Giulio Milone

Grieving on the Edge: Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*

Abstract: This article takes a close look at Helen Macdonald's memoir *H is for Hawk*, in which the author chronicles her year spent training a female goshawk as a way of coping with her father's sudden death. Drawing on some key elements of trauma and grief theory, the article argues that Macdonald's book explores and masterfully renders an experience of undoing as a consequence of traumatic grief, which causes the collapse of any fixed border, category or sense of identity. From these premises, evidence of this constant walking on a series of *lignes de partage* can be variously found in Macdonald's text, from her approach to generic conventions to her critical discussion of authoritative texts on both falconry and grief and, most importantly, in her confrontation with a wild animal.

Keywords: Life Writing. Helen Macdonald. Grief and Trauma. T.H. White. Animals.

1. In 2004, philosopher Judith Butler published *Undoing Gender*, a collection of essays written on disparate occasions in which she reflects on gender, sexuality, and psychoanalysis. In the opening paragraphs of one of these essays, titled "Beside Oneself", she broaches the topic of grief, and what essentially makes for a grievable life:

> I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being. I'm certain, though, that it does not mean that one has forgotten the person, or that something else comes along to take his or her place. I don't think it works that way. I think instead that one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance. So there is losing, and there is the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.[1]

Though not explicitly, Butler is obviously dialoguing with a well-established tradition of Grief Studies whose starting point is commonly traced to Sigmund Freud's seminal essay on mourning and melancholia.[2] In those few pages, the two titular terms are presented as similar but different forms of response to loss: on the one hand, there is mourning, understood as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on";[3] though sharing the same underlying causes as mourning, melancholia is regarded instead as a pathological disposition for which medical treatment might be unavoidable.[4] Without

[1] J. Butler, "Beside Oneself", in Ead., *Undoing Gender*, New York and London, Routledge, 2004, p. 18.

[2] S. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. J. Strachey, London, Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 243-58.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 243.

[4] *Ibidem*.

delving deep into the peculiarities of both scenarios, it is already evident at surface level that Freud drew a neat distinction between normal and pathological grief, thus envisaging mourning as the only socially acceptable behaviour between the two. This theoretical model regarding grief was favourably received, at least at the beginning,[5] because it left room for some form of reassurance in knowing that the work of mourning, "after a certain lapse of time",[6] would end.

Butler, however, is more aligned with the so-called second wave of Grief Studies, whose representatives openly challenge and ultimately reject the rigid Freudian dichotomy between 'normal' and 'pathological' grief, particularly arguing against the supposed finiteness ascribed to mourning.[7] What emerges from these more recent studies is an understanding of grief as a complex and intricate process that cannot be slotted into a step-by-step grid and should rather be accepted in its being "open and evolving".[8] Since there is no clear deadline, one should be concerned with what happens *during* the process, and not just *after* it. When Freud claims that the ego becomes "free and uninhibited again",[9] his wording seems to fail to capture the changes a grieving person undergoes, not to mention the fact that "in grieving we must relearn our very selves".[10] After such a process, a person is rarely the same as before.

This is also in line with Butler's position, because in the context of her essay she presents emotional grief – together with other intense feelings, such as sexual passion and political rage – as a perfect example of one's body and mind experiencing *ecstasy*, a word which is here to be understood in its etymological sense. To be 'ec-static' means, literally, to be outside oneself, or "to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief".[11] Grief and loss, as Butler posits, have a profoundly "transformative effect" that cannot be "charted or planned", and which ultimately leads to one's own "undoing".

Something similar to Butler's claims can be found in a recent example of life narrative: in 2014, English naturalist Helen Macdonald[12] wrote about her life-changing experience

[5] Freud's model was also the first of several studies to understand grief as a process paving the way for a complete recovery. See for example the popular five stages of grief mapped out by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, where the grief process is spelled out according to five moments, or emotional states: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. See E. KÜBLER-ROSS, *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, New York, Scribner, (1969) 2014.

[6] S. FREUD, "Mourning and Melancholia", p. 244.

[7] George Hagman, for example, said that Freud failed to "recognize the complexity and uniqueness of mourning experience". Similarly, Paul Rosenblatt meditates on the process of reality-testing (that is, recalling memories of the deceased and gradually severing all attachment to them) and argues that in no way can grief actually end, given that memories may not be retrieved simultaneously. This ultimately suggests that grief may even last a lifetime. See, respectively, G. HAGMAN, "Beyond Decathexis: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Understanding and Treatment of Mourning", in R.A. NEIMEYER (ed.), *Meaning, Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, Washington, DC, American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 24; P.C. ROSENBLATT, "Grief That Does Not End", in D. KLASS, P.R. SILVERMAN and S.L. NICKMAN (eds), *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, Philadelphia, Taylor and Francis, 1996, pp. 45-58.

[8] G. HAGMAN, "Beyond Decathexis", p. 18.

[9] S. FREUD, "Mourning and Melancholia", p. 245.

[10] T. ATTIG, "Relearning the World: Making and Finding Meanings", in R.A. NEIMEYER (ed.), *Meaning, Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, p. 40.

[11] J. BUTLER, "Beside Oneself", p. 20 (emphasis in original).

[12] Helen Macdonald (Chertsey, Surrey, 1970—) is an English writer. The daughter of two journalists, she studied at Cambridge University, where she is currently an affiliated research scholar at the Department of

with the training of a female goshawk as a way of dealing with the sudden death of her beloved father. Her published memoir – suggestively titled *H is for Hawk* – embodies and thematises how traumatic grief might engender the collapse, fragmentation and even undoing of the narrating subject. My article aims therefore to show how this grief-induced condition of instability is easily discernible in – if not at the very foundation of – three substantial features of Macdonald's text, i.e., her approach and handling of different genres while working within the slippery 'memoir' label; her critical discussion of authoritative texts on both falconry and grief; and, lastly, her complex and almost dangerous confrontation with a wild animal.

2. *H is for Hawk* (henceforth abbreviated as *Hawk*) first appeared in 2014 and quickly became a critically acclaimed bestseller. Within the same year, the book went on to win both the Costa Book of the Year Award and, most notably, the former Samuel Johnson Prize (now Baillie Gifford Prize) for non-fiction. The judges of the panel for the latter praised the cohesive hybridity of the text and commended Macdonald's deft way of combining different genres.[13] However, in this context it might be useful to reflect on the ways this – rightfully praised – hybridity can be achieved within a memoir, as well as on how and to what effects it interacts with the topic of grief.

