

CHAPTER XXIV

ON BIRDS IN ENGLISH POETRY

THE poetry of birds is quite important, for it happens to contain several of the great masterpieces of English lyrical poetry. In point of variety, however, the subject may prove a little disappointing. There are not many different kinds of birds with a special place in English lyrical verse. The best of English poetry treats of the nightingale only. Just as the greater number of our flower poems are about the rose, so the greater number of our bird poems are about the nightingale.

To understand the best poems about the nightingale it is necessary for us to go back for a moment to old Greek mythological poetry, for English poems on that bird are rich in allusions to the Greek story about its origin. If you do not know the story, you cannot understand the verses of Matthew Arnold or of Swinburne on the nightingale. Neither can you understand allusions in English literature which are certainly older than the time of Shakespeare.

The story is very horrible; but we must learn it. There was a mythical king of Athens called Pandion; and Pandion had two beautiful daughters, one of whom was named Procne, and the other Philomela. Now it happened that King Pandion was for a time hard beset by strong enemies; and he sent in all haste to the king of Thrace, whose name was Tereus, to help him. Then Tereus helped Pandion, and Pandion gave him in marriage his daughter Procne as a reward; and Tereus took Procne away with him to his own city of Daulis, where she bore him a son called Itys, or Itylus. After a time Procne wanted very much to see again her sister Philomela, and she asked Tereus her husband to

go to Athens for Philomela. Tereus then went to Athens for Philomela; but on the way back he ravished her, and then cut out her tongue for fear that she would tell Procne. He left her in the wood alone with her tongue cut out. Then he went to Daulis and told Procne a lie, saying that Philomela had died on the journey. Poor Philomela could not talk, but she had not forgotten how to weave; and she found her way to the cottage of some peasant, and there, upon a loom, she was able to weave a dress, and in weaving the dress she made Greek letters along the border so as to tell the dreadful story of what had been done to her; and that dress she sent to her sister. So Procne determined to avenge her sister terribly; and she killed her own little boy, Itylus, and cooked his flesh and served it up at dinner to the unsuspecting father. After he had eaten of the dish, she told him what he had eaten, and then fled away in company with her dumb sister. Tereus pursued them, and they prayed to the gods to save them. Now the gods heard their prayers—Philomela was turned into a nightingale, and Procne was turned into a swallow. Tereus and the murdered Itylus were also turned into birds of other kinds. But that need not concern us here. Enough to say that in the cry of the nightingale the Greek poets imagined that they could distinguish the syllables “Teru-Teru,” meaning “Tereus;” and that in the cry of the swallow they could distinguish the syllables “Itu-Itu,” meaning “Itylus.” And although this story is rather long, you must try to remember the whole of it in order to understand the modern as well as the old-fashioned allusions contained in English poems on the nightingale. Also, there is one other thing to remember—that the Greek mythologists themselves did not agree as to which sister became the nightingale. Some said it was Philomela; and others said it was Procne. But the Latin writers decided in favour of Philomela, and the English poets at first followed the Latin writers; even before the time of Shakespeare in England the name Philomela, or Philomelus, was generally accepted for the nightingale.

In proof of this I may quote to you a very old poem about the nightingale, composed in the sixteenth century at some uncertain date. We know that it is older than Shakespeare, because Shakespeare quotes it in his terrible tragedy "King Lear." But it is otherwise interesting as being the earliest poem containing an allusion to the story of which I speak. Its author is Barnefield; and the poem is simply entitled "The Nightingale." Before quoting it let me remind you of the chorus in the fairy lullaby, or serenade, of Shakespeare's comedy, "A Midsummer Night's Dream :"

Philomel, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby;
Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby :
 Never harm,
 Nor spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh;
So, good night, with lullaby.

This shows that even the common play-going public had already become accustomed to the name Philomela for the nightingale in Shakespeare's day. But the poem of Barnefield, which is older, is more interesting; for it contains most of the classical allusions used in our own time even by the poet Swinburne.

