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Escaping the Page: Point of View and the Reader of 'A Way Out'.

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Point of view (POV) is a narratological concept investigated from multiple stylistic perspectives, ranging from focalization (Genette 1988; Bal 1997), to dialogism (Bakhtin 1981), to 'planes' of compositional analysis (Uspensky 1983; Fowler 1996). The diversity of approaches adopted in analysing subjectivity, point of view, or narrative perspective (terms relating to the same concept), attested by the enormous attention paid to it in secondary literature, would normally indicate that the subject has been surfeited. POV has, however, been investigated mostly in regard to inter-textual factors: the reader as an extra-textual receiver who plays a significant role in the reception of POV has often been disregarded, with critics focussing on complex analysis of the narrator, or 'SPEAKER' (Banfield 1982). This essay will adopt what Stockwell (2009: 134) names a more 'holistic' approach in developing its analysis: the reader's reception of the text will be investigated alongside the developed narratological perspectives. By taking into consideration the aforementioned literature on subjectivity, I will analyse 'A Way Out' (Adcock 2000: 87–Appendix), a poem which I believe holds intricacies in its treatment of POV, and use the reader as a dynamic parameter to argue that POV can be employed not only to diversify the effect upon their reception of the characters, as traditionally argued, but also in the case of this poem, to function as a metapoetic description of the actual reading experience.

Although Adcock is a contemporary poet of the female sex, critics of her work are often reluctant to place her within the sphere of 'feminist poets' or 'women poets', due to her own rejection of 'separatism', arguing instead that the 'real poets' ought to address a non-gender-specific audience through their work (Pykett 1997: 253-55). Wilson (2009: 187) is quick to list 'A Way Out' amongst poems focussed on the 'immersion of self in the landscape (…) informed by an ecological consciousness', suggesting that its appeal is a sample of ecofeminist literature. Although the negotiation between humanity, the environment, and feminism possibly exists in the poem, as I will illustrate below, reducing the approaches in elucidating its intricacies in such monodimensional terms is not only limiting the poem's possible receptions, but is also a result of biographical readings regarding Adcock's New Zealander background. This essay will hence disregard the majority of literary criticism around Adcock, in assuming a more text-based analytical approach.

Part I: Positioning the reader within the text's world

The poem's opening line starts *in media res*, throwing the reader directly into the narrative situation without interrupting it. This is achieved through the use of the adjective 'other' (1), which implies that the noun it modifies – 'option'(1) – is the second of a pair of two, combined with the definite article 'the' (1), which I will regard as a proximal deictic marker, contrary to Wales (1989: 113) who argues that it is 'unmarked semantically as a "pointing" element'. The definite article positions the narrator in relatively closer cognitive proximity to the noun phrases it modifies than the indefinite article 'a', a distal deictic marker, since the nouns it modifies could belong to a more general class. The literary technique *in media res* employed here hence invites the reader to immediately position themselves in a direct relationship with the narrator – according to Stockwell (2009: 142), such 'continuation techniques' focus attention on the 'ongoing' narrator who 'has a life prior to the intervention of the text'. Namely, the technique facilitates the reader's reception of the textual information as an interaction between themselves and the narrator, who assumes the role of a conversational participant (Dixon and Bortolussi 2001: 281-5).

This perceived comradeship between narrative persona and reader is intensified by Adcock's use of the first person plural personal pronoun 'we' (4, 5), a proximal social deictic marker. Since readers naturally assume any second-person textual invitations (e.g. 'you') as a 'counterpart of [themselves]' in their cognitive mapping of texts (Stockwell 2009: 148), 'we' (including the 'I'-narrative persona and 'you') allows the reader to position themselves deictically within the text, and align themselves with the narrator's perspective. Thus, heightened involvement with the text and the narrator on the emotional plane can be achieved, since the reader is prone to fill in any blanks in the narrator's presented POV, using their own knowledge of similar schematic situations (Dixon and Bortolussi 2001: 284-5). In this case, I will argue that deictic referents within the poem position the narrator (and hence the reader) on a 'down' proximal spatial (and later, ideological) plane, with the bird character placed on an 'up' distal plane.