When it comes to discussing genres and labels, the prominence of grief in Macdonald's narrative allows one to argue that *Hawk* is primarily a 'grief memoir', a term which identifies a subgenre of life narratives where authors and their grieving processes over the loss of loved ones are put at centre stage, and of which several specimens have emerged in the last few years.[14] If truth be told, to say that *Hawk* is a book about overcoming grief while training a bird of prey would be definitely reductive, because Macdonald's personal story is in fact paralleled with an abridged history of falconry and a glimpse into the life of T.H. White. White is a British author who is generaly recalled for his Arthurian series *The Once and Future King* (1958), but who in 1951 had also penned a lesser known book describing his attempts at training a goshawk.[15] There are thus multiple thematic strands and genres adding to the structure of *Hawk*, and this back-and-forth between them can be said to be

History and Philosophy and Science. She has published two small books of poetry (*Simple Objects*, 1993 and *Shaler's Fish*, 2001), a book of cultural history (*Falcon*, 2006), and a collection of essays (*Vesper Flights*, 2020). She rose to popularity with the publication of her memoir *H is for Hawk* in 2014. Parallel to her academic career, she has also collaborated on various radio programmes on falconry and was a guest on episodes of the BBC documentary series *Birds Britannia* (2010) and *Natural World* (2017).

[13] "Labour MP Alan Johnson, one of the judges, said that marrying such different types of material could have gone horribly wrong, but she brings them together expertly", in S. Moss, "Interview with Helen Macdonald: A Bird's Eye View of Love and Loss", *The Guardian*, 5 November 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/05/helen-macdonald-interview-winner-samuel-johnson-prize-falconry (last accessed on 20 June 2020).

[14] As of today, not much has been written on grief memoir as a genre. It is mentioned only in passing by G. Thomas Couser in one of his interesting studies, whereas Michael Dennis speaks about it more in detail but with the designation of 'grief accounts', in order to identify a group of autobiographical texts that deal with a kind of grief characterised by a recurring set of themes and structural patterns. More recently, Amy-Katerini Prodromou's work has specifically focused on hybrid grief memoirs written by female writers. See, respectively, G.T. Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2012; M.R. Dennis, "The Grief Account: Dimensions of a Contemporary Bereavement Genre", *Death Studies*, 32 (9), 2008, pp. 801-36; A.K. Prodromou, *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

[15] See T.H. White, *The Goshawk*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (1951) 1963.

in keeping with the "more impressionistic"[16] form of memoir, which usually allows for a looser structure than, say, a fairly standard work of autobiography, or other forms of life narratives relying on monothematic subjects and a strict chronological grid.[17]

From the very first pages, it becomes evident that *Hawk* is an unusual memoir because it downright flaunts evidence of its contamination, while subtly nodding to the connection between such a generic instability and the undoing of its narrating subject in response to grief. The different facets of *Hawk*, however, unfold in an orderly fashion in the first four chapters, which are to be read as a sort of *overture* to the rest of the book.

The first chapter, titled "Patience", is a perfect example of nature writing, with Macdonald describing the landscape of the Brecklands, the "broken lands" which she adores because "of all the places I know in England, it feels to me the wildest".[18] It is a perfect place, she tells us, to find and observe goshawks, and it is where she heads to one early spring morning, on an unplanned trip:

> Clearings. That's what I needed. Slowly my brain righted itself into spaces unused for months. For so long I'd been living in libraries and college rooms, frowning at screens, marking essays, chasing down academic references. This was a different kind of hunt. Here I was a different animal.[19]

This brief remark might seem rather commonplace at first, but it actually reveals an important clue about Macdonald's attitude: being a research fellow at Cambridge, she is used to thinking as trained academics usually do. Although her education and readings do play a crucial role in the shaping of the book, here she is signalling her intention to move away, even if temporarily, from a self-assured and rational frame of mind.[20] Furthermore, when projecting Macdonald's longing – that is, chasing down goshawks rather than academic references – into a meta-textual level, we realise that she also hints at the hybrid nature of her book. In other words, her story cannot be told by exclusively relying on the hard facts and sometimes pedant technicalities of academia, nor by systematically drawing on a standardised autobiographical frame.

The account of the trip also doubles as an introduction to one of the other characters of the story: as she gazes at the surrounding landscape, waiting for goshawks to appear, Macdonald is reminded of the time she went birdwatching to the same place with her father, Alisdair. A restless nine-year-old, young Helen could not grasp the important lesson

[16] As Couser points out, "being based on memory rather than research, a memoir will necessarily be very different from a biography. It will be, or resemble, a reminiscence, consisting of personal recollections" (G.T. COUSER, *Memoir: An Introduction*, p. 19).

[17] Besides Couser's aforementioned study of memoirs, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's work on autobiography also offers an excellent and detailed introduction to the many quandaries pertaining to the vast universe of life writing and life narratives. See S. SMITH and J. WATSON, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Second Edition, Minneapolis, Minnesota U.P., 2010.

[18] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, London, Vintage, (2014) 2015, p. 7.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

[20] It is not the first time that Macdonald tries to transcend the limitations of conventional academic writing. As she states in the preface to the second edition of *Falcon*, she decided to write that book and freeze her doctoral dissertation on the history of science because, while researching material for the latter, she stumbled upon fascinating anecdotes and stories, and confesses that "[p]arts of me that weren't just an academic historian began to whisper that there were extraordinary things [in the Archives of Falconry at the World Centre for Birds of Prey in Idaho] I couldn't fit into my thesis, and that grieved me" (H. MACDONALD, "Preface to the 2016 Edition", in *Falcon*, London, Reaktion Books, 2016, Kindle Edition).

that her father, a press photographer, was trying to teach her: "He said it was the most important thing of all to remember, this: that when you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still, stay in the same place, remember how much you wanted to see it, and be patient".[21]

Through this recollection, Macdonald quickly sketches the loving father-daughter dynamic that underlies the whole book while also introducing the crucial theme of patience, a virtue so vital when it comes to goshawks, be it when observing them or training them. By way of an objective correlative, Macdonald vividly recognises patience in a small clump of reindeer moss that she weeds and takes home: it is a type of lichen that can survive under any meteorological condition and is described as "patience made manifest",[22] thus becoming a memento of natural resilience as well as of the "grown-up Truth"[23] which her father had given her but which, being a child, she was not able to understand. Having placed it near the phone, it is also what she ostensibly stares at when, three weeks later, she would receive the news that her father was dead.

