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Through the Working Class

Ecology and Society Investigated Through the Lens of Labour

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Beyond the Dark, Satanic Mills

An Ecocritical Reading of *A Kestrel for a Knave*

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Abstract Barry Hines' 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* is justly celebrated for its depiction of working-class life in an English mining village. However, false assumptions about the role of 'nature' in the working-class experience have led critics to overlook the significance of the bird at the centre of the novel and the descriptions of the surrounding environment. A reading that foregrounds these aspects offers new insights, revealing a prescient anxiety about the way capitalism weakens relationships between human and nonhuman. The book is shown to be ahead of its time in its understanding that human flourishing depends on meaningful connection with the more-than-human world.

Keywords Animal studies. Barry Hines. Birds. Ecocriticism. Northern England. Working-class writing.

Barry Hines' much-loved 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* tells the story of Billy Casper, a young teenager growing up in a coal mining village in South Yorkshire, and his relationship with a kestrel called Kes. In an afterword to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of the book, Hines writes that one of the questions he is most frequently asked is how he knows so much about the countryside, since he too grew up in a mining community in the north of England. He goes on:

It's an ignorant question but understandable, because many people still have a vision of the north filled with 'dark satanic mills', mines and factories, and not a blade of grass in sight. When I try to explain that the mining village in which I was born and brought up – just a few miles from Barnsley – was surrounded by woods and fields, I can tell they don't believe me. (Hines 2000, 199)¹

Such a misconception about the place of the countryside in England's industrial north is deep seated and spreads well beyond the classrooms and literature festivals where Hines used to be invited to talk about his books.

¹ Barnsley is a large town (pop. 91,000) in the north of England, known for its industrial heritage, especially coal mining.

For example, Head, discussing the relationship between post-war British novels and depictions of rurality, suggests that one of the reasons for the decline in fictional representations of nature was the rise of the working-class novel and “the post-war identification of working-class experience with the industrial north of England” (2002, 190). Implicit in this claim is an assumption that ‘nature’ is irrelevant to the northern working-class experience. Such preconceptions may explain why the little criticism that there is of *A Kestrel for a Knave* tends to pass over the extended descriptions of the countryside surrounding Billy’s town. In addition, despite the fact that the central theme of the book is the relationship between a bird and a boy, critics have failed to engage fully with the importance of the more-than-human world to the book as a whole. Generically, the book has tended to be identified with the so-called ‘working-class novel’ (Hawthorn 1984, Haywood 1997, Day 2001, Kirk 2003) and as a result, critics may have seen only what they expected.

A reading of the novel that foregrounds the representation of the more-than-human world provides important new insights into both Billy’s character and the book’s prescient understanding of the tendency of industrial capitalism to separate human and other-than-human to the detriment of both. The exception to the type of criticism referred to above is a recent essay in which del Valle Alcalá interprets *A Kestrel for a Knave* through the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and suggests that Billy’s relationship with Kes – his ‘becoming-kestrel’, to use the Deleuzian term – opens “a hitherto unexplored trajectory of being, composing a new cartography of subjectivity that is no longer determined by external factors or by the overarching dictates of an abstract capitalist machine” (2016, 393). As del Valle Alcalá suggests, to read Billy only in terms of his economic situation is to enmesh him even more tightly in the capitalist system that is failing him, whereas to read him in terms of the dynamics of his relationship with the bird opens the possibility of a much fuller understanding of his potential.

In my reading, I will focus on how the more-than-human world plays a crucial role as a site of resistance and identity formation for Billy, as well as being a place in which historic ideas about class and land ownership are inscribed. I will pay close attention not just to Billy’s relationship with the kestrel, as del Valle Alcalá does, but also to the varied natural and built environments in which the story takes place. In so doing, I will demonstrate that the book is permeated with a profound anxiety about the future of humanity that is related not only to the dehumanising effects of industrial modernity but also, in a way that is ahead of its time, to the danger of people’s weakening connections with the more-than-human world in the decades following the Second World War.