Firstly, the bird itself is presented as distanced from the reader, both through the deictic pronoun 'a' (1,9,13,14,18,24) modifying the explicit noun 'bird' or noun phrases relating to it – 'a pretty killer' (13), 'a keen-eyed stomach' (14), 'a pair of wings' (24) –, and through the connotations suggested by the subject complement 'to become a bird' (1). The full infinitive of the copular verb 'become' links its ellipted subject, possibly the narrator or the conversational pair reader-narrator, with the subject complement 'bird'. This juxtaposition through a verb reflecting the process of changing states – 'become' – suggests that the human nature is adaptable to an animal noun; this is, of course, challenging to reader-world schematic expectations, and thus the concept of 'a bird' is foregrounded as foreign within the reader's mind. This alien process is further distanced from the reader's perspective through the employment of the anaphoric antecedent 'that' (2), another distal deictic pronoun.

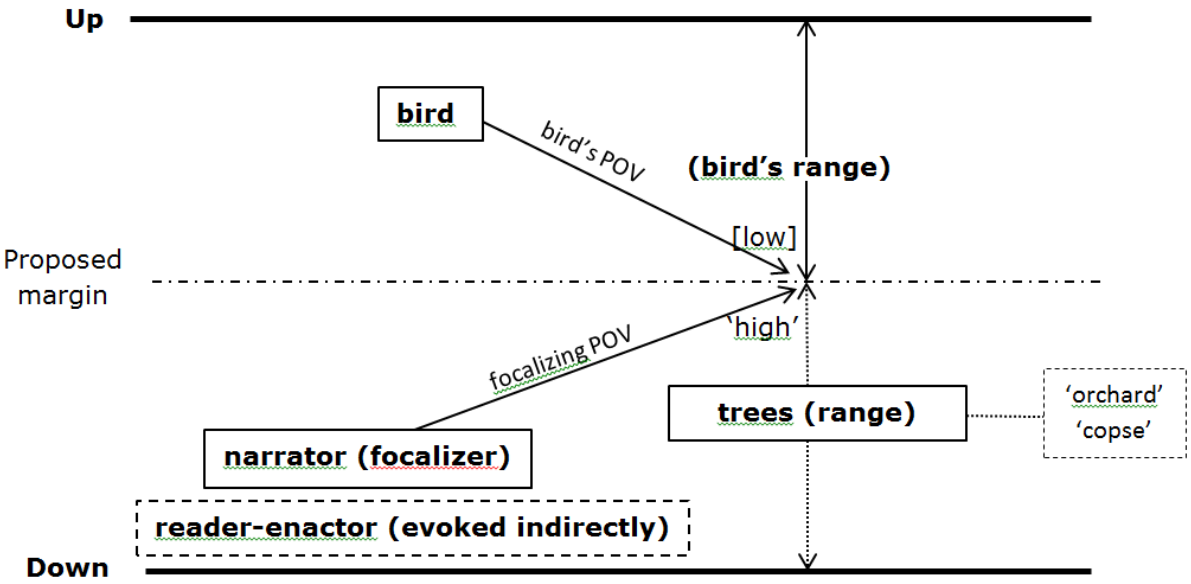
In fact, a co-referential chain of distal social deixis is established in relation to the bird: personal pronouns referring to it include the repetition of the third person plural 'they' (2, 4) and the male third person singular in subject, object, or possessive forms – 'he' (12, 15), 'him' (10), 'his' (19, 20, 21). Not only is the bird positioned away from the reader, it is also attributed a male gender. This could suggest that the narrator be seen as female since, as I will establish below, they are placed in inverse spatial and psychological planes than the bird; and since readers often attribute the gender of the poet to the narrative persona, this could also make a case for the reason the poem could be investigated under a feminist lens.

