



On "Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay"

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Abstract

"Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay" [1] is an online work of electronic literature by the author. A prose-poem in the form of a blog, it explores a modern theme of violence while playfully or darkly echoing Wallace Stevens' well-known poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." "Scrub-Jay" transforms Stevens' structure of thirteen meditative stanzas into the reverse-chronological narrative of blog entries for thirteen consecutive dates. Each entry, along with an original arresting image, describes a different method used by the unidentified blogger-narrator to kill a Western Scrub-Jay. Scrub-Jays, an aggressive and violent species, can be annoying not only to other birds but also to humans; certainly the narrator finds them objectionable. In the course of these thirteen blog entries, the narrator's murderous methods evolve from the more distant to the more intimate (if read in chronological order), or from the more intimate to the more distant (if read in "blog order"). Thus the work comments on the blog form as well as the Stevens poem.

Keywords

Electronic literature, e-lit, blog fiction.

13 Days. 13 Jays. 13 Ways. (With apologies to Wallace Stevens)

I.

Wallace Stevens' famous 1917 poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" [2] consists of thirteen short sections or stanzas and has been described as aphoristic, cinematic, and reminiscent of haiku or Zen koans. Although ostensibly unified mainly by repetition of the signifier "blackbird," the poem is more about different "ways of seeing" or shifting imaginative perspectives. As B.J. Leggett writes, "The poem illustrates Nietzsche's view that the world 'has not one sense behind it, but hundreds of senses' - i.e. multiple perspectives and multiple truths.... And aphorism in early Stevens, as in Nietzsche, is a way of depicting the resulting multiplicity of senses without discrediting or trivializing any particular depiction." [3]

II.

Stevens' modernism, and the influences of the visual arts on his work — impressionism and cubism in particular —

are also reflected in the poem's free verse, shifting points of view, and disruptive, discontinuous, nonlinear narrative. These formal rebellions can be seen as postmodern impulses at a time, with World War I just ending, of disruptive change in the world and in the arts.

III.

Nearly a hundred years later in another disruptive time, "Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay" uses text, images, and code to transform or subvert "Thirteen Ways of Seeing a Blackbird" for the digital postmodern, or post-digital, post-human world of the 21st century. (See Figure 1.) As the artist, I will be wise to leave such analysis to the experts, the scholars and critics. Does "Scrub-Jay" fly in the shadow of Stevens' poem or wing off into different airspace?

IV.

Helen Vendler says that "Stevens is almost medieval in his relish for external form." [4] Written in free verse, "Blackbird" both follows and flouts formal poetic conventions. "Blackbird" is ostensibly unstructured or loosely structured, while "Scrub-Jay" is ostensibly highly structured by the reverse-chronological date/time stamps of blog software. "Scrub-Jay" looks like a blog and rigorously follows some blog conventions while defying others.

V.

Blogs are supposed to be open, to accommodate collaboration and multiple viewpoints, and to facilitate commenting and linking. "Scrub-Jay" is closed, tightly controlled, and single-authored.

VI.

"Blackbird" offers vivid imagistic, cinematic use of language, influenced by modernist painting, and "Scrub-Jay" uses the multimedia affordances of online blogging to include actual images as illustrations for each entry.

VII.

Both "Blackbird" and "Scrub-Jay" follow the blog convention that might be called "analysis by juxtaposition" in successive stanzas/entries.



Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay

(*Aphelocoma californica*)

by Richard Holeyton

Thirteen days. Thirteen jays. Thirteen ways. With apologies to Wallace Stevens.

XIII. Long afternoon and evening waiting...

Monday, April 30, 2007

Long afternoon and evening waiting for the Scrub-Jay to land on those tar-coated limbs; to get stuck there its three forward toes and bony hallux, pointing backwards like an opposable thumb; then...

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XII. The 50% ammonia solution...

Sunday, April 29, 2007

The 50% ammonia solution in the Super-Soaker water cannon is penetrating those black eyes below the long narrow flecked eyebrows. The Scrub-Jay must be falling and flailing; being covered then cinched...

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XI. Navigated all over the Internet...

Saturday, April 28, 2007

Navigated all over the Internet to find plans for a Deadly Orgone Radiation Chamber (see Burroughs)—layers of glass, metal, organic materials, and discarded cell phones. Underestimated the time...

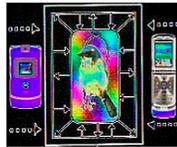


Figure 1. Screenshot from "Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay"

VIII.

"Blackbird" presents a fragmented self and reality; "Scrub-Jay" mimics the shifting syntax of "Blackbird" but seems to have a single, unified narrator and overall linear "plot logic" in which the narrator's violence grows less distant and more intimate over time.

IX.

Regarding "Blackbird's" celebrated "moving eye," "Scrub-Jay" points out that birds don't move their eyes, only their heads.

X.

"Scrub-Jay" systematically echoes and destabilizes the language of "Blackbird," sometimes playfully but always violently, into a weaponized 21st century context. A man and a woman and a blackbird become a man and a shotgun and a Scrub-Jay; beautiful whistling becomes cacophonous and enraging; barbaric glass becomes deadly; birds at women's feet become pornographic voyeurs; flying becomes falling and flailing; snow becomes a grave of tar. To natural features like snowy mountains, autumn winds, and icicles are added slingshots, pepper spray, and handguns.

XI.

Green light becomes digitized and irradiated.

XII.

The blackbird's knowing becomes the Scrub-Jay's undoing.

XIII.

In Stevens' poem, the blackbird "becomes a figure of the very language that effects a realignment of cognitive activity within language." [5] In "Scrub-Jay," the visual and aural descriptive rhetoric of bird-watching is folded into the violence of text and images.

References

1. Richard Holeyton, "Thirteen Ways of Killing a Scrub-Jay," richardholeton.org, accessed December 28, 2014, <http://web.stanford.edu/~holeton/scrubjay/>
2. Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Random House, 1972), 20-22.
3. B.J. Legett, *The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 177.
4. Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens; Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 75.
5. Beverly Mader, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).