One consequence of reading *A Kestrel for a Knave* solely as a ‘working-class novel’ is that the focus is likely to be on the extent to which Billy’s alienation arises from the fact that the only future available to him is that

of becoming a waged labourer like his miner brother, Jud. It is not that this reading is invalid, but rather that it is incomplete. Despite the political edge to the book, Billy is much more than “an endorsement of essentialist socialist constructions of the working class” (del Valle Alcalá 2016, 374). While I accept that the lottery of his birth into a working-class family in a mining town is part of the reason for Billy’s fragmented sense of self, he can only be fully understood if it is recognised that his primary wound arises from the loss of his father and the subsequent disintegration of his home environment. This aspect of Billy’s identity is something that Day misses when he says that “Billy’s hawk symbolises his spirit” (2001, 187) and quotes the passage where Billy tells Mr Farthing that Kes is “not bothered about anybody, not even about me” (cited in Day 2001, 187; see Hines 2000, 146). In fact, Billy is very bothered indeed about the other people in his family at least: when he writes a ‘tall story’² in his English class, he conjures a happy home and his father returning (Hines 2000, 89); when he is at his lowest point after the death of Kes, he heads almost unconsciously for the disused cinema where he had his last experience of happiness and intimacy with his father (194).

Day’s misreading is the result of reducing Kes to a mere cipher in the text, assuming that her sole function is to tell the reader more about Billy, rather than paying attention to her avian quiddity. In fact Kes exists in the text very much as a bird in her own right: there is none of the “moralising subjection” or “anthropomorphic taming” that Derrida criticises when he writes about animals in fables (2002, 405). A reading that recognises the distinctness of Kes’s identity also allows for a fuller understanding of Billy, whose identity is shaped by two profound experiences of disconnection. One is the savage rupture of any sense of belonging to a family when his beloved father walks out after discovering Billy’s mother’s adultery (Hines 2000, 195). The other is the alienation he experiences, along with his peers, as a working-class teenager growing up under industrial capitalism. Acting against both these disconnects is his relationship with Kes and with the wider natural world that surrounds his mining town.

Billy first encounters kestrels on an early morning walk, when he is captivated by the hovering and stooping of a pair that has a nest in the wall of an ancient monastery (Hines 2000, 35). Elsewhere I have argued that birds are “good to think with” because they embody both similarity to, and difference from, humans (Dobson 2017, 16). This encounter highlights the obvious contrast between the birds’ freedom and Billy’s lack of life choices, and between their ability to soar high in the sky and the fact that Billy’s future will almost certainly be played out below the ground in a dark coal mine. As the book progresses, it probes more deeply and

2 A story that seems unlikely or unbelievable.

subtly into both the contrasting and the contiguous aspects of the situation of bird and boy.

One reason why it is able to do this so effectively is that Kes becomes a trained falcon and thus takes up a richly creative space on the boundaries between wild and domesticated. In fact Kes, like other trained falcons, can be said to transcend the wild-domesticated binary by freely co-operating with Billy while still retaining the ability to fly away. Billy too shows characteristics of what might be called 'wildness'. These emerge partly through his refusal to compromise at school, such as when he ultimately triumphs over Mr Sugden's bullying in the showers after PE, using the exceptional, monkey-like climbing skills that he demonstrates throughout the book (Hines 2000, 133). More significantly for my reading of the book, Billy's wildness is also demonstrated through his sensitivity to the more-than-human world. In the following extract, he is on the walk on which he will eventually discover the nesting kestrels:

A cushion of mist lay over the fields. Dew drenched the grass, and the occasional sparkling of individual drops made Billy glance down as he passed. One tuft was a silver fire. He knelt down to trace the source of light. The drop had almost forced the blade of grass to the earth, and it lay in the curve of the blade like the tiny egg of a mythical bird. Billy moved his head from side to side to make it sparkle, and when it caught the sun it exploded, throwing out silver needles and crystal splinters. He lowered his head and slowly, very carefully, touched it with the tip of his tongue. The drop quivered like mercury, but held. He bent, and touched it again. It disintegrated and streamed down the channel of the blade to the earth. (Hines 2000, 30)