Part II: Positioning the reader on the spatial plane

Spatial deixis places the narrator and bird on separate planes: the 'up' and 'down'. Particles such as 'high' (9) – and its corresponding adverb 'higher' (6) – 'out' (7), 'upward' (7)/'up' (27),'down' (12),'on' (12), do not only refer to locations within the spatial plane, but also create the margins within which the characters operate. The adverb 'down' (12) – foregrounded both through the caesura and the adverbial fronting – presupposes that the initial position of the subject – 'he' (12) – was in an upper spatial point. Similarly, the direction correlated with 'out' (7) in describing the bird's movement is 'upward' (7) – emphasised by the caesura dividing the line in two pentameters –, and hence the deduction is that the narrator is located in a lower plane, since 'out' (7) is a distal particle, indicating that the agent of the action is moving away from the deictic centre.

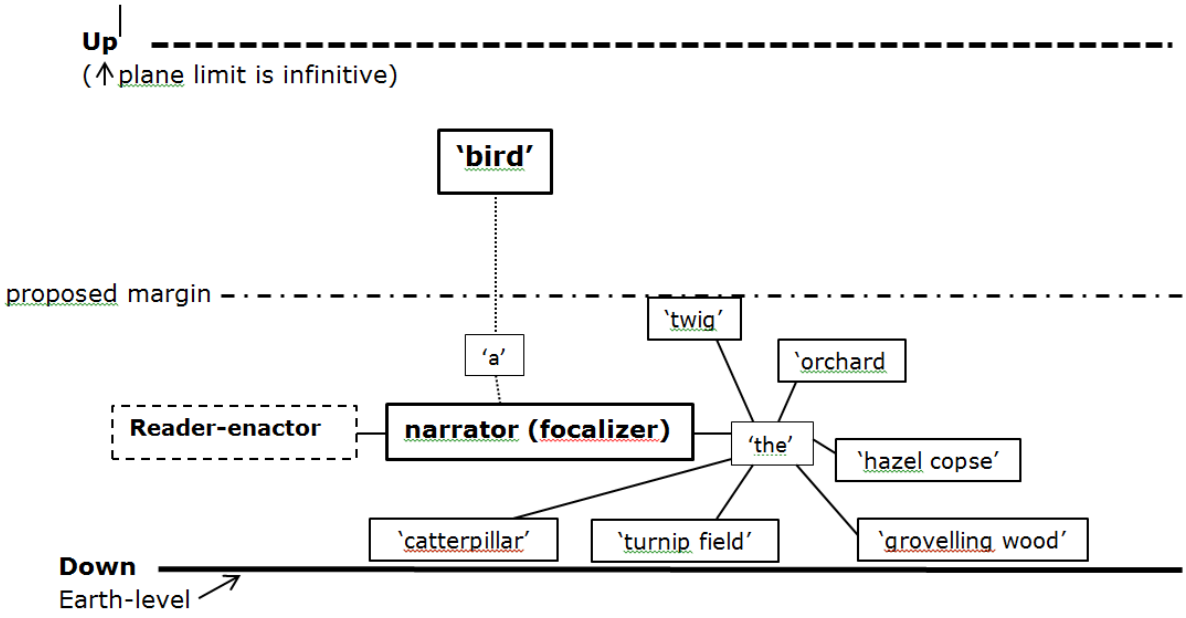
This is further substantiated by the use of the adverb 'high' (9) in relation to the non-finite progressive participle 'skimming' (9). Since the norm in adverbial collocations of the verb 'skim' include 'barely' and 'low' (Deuter et al 2002: 718), 'high' constitutes a departure which can only be explained through internal focalisation: as the point of view through which the text is filtered is the narrative persona's, they become the *focalizer*, and the bird's – the *focalized object's* – movements are hence described from their perspective (Bal 1997: 148-150). Since the focalizer is situated on the lower plane, their perception of the bird can only be in a higher position than their own; and hence, their perception of 'skimming', albeit semantically suggestive of a position just above to the tree-tops constituting the margin between low and high planes, will still be translated as 'high'. This is schematically represented in Figure A.

Figure A: Up and Down planes



The narrator's position within the lower plane is additionally substantiated through the use of proximal deixis in relation to earth-based surroundings: 'rope' (6), 'hazel copse' (10), 'turnip field' (11), 'orchard' (11), 'twig' (12), 'caterpillar' (15), 'grovelling wood' (26), are all pre-modified by the proximal deictic definite article 'the', and hence in close spatial relationship with the reader (Figure B).