The second chapter, "Lost", ferries the book towards the territories of the grief memoir, with Macdonald relating the call from her mother that announced her father's death from a heart attack. Macdonald immediately frames this event as utterly traumatic,[24] starting from the way in which she is informed – "I knew he was dead because […] she used a voice I'd never heard before to say it"[25] – to how she begins experiencing the collapse of spatial and temporal perception: "I can't, even now, arrange it in the right order. The memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places but they don't make a story".[26] In life, Alisdair had been a "dad, but also [a] friend, and partner in crime"[27] to her; his death is invested with an even harsher traumatic value when her emotional distress is cast as off-balance when compared to the rest of the world: "Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all. For weeks I felt I was made of dully burning metal".[28]

While grieving, Macdonald starts experiencing a sort of madness that she attempts to contain and schematise through scientific knowledge:

> Because these were the normal madnesses of grief. I learned this from books. I bought books on grieving, on loss and bereavement. They spilled over my desk in tottering piles. Like a good academic, I thought books were for answers. Was it reassuring to be told that everyone sees ghosts? That everyone stops eating? Or can't stop eating? Or that grief comes in stages that can be numbered and pinned like beetles in boxes? I read that after denial comes grief. Or anger. Or guilt. I remember worrying about which stage I was at. I wanted to taxonomise the process, order it, make it sensible. But there was no sense, and I didn't recognise any of these emotions at all.[29]

[21] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 10.
[22] *Ibidem.*
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[24] My understanding of a traumatic event draws on Cathy Caruth's classical definition of trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (C. CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1996, p. 11).
[25] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 12.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 14.
[27] *Ibidem.*
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 15.
[29] *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

Trying to set a barrier against an imminent undoing, Macdonald rehashes here her academic *modus operandi*, turning to books and science in the hope of finding comfort in 'hard facts', only to discover that it is not possible to superimpose orderly, unemotional and detached schemata to one's personal experience: traumatic events, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have repeatedly argued, are always "occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference".[30]

While jumping from one attempt at containing her grief to the other, Macdonald also claims to have begun dreaming about hawks on a regular basis; in particular, about a goshawk she was in charge of looking after when working at a bird-of-prey centre. Macdonald's obsession with hawks gradually emerges as another key theme, thanks to the foregrounding of these recurring dreams. The hawks' link with her grief is also fostered via a subtle lesson in philology: at the beginning of the chapter, she unpacks the etymology behind the term 'bereavement', which comes from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'.[31] At the end of the same chapter, she illustrates how 'raptor', as in 'bird of prey', comes from the Latin *raptor*, meaning 'robber', from *rapere*, meaning 'seize'. "From then on", she tells us, "the hawk was inevitable".[32]

In the third chapter, "Small Worlds", Macdonald introduces the topic of falconry, describing her relationship with birds of prey and her fascination with the hawks' supposed ability to slip into "another, wilder world from which humans had been utterly erased".[33] She also admits to being passionate about falcons, while having mixed feelings about goshawks, which are notoriously much harder to train, being "things of death and difficulty: spooky, pale-eyed psychopaths that lived and killed in woodland thickets".[34] Macdonald used to believe that she would never want to fly a goshawk in her life as a falconer, but the traumatic loss of her father and the recurring dreams about hawks ultimately led to a radical change in her views, thus ratifying the Butlerian belief that loss engenders profound transformations that cannot be charted nor planned: "*Not for me*, I'd thought, many times. *Nothing like me*. But the world had changed, and so had I".[35] Determined to follow her inner instincts – or, rather, the hawks she has been dreaming of – Macdonald sets out to find a small goshawk to train and manages to get in touch with a hawk-breeder.

However, as soon as she finalises the deal and prepares to leave for Ireland and pick up her hawk, Macdonald is reminded of a book read several years earlier, the very thought of which she would rather keep at a distance. The book in question is T.H. White's *The Goshawk*, and Macdonald confesses that her first reading of that work had been upsetting, because it consisted in the written account of an inexperienced man's amateurish and disastrous attempt to train a bird of prey that suffered greatly in the process. At first, the book was not well received within the falconry community, but it later became a sort of overlooked masterpiece.

In this regard, Macdonald switches gear once again and manoeuvres her book towards

[30] S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 5.

[31] H. Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, p. 13.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 24 (emphasis in original).

full-on biography, devoting the fourth chapter to the introduction of the figure of "Mr White", the author of *The Goshawk*. White's book is presented as the thematic and spiritual older brother of *Hawk*, with Macdonald hinting at a whole set of similarities and divergences between the two. She explicitly points out that the "book you are reading is my story. It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White. But White is part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there".[36]

Nature writing, grief memoir, a treatise on falconry, and biography: the trauma of loss brings all these seemingly disparate threads together. Macdonald realises quite early that she will be unable to tell only one story without telling other stories in conjunction with it, thus hinting at the fact that a single literary genre will not suffice either. Therefore, in the hope of downplaying the disarray and confusion unleashed by grief, she employs these four opening chapters to establish the cardinal points meant to circumscribe the area in which her complex and stratified narrative will unfurl. The final result is a hybrid text built on a memoiristic grid, where the author avails herself of multiple genres that blend and speak with each other, both mirroring and witnessing her own state of undoing.

3. The hybrid quality of *Hawk*'s textual palimpsest needs stressing, especially because one of its most interesting traits lies in the way Macdonald uses her own personal experience as a starting point for establishing a complex dialogue with other texts. This literary ploy is obviously far from new, but it is its function in relation to the element of traumatic grief that makes it worth exploring in detail. Macdonald in fact engages with a handful of texts as she carries on a passionate conversation which often ends up addressing the authors of these very texts as well. In these intertextual disquisitions, her tone juggles between the critical and blatantly furious, but there is also room for empathy and gratitude.