This careful, detailed description, together with the references to precious metals and mythical creatures, demonstrates how close Billy is to participation in a world of beauty and creativity that lies almost literally on the doorstep of the squalor and violence that characterise his home and school. Touching the raindrop with his tongue, he evokes a very young child exploring the environment with a kind of playfulness that is also a way of learning. However, in Billy's education there is no room for play. School is a joyless place where he is being prepared for a particular kind of work, one that stands in binary opposition to the idea of play and assigns him a dehumanising role in the machine of industrial capitalism. Images like this of physical contact between humans and the more-than-human world play a powerful role in *A Kestrel for a Knave*.

Billy's affinity with the more-than-human world is depicted as something unusual. Although he had been expecting some other boys to come out

nesting³ with him, they have all failed to turn up, and Jud draws attention to his difference by calling him “Billy Casper! Wild man of the woods!”. He goes on: “I ought to have thi’ in a cage. I’d make a bloody fortune” (Hines 2000, 45).⁴ This hints at a theme that goes on to become more dominant at the end of the book, which is that the further the teenagers of Billy’s town are acculturated into the narrow expectations of school and work, the weaker their connection with the more-than-human world. Jud, who is already employed in the mine, is at the far end of this scale, and as a result can only see Billy’s wildness as something to be captured and commodified.

Thus Billy’s situation is simultaneously akin to Kes’s, and radically different. He is like Kes because he inhabits a marginal space between wild and domesticated, but unlike her because, crucially, their training has different goals. The purpose of Kes’s training is to allow her to retain her wildness and her agency, to make her own decisions about whether to obey her trainer or not. As Billy explains to Mr Farthing:

(I)t makes me mad when I take her out and I’ll hear somebody say, ‘Look there’s Billy Casper there wi’ his pet hawk.’ I could shout at ‘em; it’s not a pet, Sir, hawks are not pets. Or when folks stop me and say, ‘Is it tame?’ Is it heck tame, it’s trained that’s all (Hines 2000, 146).

In complete contrast, the goal of Billy’s education is to strip him of his individuality and agency in order that he can be placed in the machine of industrial capitalism. His ‘careers’ interview offers a stark choice between office and manual work. In a telling detail, the cover of the pamphlet entitled *Leaving School* situates the school leaver inside, while the window onto the world of tree, bird and sky – the world in which Billy is most obviously himself – is out of reach behind the boss’s desk (Hines 2000, 172). This contrast between Billy and Kes illustrates the Marxian concept of alienation, in particular the idea that workers within the capitalist mode of production experience estrangement from their *Gattungswesen*, or ‘species-being’ (Mészáros 1970, 14). While Kes, in Mr Farthing’s words, “just seems proud to be itself” (Hines 2000, 147), Billy is being progressively cut off from opportunities to fulfil his potential as a human being, which in his case would almost certainly include meaningful work outside.

Kes offers Billy a chance to resist the expectations placed on him by school: in training her, he becomes both teacher and student and this as-

3 Collecting eggs from the nests of wild birds, a practice that became illegal in Britain in 1954.

4 Barry Hines’ decision to render the speech patterns of working-class Yorkshire people as accurately as possible was ground-breaking for the period. The glossary at the end of this paper explains unfamiliar spellings and words in standard English.

pect of the boy-bird relationship is an opportunity for the book to figure a different type of education to the one Billy experiences in the bottom stream at school, where he has “a job to read and write” (Hines 2000, 170). Once he decides to train Kes, he is driven to get hold of a book on falconry by any means possible. The lesson on fact and fiction, in which he tells the class and his teacher, Mr Farthing, about how he is training Kes, shows that he has mastered a range of technical words from falconry. For a few minutes, the teacher-pupil relationship is radically subverted as Billy takes control of the signifying system, telling Mr Farthing what the words mean and how to spell them (Hines 2000, 79). Such a role reversal, however temporary, shines a powerful light on the extent to which Billy is denied the chance to achieve his potential as a result of being trapped in a system that is determined to dictate the narrative of his life.