Figure B: Narrator positioning in relation to noun phrases



Part III: Positioning the reader on the temporal plane

The reader at this point can be seen spatially aligned with the narrator at the lower plane, as a result of their cognitive mapping of the text in relation to the pronoun 'we' (4-5). Once readers are evoked as participants within the narrative through pronominal usage, they are prone to cognitively map the poem as a face-to-face conversation between themselves and an enactor of the poet (narrator), due to the indirect relationship between reader and poet at discourse-world level (Gavins 2007: 129). Orality features schematically directing the reader towards spoken discourse are thus markers that could aid

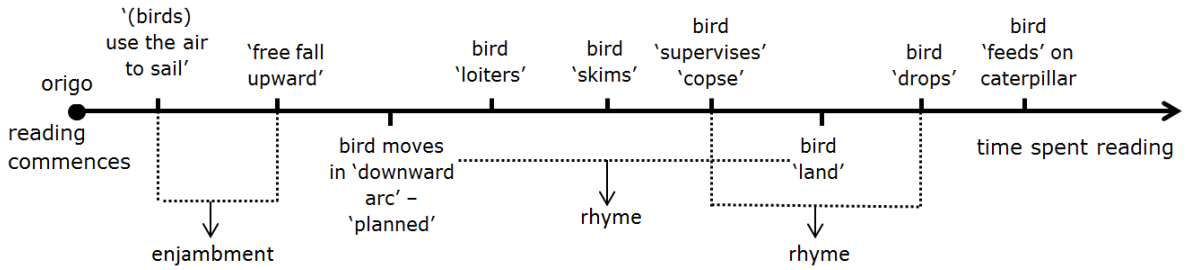
the reader's *identification* (Stockwell 2009: 134) with the narrative perspective, since they would point to their real-world knowledge of spoken interactions, and constitute a linear dynamic relationship between reader-narrator; such features are thus worth investigating.

According to Clark (2013: 277-8), contracted forms are markers of 'spoken of conversational language' which induces 'familiarisation' between text and reader. What Adolphs and Schmitt (2003: 428) name 'opaque' contractions of the present tense of the verb 'to be' are scattered throughout the poem, substituting ''s' for 'is' after pronouns – 'it's' (7, 8, 28) –, determiners – 'that's' (2) –, adverbs – 'up's' (27) –, and nouns – 'option's' (1), 'rope's' (6), 'coat's' (21), 'nest's (21)', 'dream's' (29) –. This naturalization of the form not only signifies the conversational tone assumed by the narrative persona on the ideological plane, but also serves to stir attention, on the temporal plane, away from the only instance of deviation from the present simple: the perfect aspect of 'he's chosen' (12) hidden through the auxiliary's contraction. This therefore retains the impression of 'uninterrupted time flow' (Uspensky 1983: 71), achieved by the domination of the present simple in the poem; most main verbs are copulative – 'is'/'are' –, only linking subject and verb complement on a relational level, thus signifying lack of evaluation and emphasising the arguments licensed by the verb rather than the action. The temporal flow is also achieved through the relatively stable decasyllabic verse, facilitated by the contractions, which in turn allows a rhythm to be established during active reading.

The lack of the progressive aspect throughout the poem also assists the uniformity of the temporal viewpoint. Most present participles assume either the non-finite – 'skimming' (9), 'munching' (16), 'battling' (23) – or adjectival – 'clogging' (22), 'grovelling' (26) – forms. Similarly, most non-finite past participles are used as subject complements – 'planned' (8), 'weighted' (14), 'made' (19), 'evaded' (24), 'earthed' (26), 'prolonged' (29) – thus constituting atemporal propositions. The prevalent present simple and non-finite participle forms hence foreground the action as occurring at the current temporal point, which suggests either that the narrator is describing the events while they are unfolding, allowing the reader to be further immersed into the narrative action, or that the habitual aspect can be projected upon the poem, making them applicable across various temporal points.