To start with, throughout her book Macdonald discusses several canonical texts of falconry which she employs as broad guidelines for training her goshawk. She shows a deep understanding of their content, their problematic sexual politics and the socio-political contexts in which such books were written. Indeed, by reading *Hawk*, we learn a great deal about falconry, of which Macdonald has mastered the "perfect, secret language"[37] from an early age, when she chased down "all the boys' books".[38] At its heart, *Hawk* is also a book that addresses the gender misbalance and occasional misogyny of this specific practice: to her childhood peers, Macdonald's passion turned her into "the most appalling falconry bore".[39] Her first encounter with professional falconers made her feel that, no matter how badly she wanted to, she "might not be *entirely* like these men, that they might view [her] as a curiosity rather than a kindred spirit".[40] Even in falconry parlance, to tame a goshawk is to *man* him. Most importantly, when a conversation with an acquaintance leads to a shallow remark about the relationship developing between Macdonald and her goshawk because "You're a woman, and she's female",[41] she becomes enraged and spotlights that most of the books on falconry written by men describe the wildness of hawks in clearly

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 38.
[37] *Ibidem*, p. 48.
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 28.
[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] *Ibidem*, p. 20 (emphasis in original).
[41] *Ibidem*, p. 110.

gendered terms: "Like women, Goshawks were inexplicable. Sulky. Flighty and hysterical. Their moods were pathological. They were beyond all reason. […] They were things to win, to court, to love".[42]

This survey of canonical texts on falconry seems to point towards an evident lack of space for women in this practice, and Macdonald is outspoken about her dissatisfaction. As a consequence, throughout *Hawk* she both acknowledges the existence and relevance of a whole literary tradition of authoritative works on the practice and ardently fights for the legitimacy of her own experience. Besides constituting another instance of a well-read academic mind at work, this attitude is also perfectly in line with her simultaneous deconstruction of the cookie-cutter models and impersonal bullet points of the grieving process: it is an act of dismissal that, as shown, similarly follows the scouring of canonical readings (in this case, on grief) after highlighting how they cannot be applied to her own case.

However, what really elevates *Hawk* is the way Macdonald's story as a grieving falconer is paralleled with a close reading of T.H. White's *The Goshawk*, a less known memoir about training hawks written by a lesser known author to whom contemporary popular culture actually owes a great debt: White is in fact the author of the Arthurian tetralogy *The Once and Future King*, the first book of which served as the basis for the popular Disney film *The Sword in the Stone* (1963).[43]

The Goshawk is the written account of White's disastrous attempt at training a German-imported northern goshawk using traditional falconry techniques, as opposed to more modern ones. Halfway through the training, the hawk disappears and White is unable to find it. The action takes place in Buckinghamshire during the 1930s, a period in which "long walks in the English countryside, often at night, were astonishingly popular",[44] and White indeed takes Gos, his male goshawk (in falconry terms called 'tiercel' because males are usually one-third smaller than females), on many strolls around the countryside, as part of his project to man the raptor. The manuscript for *The Goshawk* had been shelved for years because its content exposed the utter inexperience of its author, who later became more skilled and even an authority on the subject, but in the end, in 1951, the book was published (with a somewhat apologetic postscript) under pressure from Wren Howard, White's friend and publisher for Jonathan Cape.

Macdonald first stumbled across *The Goshawk* in a bookshop at the age of eight, fascinated by the goshawk on the front but puzzled by the back cover, which promised "an eighteenth-century story of seduction". When she proceeded to read the book, she became first bewildered and then enraged, because it "wasn't *anything* like the other falconry books", but rather "a book about falconry by a man who seemed to know nothing about it".[45] Her negative impression is validated by a review in a British Falconer's Club journal, where *The*

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 112.

[43] The success and influence of White's book were not limited to its Disneyian adaptation. In 1960, his work was also adapted into a Broadway musical, *Camelot*, quoted by First Lady Jackie Kennedy to describe the White House in her famously televised home tour. By the same token, *Harry Potter*'s author J.K. Rowling declared that White's Arthurian books were a huge influence on her work and that Wart, the young protagonist of White's stories, can be seen as "Harry's spiritual ancestor". See "J.K. (Joanne Kathleen) Rowling (1966—)", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/11/jkjoannekathleenrowling (last accessed on 2 July 2020).

[44] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 103.

[45] *Ibidem*, p. 30 (emphasis in original).

Goshawk is completely panned: "The men in tweed had spoken. I was on the right side, was allowed to dislike this grown-up and consider him a fool".[46] Still, years later, Macdonald finds herself inexplicably attracted to White's book when preparing to welcome a goshawk into her life as a way of coping with her father's death. As she admits, the thought of White had been haunting her for quite a long time:

> Ever since I'd read *The Goshawk*, I'd wondered what kind of a man White was and why he had tied himself to a hawk he seemed to hate. And when I trained my own hawk a little space opened, like a window through leaves, onto this other life, in which was a man who was being hurt, and I saw them both more clearly.[47]

Hawk thus registers all the points of both convergence and divergence that Macdonald recognises in comparing her progress with White's. At the same time, the memoir provides a portrait of the author, with the help of White's official biography[48] and his private journals, which she consulted at the famous Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

The first overlap between the two paths is their very beginning: both Macdonald and White cut loose from the world and escape to the wild. She writes that "[w]hen you are broken, you run",[49] but whereas the former is broken by her grief, the latter is haunted by his inability to fully fit within society for other reasons: a schoolmaster at Stowe School for five years, where he taught young pupils, White was a closeted homosexual who struggled to suppress his sadomasochistic impulses.[50] As Macdonald observes, his was a life "of perpetual disguise",[51] of desperately trying to belong to an unwelcoming community.

It is easy to see how both Macdonald and White are scarred by personal traumas that, in different ways, pertain to matters of social performances. Macdonald is powerless to face and process grief in accordance with sanitised and community-approved standards, as illustrated by an exemplary episode of the complications with a memorial service for her father. White, on the other hand, is incapable of mingling with other people in a sexless and heteronormative society on the brink of war. In a certain sense, they can both be read as outsiders, but there is a marked difference in how the two react to their nonconformist condition: if Macdonald ultimately appears to be deliberately disdainful of displaying grief in public and in predetermined terms, at no time does White hide how much he is suffering for not being able to behave like the 'others'.