As he captures the class’s attention with his fluent descriptions, Billy demonstrates that his connection with the bird is enabling him to fulfil a key feature of his *Gattungswesen*, namely the skilled use of language. The use of complex language has historically been cited as something that sets humans above other kinds of animal. However, this is not the message of *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Billy’s powers of expression are seen as essential to his individuality, but the book is also aware that industrial modernity is working to separate humans from their own animality and that this too constitutes part of the estrangement from their full humanity. One of the ways that Billy is shown as more in touch with his animal self than many is through images of physical contact. When his hands are bleeding after handling the kestrel chicks, it is “as though he had been nesting in a hawthorn hedge”, the image setting up a direct connection between Billy and the birds (Hines 2000, 54). The significance of physical connection with the more-than-human world can also be seen in the English lesson scene. When Farthing asks Anderson to tell the class a “really interesting fact” about himself (Hines 2000, 73), Anderson responds with a story about putting his bare feet into a pair of wellingtons full of live tadpoles (75). To Twenty-first century sensibilities, this sounds alarming, but as Kerridge relates in his memoir of growing up in the 60s, it was not unusual for children, especially boys, to develop a fascination with amphibians:

Children were routinely given frogspawn or tadpoles, and older boys often kept newts or Grass Snakes in tanks for a while [...] These were still the days when boys of eight climbed trees and dammed streams and lit campfires in the woods, dreaming that they were Robin Hood [...] The collecting of wild birds’ eggs had only recently been made illegal (2014, 11).

Anderson’s story is at heart another story of play, recalling Billy’s tasting of the raindrop. The tadpoles on the edge of this small mining town are

abundant in a way that is hard to imagine now, even in the countryside. “Edges of t’pond are all black with ‘em,” says Anderson (Hines 2000, 73) and after what seems like hours of ladling, the wellies are “jam packed with taddies” (74). The thought of putting the wellies on is first frightening and then disgusting – “I could feel ‘em all squashing about between my toes” (74), but once he gets used to them, Anderson is emboldened:

it was all right after a bit; it sent your legs all excited and tingling like. When I’d got ‘em both on I started to walk up to this kid waving my arms and making spook noises; and as I walked they all came squelching over t’tops again and ran down t’sides. This kid looked frightened to death, he kept looking down at my wellies so I tried to run at him and they all spurted up my legs.

It was a funny feeling though when he’d gone; all quiet with nobody there, and up to t’knees in tadpoles’ (Hines 2000, 75).

The episode has led Anderson through a whole gamut of emotions from disgust to excitement; then it has enabled him to play-act with the other children; finally, left alone, he experiences the eeriness that can come from encountering the more-than-human world. Anderson in this story is alive to all his senses and processing new experiences in a way that seldom happens in the classroom where, as Billy says, the teachers “talk to us like muck [...] callin’ us idiots, an’ numbskulls and cretins” (Hines 2000, 101). As Hines makes clear in his afterword, one of the main themes of *A Kestrel for a Knave* is the injustice of the education system. “The eleven-plus system was ruinously divisive at all levels”, he writes (2000, 201).⁵ In Anderson’s story, and in Billy’s experience of teaching himself to train Kes, there are hints of a much more humanising way of learning that engages all the senses and does not divide children from each other.

Anderson’s story paves the way for Billy to tell the class about Kes and he also uses strongly physical terms to describe achieving his ultimate ambition of flying Kes free and having her return to him:

She came like lightnin’, head dead still, an’ her wings never made a sound, then wham! Straight up on to t’glove, claws out grabbin’ for t’meat,” simultaneously demonstrating the last yard of her flight with

5 The eleven-plus examination used to be compulsory for all British children as they finished primary school at the age of ten or eleven. Children who passed were offered places at a grammar school, where they would receive an academic education that prepared them for university and/or white-collar jobs, while those who did not would proceed to a technical education and thence to manual or low-level office work. From early on it was claimed that the test had a class bias, with middle-class children far more likely to end up at grammar school than their working-class peers.

his right hand, gliding it towards, then slapping it down on his raised left fist (Hines 2000, 85).

