial aphorism quoted below, and

Semedo's own repeated references to birds, nests, and conception – indeed, in the *very title of his work* – this can be no coincidence. The evidence for a more or less contemporaneous reference to the book of Aurelio is now quite clear. The Aurelio Curvo Semedo text *is* authentic.

As ever, this new addition to our knowledge raises many more questions than answers. Why did Semedo dedicate his life's work to such an obscure bird-watching friar, soon to leave Lisbon entirely in pursuit of his fortune in Goa? And why was Semedo's book evidently destroyed after its initial approval by the Inquisition?² Here I do believe the evidence points cleanly to the workings of the *Avis Tertia*, as I shall argue in a forthcoming essay.



A final note. There is some suggestion within Aurelio Curvo Semedo's text – specifically in the anonymous epigram in Latin verse written that follows the Inquisitorial license – of internal divisions within this putative society who “gather the fruits of the Bird's Nest.” The epigram is supposedly written in praise of Semedo's great virtues not just as a physician but as one who “Attends closely to all things” [*omnes res attenderit*]. Yet it ends with the puzzling final lines reproduced below, which suggest a note of mockery, perhaps highlighting the ultimate futility of Semedo's efforts.



*When funereal birds at the funeral gather —
And vultures as well — to eat the cadaver,
You'll have no great concern for these vile congeries
For you cure not the soul, but the body's disease.*

An ambiguous note on which to end, perhaps, but a most appropriately puzzling one. Whatever the precise meaning of these lines (are

² There is one other near precedent for such a feat: João Antônio Andreoni's *Cultura e opulência do Brasil, por suas drogas e minas* (Lisbon, 1711), which was published under Andreoni's pen name of André João Antonil and strictly suppressed after its publication supposedly revealed secrets of Brazilian precious metal mines, leaving only a handful of copies unscathed. See the copy at the JOHN CARTER BROWN LIBRARY, PROVIDENCE, RI (C711.A635c).

they a denunciation of worldly aesthesis? or its celebration?), we discern here further evidence of the fractious nature of Birdish communities across time. And while it the present author's hope that this brief note may help resolve the present debate as to the authenticity of the Lisbon text, it is quite certain that this small subset of the "Curvian Secrets" contain a Pandora's box of further mysteries – which we may suppose *have wings*.

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Fig. 1. Inquisition license for Aurelio Curvo Semedo's *Observações e Segredos Medico-Chimico-Essentificatio-Apologetico-Apollineo, ou, Ninhos Para Conceber: preciosas para os Magnates, & para os Plebéos: divide-se em Duas Partes* (1698?). Printed in English translation by "J.P." [James Petiver?], *Observations and Secrets in a Medical, Chymical, Essential, Apologetical, and Apollinean Mode, Or, Nests in Which to Conceive: Precious to the Rich and Poor Alike, in Two Parts, Newly English'd* (London, 1710).