Both Macdonald and White are drawn to goshawks because of their nature. The former

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 31.

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 38.

[48] See S. TOWNSEND WARNER, *T.H. White: A Biography*, London, Viking, 1967.

[49] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 46.

[50] The debate around White's sexuality is complex and involves an extremely delicate matter such as suspicions of his being a paedophile, perhaps as a consequence of the abuse White himself had suffered as a child at his father's hands. As Macdonald acknowledges, "[w]hen White died of heart failure in January 1964, far from home in a cabin on the SS Exeter in Greece, his friends were concerned for his reputation. There were things in his journals they did not want to come to light, matters relating to his sexuality that if spoken of at all, had to be handled with rare delicacy. They needed to find a suitable biographer. They chose Sylvia Townsend Warner, because she had corresponded with White, and he had liked her books. And for another reason: she was gay. 'You will be sympathetic to his character,' Michael Howard informed her. 'If it is a sufficiently bad character I should certainly be sympathetic to it,' she replied" (H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, pp. 37-38). It should be noted that at no time does Macdonald explicitly use the word 'paedophilia', although she frequently mentions White's unrequited crushes and fantasies over both young boys and girls.

[51] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

confesses that these birds of prey represent everything she aims to be, that is, "solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life";[52] on the other hand, the latter becomes fascinated by hawks while tackling the same falconry readings as Macdonald's:

> There was a sentence which suddenly struck fire from the mind. The sentence was: "She reverted to a feral state." A longing came to my mind, then, that I should be able to do this also. The word 'feral' had a kind of magical potency which allied itself with two other words, 'ferocious' and 'free'. 'Fairy' 'Fey', 'aeriel' and other discreditable alliances ranged themselves behind the great chord of 'ferox'. To revert to a feral state! I took a farm-labourer's cottage at five shillings a week, and wrote to Germany for a goshawk.[53]

On the surface, the two might be seen to share similar intentions but, in explaining her reasons, Macdonald signals the differences between White's project and hers. She is more oriented towards becoming "numb to the hurts of human life" because she is unable to face grief, but at the same time she also argues that White's desire to "revert to a feral state" is more tied to what he – not so secretly – aims to project onto the goshawk:

> His young German goshawk was a living expression of all the dark, discreditable desires within himself he'd tried to repress for years: it was a thing fey, fairy, feral, ferocious and cruel. He had tried for so long to be a gentleman. Tried to fit in, to adhere to all the rules of civilised society, to be normal, to be like everyone else. But his years at Stowe and his analysis and the fear of war had brought him to breaking point. He had refused humanity in favour of hawks, but he could not escape himself. Once again White was engaged in a battle to civilise the perversity and unruliness within himself. Only now he had put those things in the hawk, and he was trying to civilise them there. He found himself in a strange, locked battle with a bird that was all the things he longed for, but had always fought against. It was a terrible paradox. A proper tragedy. No wonder living with Gos brought him nearly to madness.[54]

The different configurations of the two human-animal relationships are now more evident. In her goshawk, Macdonald sees a model to be emulated, a perspective which she strives to inhabit; on the other hand, White is undertaking a challenge against himself, or what Macdonald describes as "a test of manhood", as his tiercel becomes a proxy for "all the dark, discreditable desires within himself he'd tried to repress for years". [55]

When training his Gos, White had not yet reached a substantial level of experience. His early mistakes with Gos resulted in the hawk's odd, undisciplined behaviour, to which White reacts with extremely violent thoughts:

> And oh! the agony of patience, the brooding and godlike benevolence which had been exerted. At the thousandth bate in a day, on an arm that ached to the bone with its L-shaped rigidity under the weight of the bird, merely to twitch him gently back to the glove, to speak to him kindly with the little mew which of my conversation he seemed to like best, to smile past him at space, to re-assure with tranquillity, when one yearned to beat him down—with a mad surge of blood to the temples to pound, pash, dismember, wring, wrench, pluck, cast about in all directions, batter, bash, tug and stamp on, utterly to punish, and obliterate, have done with and finally finish this dolt, cow, maniac, unteachable, unutterable, unsupportable Gos.[56]

[52] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[53] T.H. WHITE, *A Sort of Mania* (unpublished manuscript), quoted in H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 45.
[54] *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 127.
[56] T.H. WHITE, *The Goshawk*, p. 47.

When White hurls at Gos, he is actually redirecting those insults at himself for his inability to tame the raptor. But this raptor, as stressed, also represents all the hidden desires he is trying to suppress. White felt both disgust and shame at his sadistic fantasies, especially because he was sure of their being a by-product of the abuse he himself experienced as a child from his father and his masters. When he punishes Gos, White acts out traumatic memories of his childhood, but at the same time he is also making room for his fantasies by taking up the role of the abuser: he is both the abuser and the abused, and this is exactly the "terrible paradox" to which Macdonald refers.

The Goshawk, however, is not only a book about White's lost battle with Gos: being a day-to-day account, it also registers the more positive and uplifting episodes between man and animal, and Macdonald makes sure to mention them as well in her book. In particular, she notices how Gos gifts White with "the joys of domesticity"[57] and, most importantly, the possibility of feeling "almost like a mother nourishing her child inside her",[58] his text thus joining the long list of classic books on animals authored by "gay writers who wrote of their relationships with animals in lieu of human loves of which they could not speak".[59]

White's sexual proclivities might prove discomforting matter to tackle. All the same, through minute research and unparalleled empathy, Macdonald sets out to understand what really happened with White and his goshawk. She acknowledges and cherishes what their stories have in common and departs from her initial hasty judgement on his book, even though she still labels his *modus operandi* as a perfect example of what *not* to do when training a raptor. Besides resorting to a biographical exercise as a counterpoise to her own experience, she simultaneously unravels the stories of two broken people that seek refuge from their traumas in nature and birds of prey. Paired with her discussion and subsequent demystification of established texts on grief and falconry, the pages of *Hawk* in which Macdonald considers her own personal experience in relation to different textual sources help her argue for the possibility of another, non-standard way of grieving, as well as another way of approaching the art of falconry. All the while, she shows how these two intricate dimensions interact with and influence each other when clashing, as happens both in her case and White's.