The moment of physical contact between bird and boy represents a rare moment of joy and achievement in Billy's life. "It wa' a smashin' feeling," he says. "You can't believe that you'll be able to do it. Not when you first get one, or when you see 'em wild" (Hines 2000, 85).

In complete contrast, Jud's experience of physical contact with Kes leads him to kill her. As if by way of excuse, he says:

It wa' its own stupid fault! I wa' only going to let it go, but it wouldn't get out o' t'hut. An' every time I tried to shift it, it kept lashing out at my hands wi' its claws. Look at 'em, they're scratched to ribbons! (Hines 2000, 183).

When Billy's hands were scratched by kestrels, he was compared to a bird nesting, but the lacerations on Jud's hands render him brutal: first he kills the kestrel and then he violently attacks Billy. This is another example of Jud, who is already working in the mine, being portrayed as more thoroughly alienated than the other young men in the book, and one of the signs of it is a loss of connection with his own animality, which could have led him into an intelligent relationship with the bird.

Kes's status as a trained falcon also enables the book to draw attention to the long history of class prejudice in England, one that extends back well before the Industrial Revolution. The title of the book is taken from the Fifteenth century *Boke of St Alban's*, quoted in the epigraph:

An Eagle for an Emperor, a Gyrfalcon for a King, a Peregrine for a Prince, a Saker for a Knight, a Merlin for a Lady; a Goshawk for a Yeoman, a Sparrowhawk for a Priest, a Musket for a Holy water Clerk, a kestrel for a Knave (Hines 2000, 7).

People and birds are here arranged in strict order of status, with the knave, or Billy, at the bottom. Barry Hines' brother, Richard, whose experiences of training kestrels were part of the inspiration for *A Kestrel for a Knave*, recalls in his memoir his amazement at discovering that medieval falconers flew peregrines on the moors near his Barnsley home. "Yet had I lived in those times, I wouldn't have been allowed to fly a peregrine on the moor," he writes (Hines 2016, 62). His social class would have allowed him only to have a kestrel, a bird "derided by falconers in the Middle Ages" (63).

That notwithstanding, in Marxian terms, this feudal era was less oppressive than the age of capitalism, since despite the strict hierarchy, a culture of connection prevailed. Marx and Engels express it rather unrealistically:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the natural feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self interest, callous 'cash payment' (2010, loc. 135).

The medieval labourer working long, backbreaking hours for the lord of the manor might have been hard pressed to find much that was idyllic in his life. Nevertheless it is at least true that in feudal times workers were more closely connected to the more-than-human world than they were under industrial capitalism. This earlier period is evoked in *A Kestrel for a Knave* when Billy discovers that the birds are nesting in the wall of a ruined monastery, a relic of a pre-industrial age when people of his class would have had more opportunity to work outside. The current economic system works to exclude him from the land: as he pursues the kestrels, he is confronted by the farmer who tells him to "bugger off" because "this is private property" (Hines 2000, 37). This passage is further evidence of the book's concern that under industrial capitalism, working-class exclusion extends to a separation from the more-than-human world. "You ought to have seen it, mister, it was smashin'", enthuses Billy, only to be laughed at because the farmer and his little girl can see the kestrel every day on their private land. "I wish I could see it every day", replies Billy poignantly (37). Discussing the representation of the rural in post-war fiction, Head refers to the writing of Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, saying that they confront the reader with "superficially 'natural' images in which questions of social history are inscribed in the landscape" (2002, 189). The implication is that such writing ceased after the 50s, but in this and other episodes in *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Hines is seen to be doing the same thing.