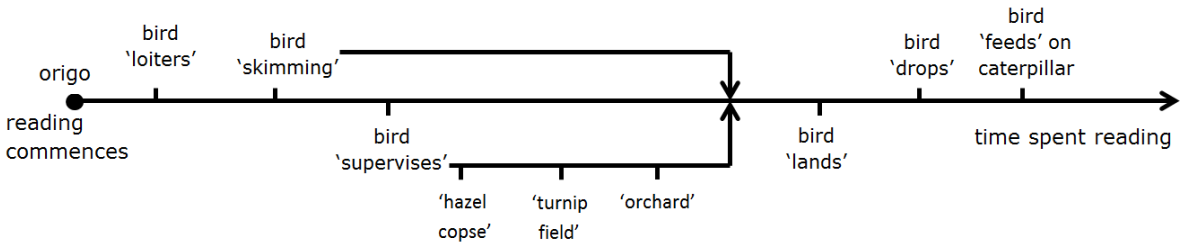
Temporal deixis is, according to Flundernik (2001: 101), a linguistic feature expressing internal perspective. Although explicit temporal deixis in the poem is limited to the adverb of sequence in time 'then' (11), I here hold that it exists through locatives. Based on Fowler's (1996: 164) assertion for the active experience of spatial locatives, which allows the reader's temporal placement within the textual sequence by equating the 'initial viewing position' with a temporal origo, the syntactical organisational structure of the poem allows for temporal associations. The organization of the poem in stanzas linked through enjambments – (6-7), (12-13), (18-19) – and an ABACBC rhyming scheme allows actions to be temporally marked synchronously to the reading experience (Figure C).

Figure C: Temporal plane / synchronous marking



Parataxis, which is also the grammatical organisation generally prevalent over hypotaxis in spoken discourse (Matthiessen 2002: 300) since the independent relationship between clauses which characterises it reflects the spontaneous construction of speech, allows for pauses within the temporal plane to be made during the active reading experience. For example, parataxis is foregrounded through the coordinating conjunctions – 'and'(4, 11),'but' (6),'or' (8) –, and in juxtaposed noun phrases posing as direct objects of the same main verb 'supervise' (10) – 'the hazel copse' (10)/'the turnip field' (11)/'the orchard' (22) which occur within the same compound-complex sentence – (2-12). Hence, the parataxis, combined with the pauses in metre created by the commas, allows for a more gradual reception of the noun phrases, in a meta-receptive temporal manner similar to the actual described action of the nouns appearing within the bird's optical field (Figure D).

Figure D: Temporal plane / parataxis



Contrasted planes

Having established that two separate spatial planes define the text-world of the poem, I now investigate Bakhtin's *heteroglossia*, which argues that 'different value systems articulated in the text are in some conflicting relationship' (Fowler 1996: 166). Hence, I will attempt to prove that the upper plane holds an inversely proportional relationship to the lower, which is characterised by realism, in terms of natural schematic expectations. I extend this analysis below, in my discussion on possible interpretations, to regard a parallel between spatial and ideological subjectivity.

The two planes are initially juxtaposed as opposites through the comparative syntactical structure initiated by the preposition/conjunction 'as' (4, 5); the repetition of the formula 'how they...'+'as we…' (2-4, 4-5) places the subjects of the two clauses (birds and humans) in direct opposition. The negated copular verb 'are not' (4), which is emphasised by the caesura, highlights the contrast, and the syntactical parallelism 'as we are not' (4)/'as we might' (5) undermines the possibility suggested by the epistemic modal.

In fact, the modality in force within each plane is also contrasted: 'can' (9, 24) is used twice in relation to the bird; in (24), the passive construction 'be evaded' places the agent – 'a pair of wings' (24), a metaphor for the bird – in object position. Although both 'can' (9, 24) and 'might' (5) – which is used in relation to the narrator-reader – are epistemic modal verbs, the latter is 'tentative' (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 646) and hence expresses unlikelihood, with 'can' instead indicating ability/certainty (642, 645). Similarly, the 3sg lexical verb 'lets' (10) expresses modal meaning of permission, and could hence be received as deontic and possibly reflexive, since the permission originates from, and only affects, the bird. The upper plane is hence characterised by a dynamism, with the lower retaining a more hesitant attitude.