4. But what exactly happens between Macdonald and her hawk? Before answering this question, one may begin with another – and more general – one: what is it that often draws humans to confront themselves with animals? In her regular column for the *New York Times*, Macdonald observed that:

> Animals don't exist in order to teach us things, but that is what they have always done, and most of what they teach us is what we think we know about ourselves. The purpose of animals in medieval bestiaries, for example, was to give us lessons in how to live. […] But our minds still work like bestiaries. We thrill at the notion that we could be as wild as a hawk or a weasel, possessing the inner ferocity to go after the things we want; we laugh at animal videos that make us yearn to experience life as joyfully as a bounding lamb. A photograph of the last passenger pigeon makes palpable the grief and fear of our own unimaginable extinction. We use animals as ideas to amplify

[57] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 92.
[58] *Ibidem*, p. 28.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

and enlarge aspects of ourselves, turning them into simple, safe harbors for things we feel and often cannot express.[60]

Through the practical example of bestiaries, always "suspended between reality and imagination, between referential concreteness and symbolic truth",[61] Macdonald stresses how humans have always been prone to project onto animals those "aspects of ourselves" that we might not be able to come to terms with without operating from a removed distance. That is, without transferring these "things we feel and often cannot express" to an "other" that is not us, and that might not even be a human (as the case study of T.H. White and his Gos amply illustrates).

However, the acknowledgement of Macdonald's own relationship with animals, whose turns and rhythms are in this scenario fuelled by grief, is not as immediate. When recounting her initial web hunt for a goshawk to train, Macdonald confesses to her somewhat passive and simultaneously besotted state, writing that "The hawk had caught me. It was never the other way around".[62] What is really remarkable, however, is that she appears envious of its overall attitude: "The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life".[63] She is perfectly aware of the physical and emotional burdens of the task she is taking upon herself, but decides to see it as the most helpful gambit she can use to escape the madness of grief in which she has precipitated.[64]

The first encounter between human and animal is told in retrospective with the tones of a classic tale of love at first sight. The raptor that Macdonald eventually trains is not the one she was supposed to pick up: at the designated meeting point, the hawk-breeder shows up with two goshawks, the second one being for another client. Upon opening up both cages in order to verify the code and bird associated with her purchase, Macdonald is stunned: "My heart jumps sideways. She is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water. A broken marionette of wings, legs and light-splashed feathers".[65] On the other hand, the bird that comes out from the second cage is presented in Victorian-like terms, as "a sort of madwoman in the attack", with Macdonald ironically doubling down on the *Jane Eyre* reference when she describes what she sees in the hawk's eye as "some madness from a distant country".[66] Disappointed by the hawk she was supposed to receive and overly enamoured with the other one, in the end she convinces the hawk-breeder to give her the one she wants.

[60] H. MACDONALD, "What Animals Taught Me About Being Human", *The New York Times*, 16 May 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/16/magazine/what-animals-taught-me-about-being-human.html (last accessed on 24 June 2020).

[61] A. STARA, "Animali che vivono nei racconti", in ID., *La tentazione di capire e altri saggi*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2006, p. 64, my translation.

[62] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 24.

[63] *Ibidem*, p. 85.

[64] As Rebecca Chaplan has observed, "she needs a bird that will be strong enough to handle the aggression she dimly senses within herself. […] She therefore enters a state of complete absorption, a kind of primary maternal preoccupation that coincides with her mourning and withdrawal from her social world" (R. CHAPLAN, "Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 64 [1], 2016, p. 196).

[65] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 53.

[66] *Ibidem*, pp. 54-55.

After the bird has become accustomed to Macdonald's presence – the first step in the training of any bird of prey – she is eventually given a name: Mabel, from the Latin *amabilis*, meaning 'loveable, dear'. This particular christening is in keeping with the most common superstition among falconers, according to which a hawk's ability is inversely proportional to the ferocity of its name but, that said, the calmness evoked by the chosen name mirrors Macdonald's desire to get "as far from Death as it could get".[67]

The training is long and laborious, made up of distinct phases that must be executed to the letter, and Macdonald has no choice but to resort to all those problematic books on falconry mentioned earlier, inasmuch as they present something tangible to hold on to. The rigour of these manuals is a safe anchor, as she trains Mabel while navigating the agonies of grief in parallel: having realised that her own grief does not necessarily come in stages as certain books have suggested, she hopes that Mabel's path is more linear, conventional and ultimately reassuring. However, grief and its traumatic burden inevitably complicate the endeavour, and the bookish knowledge helps Macdonald to locate the inner source of her distress:

> Nothing was wrong with the hawk. She wasn't sick. She was a baby. She fell asleep because that's what babies do. I wasn't sick either. But I was orphaned and desperately suggestible, and I didn't know what was happening to me. […] I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist.[68]

Here Macdonald explicitly refers to Mabel as a model to be emulated; later on, she describes her resolution to train her as a way "to make it all disappear".[69] Framed in these terms, it becomes evident how coping with her father's death entails a withdrawal from the painful aspects of human emotions and rationality, an attempt to assume the hawk's point of view in order to tame both the bird and the grieving human: "I had put myself in the hawk's wild mind to tame her, and as the days passed in the darkened room my humanity was burning away".[70]

It is easy to pinpoint the signs of Macdonald's own undoing when she speaks of her humanity receding as she slowly settles into a precarious and potentially dangerous state of inbetweenness. She reverts to the goshawk's wildness as a way of escaping from the human world and the complications of grief, but the shock of her father's death keeps haunting her, since memories of the excursions and conversations she used to have with him are triggered by seemingly innocuous objects or places she stumbles upon while going around with Mabel.[71] Trauma, thus, constantly creeps up on Macdonald, obfuscating rationality and ultimately hindering any attempt at sublimating the pain:

> The anger was vast and it came out of nowhere. It was the rage of something not fitting; the frustration of trying to push something in a box that is slightly too small. […] And finally you know it won't fit, know there is no way it can fit, but this doesn't stop you using brute force to try to crush it in,

[67] *Ibidem*, p. 89.
[68] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[69] *Ibidem*, p. 117.
[70] *Ibidem*, p. 86.
[71] The portrayal of these episodes also tracks with two Freudian tenets of trauma theory: Cathy Caruth's notion of 'latency' and Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'acting out'. See C. CARUTH, *Unclaimed Experience*; D. LACAPRA, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., (2001) 2014.

punishing the bloody thing for not fitting properly. That was what it was like: but I was the box, I was the thing that didn't fit, and I was the person smashing it, over and over again, with bruised and bleeding hands.[72]

During these bouts of anger, Macdonald regularly refers to her readings on both falconry and grief.[73] Despite her previously stated intentions of shedding her academic side, she still retains portions of that all too rational (and human) mentality: it seems as if she is startled by her inability to curb grief, remaining almost unaware, or rather unwilling to succumb to the potential of trauma to shatter and exceed any plan or scheme.