The encoding of class structures within Billy's surroundings is a recurrent theme, notably in the description of his newspaper delivery round. This early episode locates Billy as a child of the housing estate,⁶ suspect in comparison to the "grand lads" from areas such as Firs Hill (Hines 2000, 14). Natural features within the built environment serve to illustrate social stratification: on Firs Hill there are wide verges, trees and rhododendrons; the rich children whose father owns a Bentley live in a detached house set back from the lane. However, despite his estate origins, Billy is at home all over the town and knows how to negotiate the varied terrain: he is sly and successful in his thefts of chocolate and orange juice, and moves around as swiftly and sure-footedly as a fox might, climbing fences, squeezing through hedges and using short cuts to help him complete the job before school starts.

6 A large complex of public homes built by local municipalities and rented to people on low incomes.

After the death of Kes, Billy's perception and negotiation of his environment undergo a distressing change, a sign not only of his deteriorating mental state but also of his decreasing ability to resist the pressure to order his life in the way dictated by the prevailing power structures. When Kes goes missing, he embarks on a desperate race through the darkening woods that contrasts starkly with his earlier moonlit excursion to fetch her from the nest. His deft negotiation of different terrains is replaced with stumbles and trips, and when he emerges into the farmland, the wall of the monastery, that relic of an earlier, pre-capitalist age of connection, and a communal landmark for centuries, has been destroyed (Hines 2000, 179).

The final stage of the book describes Billy's ghastly flight through the estate, dead hawk clutched in sweaty palm (Hines 2000, 188). Where the paper round highlighted variety in Billy's landscape, the emphasis now is on the sameness of his surroundings:

On both sides of this road, and the next, and along all the Roads, Streets, Avenues, Lanes and Crescents of the estate, the houses were of the same design: semi-detached, one block, four front windows to a block, and a central chimney stack. This pattern was occasionally broken by groups of pensioners' bungalows, tucked into Closes, but built of the same red brick as all the other dwellings. (Hines 2000, 188)

The uniformity of the homes mirrors that of products issuing from the conveyor belts of industrial capitalism. The layout of the estate is an example of what Tally calls "conceptual gridding", a state attempt to segment the rank and file and "assign stable places" (2013, 136). Whereas Billy's paper round showed him negotiating space in a way that defied these kind of prescriptive boundaries, now he is seen to be caught inside them. And whereas his paper round was full of references to the more-than-human world, the emphasis now is on its absence. The gardens are mostly "uncultivated squares of stamped soil" (188), though a few have lawns with stone birds, gnomes and artificial toadstools "all illuminated in unnatural shades" (189). Cars are parked on seeded verges and trees have been reduced to "saplings surrounded by guards of spiked railings" that are used as litter bins (190).

Finally, Billy arrives at the disused cinema, the site of his last happy memory of his father. Here he enters a quasi-hallucinogenic state in which he imagines himself on the big screen, flying Kes. His mental disintegration is mirrored in the staccato quality of his language: "Billy as hero. Billy on the screen. Big Billy, Kes on his arm" (Hines 2000, 196). He tries to imagine Kes attacking Jud, and the repeated refrain "No contact! No contact!" is not just about the failure of this image. In the context of the rest of the book, it is *A Kestrel for a Knave's* final verdict on Billy's fate. Severed from his family, severed from meaningful work and increasingly severed

from the more-than-human world, Billy's disconnection is complete. This separation, which can only be seen fully in a reading that pays careful attention to the representation of the more-than-human world, is depicted as a loss of humanity and anticipates present-day ecological thinking in its understanding that human flourishing is dependent on a recognition of our interconnectedness with the wider natural world.

Glossary of Dialect and Slang Words Used in Quotations from *A Kestrel for a Knave*

<i>an'</i>	and
<i>'em</i>	them
<i>callin'</i>	calling
<i>grabbin'</i>	grabbing
<i>heck</i>	hell
<i>lightnin'</i>	lightning
<i>numbskulla</i>	stupid person
<i>o'</i>	of
<i>smashin'smashing</i>	wonderful
<i>spook</i>	ghost
<i>taddies</i>	tadpoles
<i>t'</i>	the
<i>thi'</i>	you
<i>wa'</i>	was
<i>wi'</i>	with

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