As it fell upon a day
In the merry month of May,
Sitting in a pleasant shade
Which a grove of myrtles made,
Beasts did leap and birds did sing,
Trees did grow and plants did spring;
Everything did banish moan
Save the Nightingale alone :
She, poor bird, as all forlorn,
Lean'd her breast up-till a thorn,
And there sung the dolefull'st ditty,
That to hear it was great pity.
Fie, fie, fie! now would she cry;
Tereu, Tereu! by and by;
That to hear her so complain

Scarce I could from tears refrain;
 For her griefs so lively shown
 Made me think upon mine own.
 Ah! thought I, thou mourn'st in vain,
 None takes pity on thy pain:
 Senseless trees they cannot hear thee,
 Ruthless beasts they will not cheer thee:
 King Pandion he is dead,
 All thy friends are lapp'd in lead;
 All thy fellow birds do sing
 Careless of thy sorrowing:
 Even so, poor bird, like thee,
 None alive will pity me.

Easy as this little song is to read, you could not understand several lines in it without knowing the story;—only the story explains to us why the bird should cry “Tereu, Tereu” and “Fie, fie,” which means “For shame;” why King Pandion should be spoken of; or why all the nightingale’s friends should be spoken of as “lapp’d in lead” (referring to the old custom of burying the dead in leaden coffins). I quoted this poem as an illustration of the allusions only—not for its great age. If we wanted anything very old on the subject, we might go to Homer, who in the Nineteenth Book of the “Odyssey” represents the brown nightingale as lamenting for the boy Itylus. But we need only refer to modern English literature hereafter, for that contains the jewels of this poetry.

I shall begin with Swinburne; for, notwithstanding the splendour of Keats, Swinburne’s “Itylus” must be considered as the very greatest of all modern poems on the nightingale—whether English or French or Italian or anything else. It is the greatest because of the extraordinary beauty and music of the prosody, and the intensity of the emotion in it. You will find the poem very different indeed from anything else of the kind, and I think that you will like it. But without knowing the story that I told you, you could not understand it, and it illustrates better than any other poem what that story signifies for the Greek mind. You

must remember that it is the nightingale who speaks to the swallow.

Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow,
 How can thine heart be full of the spring?
 A thousand summers are over and dead.
 What hast thou found in the spring to follow?
 What hast thou found in thine heart to sing?
 What wilt thou do when the summer is shed?

O swallow, sister, O fair swift swallow,
 Why wilt thou fly after spring to the south,
 The soft south whither thine heart is set?
 Shall not the grief of the old time follow?
 Shall not the song thereof cleave to thy mouth?
 Hast thou forgotten ere I forget?

Sister, my sister, O fleet sweet swallow,
 Thy way is long to the sun and the south;
 But I, fulfill'd of my heart's desire,
 Shedding my song upon height, upon hollow,
 From tawny body and sweet small mouth
 Feed the heart of the night with fire.

I the nightingale all spring through,
 O swallow, sister, O changing swallow,
 All spring through till the spring be done,
 Clothed with the light of the night on the dew,
 Sing, while the hours and the wild birds follow,
 Take flight and follow and find the sun.

Sister, my sister, O soft light swallow,
 Though all things feast in the spring's guest-chamber,
 How hast thou heart to be glad thereof yet?
 For where thou fliest I shall not follow,
 Till life forget and death remember,
 Till thou remember and I forget.

We have to recollect the relationship between Procne and Philomela. The swallow is Procne. The nightingale reproaches her sister because, being a bird, she delights in the spring and would fly south. She herself, a nightingale, will not fly south. Nor will she sing in the light, the sun, nor

will she have any gladness, but will complain for ever—not only because of the wrong that was done to her, but because of the killing of Itylus, the sister's son. Oh, how can that sister forget—even though a thousand summers are past! She, Philomela, will not forget, until such time as death itself shall become the same thing as remembrance, and life itself the same thing as oblivion. That is to say never! never!

The opening lines of several of the stanzas are almost exact copies from an ancient Greek song, with some artistic modifications. We know that Greek children used to sing every year a little song when they saw the swallows come with the fine weather, and in that song the swallow was addressed as "our sister swallow." The word "tawny" in the fifth line of the third stanza—so beautifully used—is suggested also by the Greek term for brown. Tawny is a glowing reddish or yellowish brown.

Swallow, my sister, O singing swallow,
 I know not how thou hast heart to sing.
 Hast thou the heart? is it all past over?
 Thy lord the summer is good to follow,
 And fair the feet of thy lover the spring:
 But what wilt thou say to the spring thy lover?

O swallow, sister, O fleeting swallow,
 My heart in me is a molten ember
 And over my head the waves have met.
 But thou wouldst tarry or I would follow
 Could I forget or thou remember,
 Couldst thou remember and I forget.