Victims and survivors of trauma never take their acts of witnessing lightly, as they are often afraid of not being up to the task, or lucid enough to provide a coherent testimony.[74] The same could be said of Macdonald's case, except that here her testimony, her act of survival, does not only consist in a written account, but also in her decision to train Mabel. Her precarious psychological state and emotional exhaustion lead her to believe she is not doing a good job and that her project with the goshawk is ill-fated. This *impasse* is eventually broken when she finds the strength to open up to a friend and fellow falconer about her crippling fears.[75] After acknowledging her distress, both to herself and to third parties, Macdonald feels more relaxed and able to continue her work with Mabel, up to the point where the two reach such a degree of mutual trust that Mabel can now fly free.

There is, however, one last step to be completed: every *austringer* (i.e., every keeper of goshawks) has to help their hawks to hunt and kill. In other words, what Macdonald must help Mabel to do is to mingle with and ultimately cause death, the one thing she herself is running away from. There is a brilliant passage in which she voices her concerns, while also exposing the divide between human and animal:

Trained hawks didn't catch animals. They caught *quarry*. They caught *game*. What an extraordinary term. *Game*. I sat quietly watching the line and wondered. I would hunt with this hawk. Of course I would. Training a goshawk and not letting it hunt seemed to me like raising a child and not letting it play. But that was not why I needed her. To me she was bright, vital, secure in her place in the world. Every tiny part of her was boiling with life, as if from a distance you could see a plume of steam around her, coiling and ascending and making everything around her slightly blurred, so she stood out in fierce, corporeal detail. The hawk was a fire that burned my hurts away. There could be no regret or mourning in her. No past or future. She lived in the present only, and that was my refuge. My flight from death was on her barred and beating wings. But I had forgotten that the puzzle that was death was caught up in the hawk, and I was caught up in it too.[76]

[72] H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 141.

[73] "All the anger within me, the anger I didn't know was there, the anger the books call One of the Five Stages of Grief rears up in a towering instant of white-hot fury" (*ibidem*, p. 100).

[74] See S. FELMAN and D. LAUB, *Testimony*.

[75] "And the sun on the glass and the memory of the shining field, and the awful laughter, and the kindness of that morning's meeting must have thinned the armour of silence I'd worn for months, because the anger was quite gone now, and that evening as we drove to the hill, I said in a quiet voice, 'Stuart, I'm not dealing very well with things at the moment.' I said, 'I think I'm depressed.' 'You've lost your father, Helen,' he said. 'I'm training a gos. I suppose it's quite stressful.' 'You've *lost your father*. And you're doing OK with the gos,' he added. 'You might not see it, but you are. She'll be flying free, soon. She's nearly there, Helen. Don't be so hard on yourself.' I hadn't told him everything. […] But I had told him something" (H. MACDONALD, *H is for Hawk*, p. 151, emphasis in original).

[76] *Ibidem*, p. 160.

This moral conundrum triggers an emotional short circuit in Macdonald's mind. She admits having hunted with other hawks for years, but in the wake of her father's death she is no longer equipped with the same cold blood. At the same time, she is aware that by their nature hawks *must* hunt, and thus decides to go forward with her project and "let slip havoc and murder".[77] What happens when the two go hunting for the first time is described in terms of a pursued loss of control:

> That is the lure: that is why we lose ourselves, when powerless from hurt and grief, in drugs or gambling or drink; in addictions that collar the broken soul and shake it like a dog. I had found my addiction on that day out with Mabel. It was as ruinous, in a way, as if I'd taken a needle and shot myself with heroin. I had taken flight to a place from which I didn't want to ever return.[78]

As Macdonald herself acknowledges in retrospective, hunting with Mabel took her "to the very edge of being a human. Then it took me past that place to somewhere I wasn't human at all".[79] Indeed, by being beside herself with both rage and grief, she has been inhabiting two sides and sensibilities: one more human, more civilised; the other closer to the wildness and state of nature of animals. However, each time she goes hunting with Mabel, she makes a small step towards the latter, getting closer and closer to a point of no return: "In hunting with Mabel, day after day, I had assumed – in my imagination, of course, but that was all it could ever be – her alien perspective, her *inhuman* understanding of the world. It brought something akin to madness, and I did not understand what I had done".[80]

It is here that the fallacy of Macdonald's plan becomes apparent, and her way of working through her grief reveals its problematic slant. If we understand *working through* as the phase subsequent to the acknowledging of a traumatic event as such, in which survivors slowly attempt to rebuild their life and begin a course of actions that may lead to their own self-healing,[81] we can easily see Macdonald doing the exact opposite. By expressing her desire to escape from human emotions and assuming the feral point of view of the goshawk, she is actually circumnavigating her own trauma. Training Mabel as a way of coping with her father's death may have a therapeutic effect, but this can only be temporary. Thinking as a raptor would surely allow a certain recess from experiencing grief in human terms, but Macdonald becomes so lost in the hawk's 'alien perspective' to almost forget that this behaviour cannot be assimilated into human interactions.

However, Macdonald is prompted to get back on a righteous path during the memorial service, where she meets people who had been in touch or worked with her father and who remind her of the warmth of human connections:

> Hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks. And the wild is not a panacea for the human soul; too much in the air can corrode it to nothing. […] I'd fled to become a hawk, but in my misery all I had done was turn the hawk into a mirror of me.[82]

[77] *Ibidem*, p. 175.
[78] *Ibidem*, p. 177.
[79] *Ibidem*, p. 195.
[80] *Ibidem*, p. 212.
[81] See D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.
[82] H. Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, pp. 217-18.

