

Birdo...fåglo...whammo - New monster languages

Short introduction to Öyvind Fahlström's Birds in Sweden

To grasp both Öyvind Fahlström's artistic development and the basic idea behind his compositions for the radio, there is only one way to begin – with his “Concrete Manifesto”, written in 1953 and one of the first of its kind. At this time the author was leaving his surrealist poetry to find a new way of expression.

Fahlström often emphasized that the manifesto came into being at a time when he had just discovered concrete music (musique concrete, Pierre Schaeffer) with its novel manipulation of the sound material. When Fahlström created his monster languages birdo, whammo and fåglo at the very beginning of the sixties it was also the fulfilment of many of the ideas in the manifesto. This was at an expansive period of his development. In 1961 he had moved to New York and in contact with Robert Rauschenberg and other American artists he had realized that he was free to work with “the entire repertoire of life” in his own art.

In the same year in an article entitled Bris (Breeze) (Rondo 3/1961) he had presented an international overview of contemporary experimental poetry. Besides summarizing some of the current trends, the article also contained a farewell to the poetry of the printed page in favour of acoustical presentation. Fahlström also played with the idea of “false dialects” and asked why no one was writing suites of poems for these invented dialects. Birdo, whammo and fåglo were his own reply to the question and at this period he made use of “false dialects” both in his poetry and in his theatrical art. In the studios of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation Fahlström had discovered “the possibilities inherent in tape technology for ‘concrete’ kneading and processing, multiplying, layering, fragmentation and so on of the sounding material”. He now concluded his poetic concretism in grand style with a half-hour radio collage entitled Fåglar i Sverige (Birds in Sweden) (1963) which makes use of fåglo and whammo. Prior to this the artist had, in New York, notated birdcalls in his large painting Sunrise, thereby creating his first work of art in which words and images are fully integrated. In a letter to the Swedish radio producer Börje Lindell (1962) Fahlström described the origins of the work:

“I don't really know why I started in on birds. In New York I did a large painting [Sunrise] with illuminated branch-like forms, glowing in the east, of a rising invisible sun which awakens each branch, each bird family and its song (painted = written on the canvas). Americans have their own way of translating bird songs (jingles, mnemonic phrases), and Swedes have theirs (“letteristic formations”). The translation itself (from natural sound to phonetics) was the fundamental experience. It linked up with my old ideas about creating new “concrete” dialects - contorting, stretching, kneading the language as “concrete material”. By analysing and cataloguing all birdsong syllables in Rosenberg's Birds in Sweden, I was able to uncover a certain phonetic vocabulary. When normal words are then translated, such as Börje Lindell, we get expressive contortions due to the syllabic vocabulary's characteristic limitations, to wit Görrkjä Zilltell.”

Fahlström's intention with the new dialects was not to establish a secret or transmental communication – even the Russian Zaum poets had sought to create the language of birds and stars – but he was

principally interested in drawing our attention to the fact that much of what we take for granted, as in the mirroring of the world in language, is a highly arbitrary construction. The author touches here on something that Novalis had noted in one of his fragments (c. 1798): "There is really something ridiculous about talking and writing; a real conversation is just a play on words. One cannot but be fascinated by the absurd mistake people make of believing that they speak on behalf of objects. The peculiarity of language, that it is only concerned with itself, is something that no one knows about."

If we study the *birdo* catalogue we can see how Fahlström listed the transcribed birdcalls according to the vowels of the phonetic alphabet and then in alphabetical order. In this case the author used the transcriptions of birdcalls he found in A.D. Cruickshank's *A Pocket Guide to Birds* (1960). He proceeded in similar fashion in preparing the catalogue for *whammo* (which is built on onomatopoeic expressions from the world of comic strips: wham, slurp, fsst, thunk, etc.) and *fåglo*. In the latter he made use of Erik Rosenberg's classic ornithological fieldbook *Fåglar i Sverige* (*Birds in Sweden*) (first edition 1953). If we compare the bird catalogues with the original sources we see that Fahlström often chooses a portion or syllable of a birdcall and that he constructs his own "syllabic repertoire" in order to establish building materials that are easier to use. When he then comes to translate, to "sculpt" the words, fragments of the phonetic transcriptions are combined until he arrives at the most similar and attractive combination. *Birdo*, *whammo* and *fåglo* become, in other words, mocking-bird languages.

"At the same time, the actual translation concept related to the games and role-playing that occupy me nowadays. Assuming the basic principle that anything can stand for anything, I want to move from a pure Cageian approach, i.e. where new things continually stand for "x" to a state where by determining that a certain thing stands for "x", you can create an incentive to build contexts, make games based on these "rules", or define roles. Thus our regular old linguistic sounds start playing bird-sound roles. Then the bird-sounds can start playing linguistic roles. What would a nightingale call itself? *Jitetingegay!*" (Letter to Börje Lindell, 1962)

Fahlström emphasized that he found the birdsounds in *birdo* and *fåglo* beautiful but that the most significant aspect as far as he was concerned was the translating situation itself. He observed that what happens in our perception of reality is that we translate according to different systems and that all systems are equal and that every combination is possible. In this way the monster languages were not exclusively a poetic language-game for Fahlström who associated them with fundamental questions about mankind's relationship to the world around.

The radiopiece *Birds in Sweden* was airplayed in January 1963, it was introduced as "a piece of concrete poetry" by the programme host.

This work had a powerful impact on a number of Swedish authors/composers which have testified that this composition opened their eyes to the potential of radio, a development that soon resulted in the emergence of a completely new genre in Sweden: text-sound compositions, with authors like Bengt Emil Johnson, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Åke Hodell, Ilmar Laaban and Sten Hanson.

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