O sweet stray sister, O shifting swallow,
 The heart's division divideth us.
 Thy heart is light as a leaf of a tree;
 But mine goes forth among sea-gulfs hollow
 To the place of the slaying of Itylus,
 The feast of Daulis, the Thracian sea.

O swallow, sister, O rapid swallow,
 I pray thee sing not a little space.
 Are not the roofs and the lintels wet?

The woven web that was plain to follow,
 The small slain body, the flower-like face,
 Can I remember if thou forget?

O sister, sister, thy first-begotten!
 The hands that cling and the feet that follow,
 The voice of the child's blood crying yet,
Who hath remember'd me? who hath forgotten?
 Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow,
 But the world shall end when I forget.

The reference to the crying of the child reminds us of another story. For it is said that the gods took pity on the little boy and he returned as a wood-pigeon,—I think the bird we call in this country *yamabato*,—and that the mournful cry of this bird is the voice of the boy, still asking, “Has everybody forgotten me? Does nobody remember?”

I cannot speak to you about the reason why the form of this poem is greatly praised by the highest critics; that would take too long, and perhaps would not be interesting. But for musical flow and emotional force, you can see that it is a very great poem. And after what we have been reading, you can understand why the Greeks did not like the singing of the nightingale. They thought it was too sad, and that it was not good fortune to listen to it. How curiously modern poets have changed in this respect! To all European poets to-day, not less than to the poets of Persia and Arabia, the singing of the nightingale is an ecstasy, the very paradise of pleasure in sound. We recognize the sadness in it, but it is pleasant to us. Not so to the Greeks—and perhaps they were right. But a modern poet contemporary with Swinburne, seems to have felt very much like the Greeks in regard to the melancholy side of the sound,—Matthew Arnold. One of his best short poems is entitled “*Philomela*.”

Hark! ah, the Nightingale!
 The tawny-throated!
 Hark! from that moonlit cedar what a burst!
 What triumph! hark—what pain!

O Wanderer from a Grecian shore,
 Still, after many years in distant lands,
 Still nourishing in thy bewilder'd brain
 That wild, unquench'd, deep-sunken, old-world pain—

 Say, will it never heal?

And can this fragrant lawn
 And its cool trees, and night,
 And the sweet, tranquil Thames,
 And moonshine, and the dew,
 To thy rack'd heart and brain

 Afford no balm?

Dost thou to-night behold
 Here, through the moonlight on this English grass,
 The unfriendly palace in the Thracian wild?

Dost thou again peruse
 With hot cheeks and sear'd eyes
 The too clear web, and thy dumb Sister's shame?

Dost thou once more assay
 Thy flight, and feel come over thee,
 Poor Fugitive, the feathery change
 Once more, and once more seem to make resound
 With love and hate, triumph and agony,
 Lone Daulis, and the high Cephissian vale?

 Listen, Eugenia—

How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!

 Again—thou hearest!

Eternal Passion!

Eternal Pain!

Cephissus was the name of a river in Attica. It was there that the sisters originally lived. You can see that Matthew Arnold does not follow exactly the same Greek story that Swinburne does—for in this poem it is not Procne but Philomela who avenges. Swinburne takes the other legend, not only in his "Itylus" but also in the splendid opening of the chorus in "Atalanta:"

When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
 The mother of months in meadow or plain
 Fills the shadows and windy places
 With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;

And the brown bright nightingale amorous
 Is half assuaged for Itylus,
 For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
 The tongueless vigil, and all the pain.

I need not attempt to explain now to you the allusion to Itylus, the Thracian ships, or the tongueless vigil. But you will see that Swinburne takes the other version of the tale. Either course is quite justified by precedent, and when such great poets and Greek scholars disagree, it is not for us to decide which course is best. I suppose the best way to think about it is to remember that everybody ought to take that view or version of a legend which is best suited to his particular genius.

You can now easily understand why Wordsworth did not like the singing of the nightingale very much; his cold, quiet, thoughtful mind disliked passionate things, even the passionate expression in the sound of a bird's voice. He preferred, he said, the voice of the dove to the nightingale. Perhaps several of us here present would agree with him in that. But I am not able to understand why Wordsworth should think the cooing of a dove more cheerful than the sobbing melody of the nightingale. There is nothing sweeter than the sound of the cooing of certain doves, but surely it is both sad and sorrowful. However, Wordsworth may also have been prejudiced against the nightingale by the horror of the Greek story. This is what he has written about it:

O Nightingale! thou surely art
 A creature of a "fiery heart":—
 These notes of thine they pierce and pierce;
 Tumultuous harmony and fierce!
 Thou sing'st as if the God of wine
 Had helped thee to a Valentine;
 A song in mockery and despite
 Of shades, and dews, and silent night;
 And steady bliss, and all the loves
 Now sleeping in these peaceful groves.