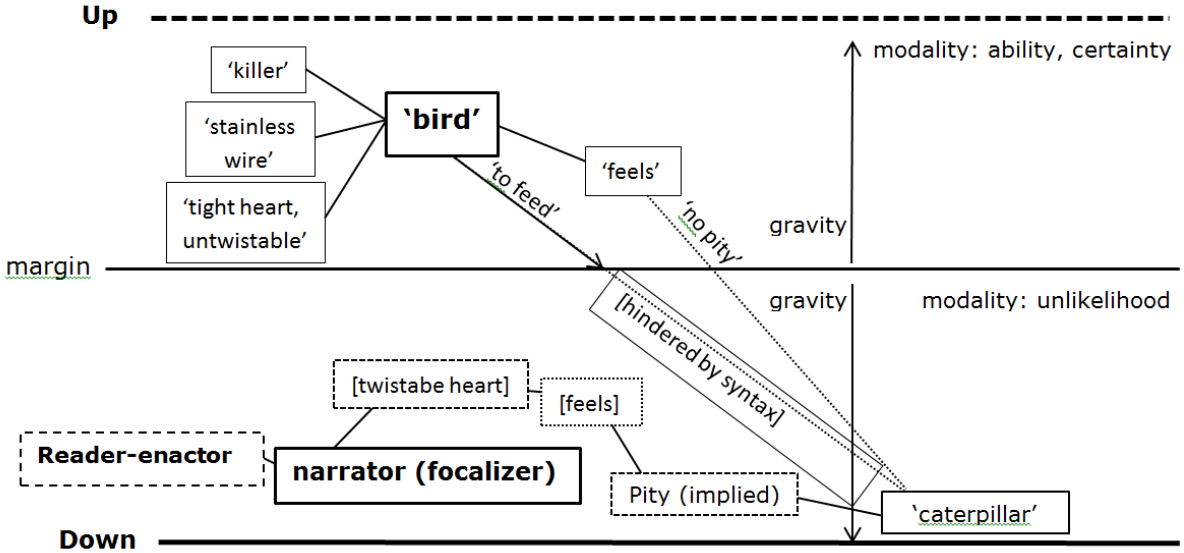
The physics which govern the upper plane also depart from real-world schemata. The alliterated oxymoron 'free fall upward' (7) suggests that the gravitational force acting upon the body in the upper plane retains an opposite direction from the Earth's; the use of 'fall' (7) by itself suggests a movement from upper to lower heights, an expectation challenged by the adverbial 'upward' (7).

This mirroring is also extended to schemata relating to birds. 'stainless wire' (20) and 'impermeable coat' (21) as metaphors for the compositional material of the bird's physiological system and plumage respectively, reconstruct it as an armoured, immortal, and lethal – 'killer' (13) – entity. This, combined with its independence from gravity – 'planned' (8) – and the explicit agency it is given – 'he's chosen' (12), emphasised by the perfect, and subject position in most lexical main verbs, contradict its real-world established schema of innocence and, frequently, victimization. The main lexical verbs whose subject is relative to the bird are predominantly intransitive – 'sing' (2), 'veer' (8), 'loiter' (9), 'land' (11), 'drops' (12); despite the active movement they connote, the lack of direct objects correlated with the lower plane suggests that the bird's actions have little effect upon other entities within the text-world.

An example of this is the 'feeding' episode – (12-17) – in which 'the caterpillar' (15), a proximal participant in the lower plane, is eaten by the bird: the grammatical deviation from standard forms, nevertheless, foregrounds the interaction as incomplete. Although the sounds created by 'moistly munching' are onomatopoeic, representing the chewing sounds made by the mouth – he alliterated /m/(bilabial nasal), and the tri-consonant clusters 'stl' and 'nch' are all labial or coronal, thus concentrating in the mouth area where the 'munching' occurs in reality, the syntax does not allow the trope to be completed. 'Munch' is a lexical verb normally attributed to the agent, but the participle form and the syntactic positioning between adverb 'moistly' (16) and noun 'hoop' (16) suggests its adjectival reception as a property of the caterpillar. Hence, there is a concrete spatial distinction between the two planes, as indicated by the lack of interaction between participants. The narrator's function is therefore reduced to that of an observer, as further indicated by the perceptive nature of the only lexical verb licensing it in subject position – 'I see' (30) – and the narrative's focus upon the actions of the bird,

indicated by the pronominal usage which, in its majority, introduces the bird. It is therefore established that the two planes not only receive minimal interaction, but the properties of their respective participants are semantically inversed (Figure E).