Macdonald's *inhuman* understanding of the world is, in clinical terms, the sign of a profound depression: in the wake of this realisation, she manages to seek help from a professional, so as to slowly re-enter her human frame. As she progresses with her treatment, she also becomes lucid enough to understand what happened with Mabel and why their relationship was on the brink of unhealthiness. At the beginning of the book, she had hinted at the hawk's ability to slip into "another, wilder world from which humans had been utterly erased".[83] And, later on, she is reminded of a Middle English poem from her college days, *Sir Orfeo*, in which hawks are depicted as crossing borders inaccessible to humans, thus rehashing the "ancient shamanic traditions right across Eurasia, [in which] hawks and falcons were seen as messengers between this world and the next".[84] At this point, Macdonald finally admits to having craved for this other world and having, in a sense, exploited Mabel: "I know now what those dreams in spring had meant, the ones of a hawk slipping through a rent in the air into another world. I'd wanted to fly with the hawk to find my father; find him and bring him home".[85]

As spring arrives, Macdonald must part from Mabel, because hawks usually spend the warmer seasons moulting in their aviaries. As she begins to say goodbye, she appears fully capable of reconfiguring their bond and ultimately treasuring what they have learned together:

> In my time with Mabel I've learned how you feel more human once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not. And I have learned, too, the danger that comes in mistaking the wildness we give a thing for the wildness that animates it. Goshawks are things of death and blood and gore, but they are not excuses for atrocities. Their inhumanity is to be treasured because what they do has nothing to do with us at all.[86]

This remark bears some striking similarities with the *New York Times* piece mentioned earlier, the latter inevitably building from the former. Macdonald says she has learned (or rather, relearned) what it means to be human by confronting her own nature with Mabel's wildness. After briefly experiencing a dissolution of her humanity, she is finally able to separate herself from the goshawk. No longer trying to inhabit Mabel's subjectivity, she looks back at what they have accomplished together, recognising the scars on her hands as mementos of a year of arduous training. She also sees other scars that are not visible, the scars of her own grief that Mabel "helped mend, not make".[87] The way Mabel helped to mend Macdonald's bleeding, grieving scars is also testified by a brief episode in which she finds a previously unseen note written for her by her father. This discovery rekindles the theme of patience, and Macdonald's heartfelt reaction – now free from anger – shows how time "worked its careful magic",[88] for her grief has finally transformed into love.

5. *Hawk* was written roughly seven years after the events it deals with. At no time does this work hide its mainspring in the personal and complex trauma of loss, which rapidly becomes the driving force of the whole narrative, in terms of form as well as content.

[83] *Ibidem*, p. 24.
[84] *Ibidem*, p. 226.
[85] *Ibidem*, p. 220.
[86] *Ibidem*, p. 275.
[87] *Ibidem*.
[88] *Ibidem*, p. 268.

The degree of instability generally ascribed to traumatic events, which are perceived as unspeakable and in excess of our frames of reference, is indeed mirrored in the book's structure and its resistance to generic categorisation. Macdonald feels unable to fully give her testimony by writing *only* a grief memoir, or *only* a record of her training with Mabel. Propelled by trauma, the final result rests in a hybrid text which resists any fixed or self-contained label[89] and which somehow embodies the slippery, out-of-reference nature of trauma itself.

Yet, as we have seen, this instability transcends the text itself. If we turn to the narrating subject, we discover a grieving orphan who decides to escape from the human world, hoping to find solace in nature while training her goshawk. *Hawk* details the author's progress step by step, with Mabel emerging as a fully-fledged and utterly captivating character and Macdonald comparing their story with T.H. White's experience with his male goshawk. Spending time with Mabel provides the author with the chance to de-emphasise her human conscience and temporarily embrace the hawk's feral perspective, in a desperate attempt to flee from grief. In other terms, throughout *Hawk*, Macdonald approaches the status of a hybrid subject herself, a wild and animal-like mind trapped inside a human shell.

Reading *Hawk* through the lenses of grief and trauma theory contributes to shedding light on Macdonald's achievement. Her book stages and narrates the experience of one's undoing in response to traumatic grief. The unpredictable transformations of which Butler speaks in her essay are related to processes of hybridisation that inform the book's structure and leave an imprint in the narrating autobiographical subject. As a consequence, the grieving process traced in *Hawk* is relentlessly on the edge, or rather, on multiple ones: on the edge of different genres without ever settling into a specific one; on the edges and fringes of civilised society and its rules of conduct for grieving; finally, on the edge of the tantalising divide between human and animal.

Thanks also to her reading of White and his disastrous attempt at projecting his own demons onto his hawk in order to exorcise them through an animal proxy, Macdonald is able to see that she had been mistaken about "those books about people running to the woods to escape their grief and sorrow".[90] Her hybrid condition, her desire to be free from grief as hawks allegedly are, does not translate well in the human world, given that she was frantically spiralling into severe depression in spite of herself. In the end, she manages to backtrack and reconfigure her relationship with Mabel, finding her humanity again by confronting with (i.e., distancing from) the goshawk's *inhuman* wildness.

A sense of artful reconstruction of the past is also at work in the closing pages of *Hawk*, where Macdonald ties things up with a neat ending which almost jars with the generic fluidity and overall instability flaunted up to this point. The book in fact ends with a reference to the author's changed mental state that, as an earthquake, wakes her up in the middle of the night. Concerned about Mabel, she precipitates down the stairs to check on her, only to find the animal calm and asleep: "right now Mabel is more than a hawk. She feels like a protecting spirit. […] I had thought the world was ending, but my hawk had saved me again, and all the terror was gone".[91]

[89] Even the 'Nature Writing/Biography' label on the Vintage copy referenced in these pages sounds reductive as well as misleading.

[90] *Ibidem*, p. 224.

[91] *Ibidem*, p. 278.

Most importantly, Mabel reminds Macdonald of the value of human warmth, and it is precisely with this image of domestic comfort that the book closes. After driving to the Suffolk home of a friend who owns an aviary, Macdonald bids goodbye to Mabel for the spring months, and, in order to take her mind off the separation, her friend invites her to his kitchen, "where the kettle is whistling, and the house is very warm".[92]

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[92] *Ibidem*, p. 279.

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