I heard a Stock-dove sing or say

His homely tale, this very day;
 His voice was buried among trees,
 Yet to be come—at by the breeze:
 He did not cease; but cooed—and cooed;
 And somewhat pensively he wooed:
 He sang of love, with quiet blending,
 Slow to begin, and never ending;
 Of serious faith and inward glee;
 That was the song—the song for me!

The allusion in the fifth and sixth lines, to the god of wine, implies that a nightingale sings as if he were drunk. You know that the word "Valentine" means a love letter or love message. Certainly Wordsworth has no esthetic feeling in certain directions; and it does not at all increase our very proper estimate of him to find him insensible to the charm of the nightingale's song. Yet he is quite right in praising the coo of the dove; for there is nothing more delicious in nature than

The moan of doves in immemorial elms.

Now it is not surprising to find other English poets almost like Wordsworth in his indifference to the nightingale. Coleridge has two poems about the nightingale; and neither of them is worth quoting. The first is only to the effect that he thinks the voice of his wife much sweeter than the voice of a nightingale; and the other is a description of moonlight walks in a garden where nightingales sing, but there is very little about the singing, and a great deal about the maiden with whom the poet was walking. Shelley has a poem about a woodman and a nightingale, but it is an allegory. The nightingale signifies poetry, and the woodman is the vulgar practical man-of-the-world who hates poetry, and would like to suppress all poets. The woodman takes an axe and cuts down the tree on which the nightingale sings; and Shelley would have us believe that the unsentimental world would like to starve all poets to death. The poem is full of beauty indeed; but we need not quote more than a

few stanzas from it, because it is really a little foreign to our subject. I shall speak only about the passages treating of the nightingale's peculiar music. These verses are beautiful:

One nightingale in an interfluous wood
 Sate the hungry dark with melody;—
 And as a vale is watered by a flood,
 Or as the moonlight fills the open sky
 Struggling with darkness—as a tuberos
 Peoples some Indian dell with scents which lie
 Like clouds above the flower from which they rose,
 The singing of that happy nightingale
 In this sweet forest, from the golden close
 Of evening till the star of dawn may fail,
 Was interfused upon the silentness;
 The folded roses and the violets pale
 Heard her within their slumbers, the abyss
 Of heaven with all its planets; the dull ear
 Of the night-cradled earth; the loneliness
 Of the circumfluous waters,—every sphere
 And every flower and beam and cloud and wave,
 And every wind of the mute atmosphere,

 Was awed into delight, and by the charm
 Girt as with an interminable zone,
 Whilst that sweet bird, whose music was a storm
 Of sound, shook forth the dull oblivion,
 Out of their dreams; harmony became love
 In every soul but one.

This is musical and very pretty, and makes us think about the skill of the poet who can use words so melodiously. But it does not make us think about the bird at all. The substance of it is simply that the bird filled the night with music, as flowers fill the air with perfume,—and that everything listened to the magical notes and even the elements

were stilled, and everybody's heart became loving except the heart of that detestable woodcutter. It is much better to turn to poets that give us something to think about on the subject of the nightingale. Let us take, for example, Robert Bridges—whom I might call the very last of the English classical poets, though he is still living. Robert Bridges is, like Swinburne and Arnold, a Greek scholar, and a great many of his poems are renderings of Greek myths, or dramatic compositions formed after a careful study of the Greek poets. Therefore we might expect him at least to make one allusion to the legend of Philomela. But he does not. Nevertheless he gives us something very beautiful and very sad:

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom
Ye learn your song:
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air
Bloom the year long!

Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams:
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
A throe of the heart,
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,
For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,
As night is withdrawn
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day
Welcome the dawn.

As I have said, he makes no allusion directly to the Greek story; nevertheless the poem can be fully understood only by those who know that story. For the barren mountains and the dried-up rivers will make them think of the Thracian country and the hills about Attica. This is worth

paraphrasing; you will then see the beauty of it better.