Figure E: Inverse Planes



Bisected focalization

According to Rimmon-Kenan (1983), the concept of focalization adopts a uniform viewpoint in relation to physical, cognitive, and emotive orientation within the text (Wales 1989: 179). I here, however, argue that Adcock suggests two separate emotive perspectives regarding the bird: an explicit, adopted by the narrative persona, and an implicit, arguably adopted by the reader, hence introducing the trope of the unreliable narrator (Booth 1961: 158-9). I will refer to this split on the emotive orientation as *bisected focalization*.

The first emotive narrative perspective in relation to the bird is the admiration of its freedom and overall state, as initially suggested by the affective adverbs of manner 'kindly' (2) and 'decently' (3) complementing the 'bird' (1) and its 'singing' (2). The repetition of the possessive form of 3sg personal pronoun 'his' (19, 20, 21) also suggests the perspective's admiration of the individualized propriety of both body and home. In addition to this, based on Fowler (1996: 167) who argues that generic sentences define the ideological plane on which the persona operates by establishing which 'truths' exist in their perspective, 'Up's the way to go' (27) is an explicit urge by the narrator to follow the bird's path. The proximal deictic article 'the' (27) linking the current deictic centre (narrator/reader) to a possible direction 'up' (27) through the copular verb, complemented by the infinitive 'to go'(27) arguably posing as a directive (Wales 1989: 250), suggests that the narrative perspective on some level considers the upper plane ideal.

Fowler (1996: 78) moreover states that the narrative perspective's attitude towards the validity of their proposition is grammatically realised through modality. In this case, the adverb 'apparently' (20) which betrays epistemic modality and hence the narrator's reluctance to commit to the schematically unfamiliar natural truth proposed in the clause. I hold that the final line in fact creates a definite breach between emotive perspectives adopted by the narrator and, based on my reception of the poem, reader, as a result of the following discussed stylistic features.

The employment of the isolationist 1sg personal pronoun 'I' (30) cognitively distances the reader from the previous alignment with the persona established through the inclusive pronoun 'we' (4, 5). The negative semantic connotations introduced by 'scheme' (30) undermine the idealised perception of the generic sentence in (27), whilst the repeated conditional clauses 'if…' (28) subvert the emotive tone introduced in the affective adjective 'escapist' (28) and simile 'like a dream' (28) within them, by emphasizing their unlikelihood. Additionally, the syntactic parallelism between lines 15 and 30, which adopt the same formula (Personal pronoun+*verba sentiendi*+negative particle+noun+prepositional phrase), subverts the decisiveness suggested by the clause's declarative structure, by juxtaposing the

nouns ‘disadvantage’ (30)/‘pity’ (15): the animalistic cruelty is revealed as the precise disadvantage of rejecting humanity in favour of the bird’s nature.

In fact, the bird’s cruelty appears in a chain of semantic connotations: metaphoric references to the bird hold sinister connotations, with the most apparent being ‘pretty killer’ (13). The emphatic immediate repetition of the noun ‘heart’ (17, 18), as a result of the use of the anticipatory ‘it’ in a syntactic instance of raising – (17) – allows for a comparison of the proximal, lower-plane ‘the heart’ and distal ‘a bird’s heart’. The main verb – ‘twist’ (17) – projects a malleable quality upon the proximal human heart, contrasting with its negated adjectival form ‘untwistable’ (19) emphasised by both the enjambment and caesura which post-modifies the bird’s heart. If the heart is regarded as the literary trope for the locus of emotion, the reader is able to sympathize with the humane, proximal heart as a result of the linear thematic progression repeating the rheme ‘heart’ (17) in the theme of the following clause. This technique also appears in the final stanza to emphasise the rejected possibility of the ‘dream’ (28, 29) being realised: the participle ‘prolonged’ (29) used as a subject complement to the dream suggests duration, immediately subverted through the prepositional phrase ‘for good’ (29) as an intensifier of the terminating process related by the verb ‘ends’ (29). Hence, bisected focalisation appears: narrator and reader occupy separate emotive subjective viewpoints, with the reader retaining the higher ‘optique’ (Pascal 1977: 132).

Conclusion: Interpretative Possibilities

Although, as discussed in the introduction, feminist interpretations of Adcock’s works are often avoided due to the poet’s attitude towards the movement, by disregarding the poet as an entity affecting the poem’s reception, we observe stylistic cues which could point to a feminist perspective within the text. The attribution of the male gender to the bird has already been discussed; this, in relation to the phallic simile ‘like a dart’ (14), syntactically related to the synecdoche reducing the bird to a ‘keen-eyed stomach’ (14) could be received as a female chauvinist reception of man as a being of unsaturated sexual appetite. If the narrative persona, which is positioned in contrast to the bird’s features, is hence regarded as female, an ironic perpetuation of the female’s receptive and perceiving role of the object within the literary world occurs (McNay 1992: 169). Of course, such interpretations are based on radical feminist beliefs in elucidating the allegorical nature of the poem, which is problematic.

Escapism, on the other hand, is a possible theme within the poem. The narrative positioning within a confined ‘lower’ plane, observing the mechanics of the ‘upper’ plane could account for a need to escape the human condition. In euphemistic terms, the poem could be an extended metaphor for suicidal tendencies, suggested by the narrator’s rejection of the confusing reality and the tendency to move towards the sky, a literary trope associated with heaven, which creates a kinaesthetic image-schema possibly metonymic of the departing soul (Fernández 2006: 107).

My own reception of the poem’s escapist allegory is, on the contrary, based on the literal need for escaping the page. Having discussed the reader as aligned with the narrator on the spatial plane, I now move to the realistic, three-dimensional, physical reading experience: the reader is positioned above the page, possessing agency in conducting a reading (for which ‘skimming’ (9) is an apt metaphor). Hence, the reader could assume the role of the bird. If we, however, regard the two-dimensional plane of the physical page, the directive in ‘Up’s the way to go’ (27) could point to the upper part of the page to which the reader ought to divert their attention: it hence constitutes an urge to repeat the reading experience, get lost in the world of the poem – ‘like a dream’ (28) – until its riddles are elucidated and the poem ‘ends for good’ (29). By redirecting our attention to the beginning of the poem, we may thus consider the metaphor proposed by the title: ‘A Way Out’ is truly a way for the poetic voice to escape the confines of the physical page.

Appendix: *A Way Out*

The other option's to become a bird.
That's kindly done, to guess from how they sing,
decently independent of the word
as we are not; and how they use the air
to sail as we might soaring on a swing
higher and higher; but the rope's not there,

it's free fall upward, out into the sky;
or if the arc veer downward, then it's planned:
a bird can loiter, skimming just as high
as lets him supervise the hazel copse,
the turnip field, the orchard, and then land
on just the twig he's chosen. Down he drops

to feed, if so it be: a pretty killer,
a keen-eyed stomach weighted like a dart.
He feels no pity for the caterpillar,
that moistly munching hoop of innocent green.
It is such tender lapses twist the heart.
A bird's heart is a tight little red bean,

untwistable. His beak is made of bone,
his feet apparently of stainless wire;
his coat's impermeable; his nest's his own.
The clogging multiplicity of things
amongst which other creatures, battling, tire
can be evaded by a pair of wings.

The point is, most of it occurs below,
earthed at the levels of the grovelling wood
and gritty buildings. Up's the way to go.
If it's escapist, if it's like a dream
the dream's prolonged until it ends for good.
I see no disadvantage in the scheme.

Adcock (2000:87).

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