First, the poet says to the nightingales,—“O nightingales, surely you must have come from some heavenly country to be able to sing like that! How beautiful must be the mountains of your native land, and how fruitful the valley, and how bright the rivers of the region in which you first learned to sing. Tell me where are those luminous, heavenly woods! O how I wish I could go to that place and wander among the celestial flowers, which never fade in that country of heaven and of eternal summer.” But the nightingales answer: “No, you are much mistaken! We do not come from heaven; and the mountains of our country are mountains where no trees grow, and the rivers of our country are dried up for ever. And the song that we sing is a song of longing and of pain—a pain of remembrance that haunts our dreams, an agony of heart. And the dim things that we see in memory and long for, the deep hopes that we once had and which we are forbidden now to entertain,—these are things which all our art of sorrowful music never can alter. Only at night we sing. Then all alone we try to tell our dark night-secret to the ears of men; and men are delighted by the sound of our sorrow, only because they do not understand. And then, when the night passes away from the fragrant blossoming meadows and the budding branches of the spring-blooming trees, we sleep. We sleep—but the other innumerable birds hail the god of day with their morning songs while we begin to dream.”

I forgot to tell you that Dr. Bridges is a musician, as well as a physician and poet. Wordsworth was not a musician, nor did he have much of what is called “an ear for music;” perhaps that is one reason why he did not care for the nightingale, because it really requires a musical ear to appreciate the finer qualities of the song of that bird. Swinburne understood music; so did Keats a little; so did Shelley to some degree. And Milton, who was an excellent musician, was also a lover of the nightingale. Here is a famous sonnet which he wrote about it:

O nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray
 Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still;
 Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart dost fill,
 While the jolly hours lead on propitious May:
 Thy liquid notes that close the eye of day,
 First heard before the shallow cuckoo's bill,
 Portend success in love; Oh, if Jove's will
 Have link'd that amorous power to thy soft lay,
 Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate
 Foretell my hopeless doom in some grove nigh;
 As thou from year to year hast sung too late
 For my relief, yet hadst no reason why:
 Whether the Muse, or Love, call thee his mate,
 Both them I serve, and of their train am I.

From this poem by Milton we know that the song of the nightingale was considered lucky to hear in the seventeenth century, as well as before it; while it was considered a bad omen to hear the hooting of an owl. And Milton seems to have found much more pleasure than sadness in the bird's note.

Is it not curious to find Milton, the most scholarly of all poets, and perhaps the most musical of his generation, touching so lightly and tenderly on the subject of the nightingale? It reminds us of the way in which Milton looked at Shakespeare. He did not think of Shakespeare like the other poets of the time; he found him joyful and merry, and spoke of him as "warbling his native wood-notes wild."* He called him "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child," at a time when nobody else understood how great Shakespeare really was. But Milton did not see the great depth of Shakespeare; and perhaps, for the same reason, he did not feel certain profound qualities of sadness suggested by the music of the bird. But the most perfect expression of these deeper feelings—feelings independent of the Greek story altogether—was given years later, and then by Keats. Keats's poem, the "Ode to a Nightingale," is the greatest of all English nightingale poems, except the "Itylus" of Swinburne. But re-

* *L'Allegro*, 134-5

member that it is altogether different and has nothing to do with "Itylus." It is only an attempt to express in perfect verse the particular emotions which the song of the nightingale aroused in the heart of the poet. After this passionate and beautiful poem, other poems about the nightingale will perhaps seem very pale. But I shall quote only one more—by Christina Rossetti, the greatest woman poet of her time. Compared with Keats's "Ode" it is very simple, but it is pretty and, in its way, full of sweetness.

The sunrise wakes the lark to sing,
The moonrise wakes the nightingale.
Come darkness, moonrise, every thing
That is so silent, sweet, and pale:
Come, so ye wake the nightingale.

Make haste to mount, thou wistful moon,
Make haste to wake the nightingale:
Let silence set the world in tune
To hearken to that wordless tale
Which warbles from the nightingale.

O herald skylark, stay thy flight
One moment, for a nightingale
Floods us with sorrow and delight.
To-morrow thou shalt hoist the sail;
Leave us to-night the nightingale.

The appeal is being made to a skylark which has begun to sing a little too early, before it is quite yet dawn, and while the nightingale is still singing. That appeal is in the last stanza only. The first stanza represents the poet's longing during the day for the coming of the night and the nightingale; in the second stanza the night has come, and the moon is asked to waken the nightingale; and in the third stanza the night is almost passed, and the skylark has begun to twitter, though the nightingale has not yet done. The whole thing is a pretty little song. No explanation in detail is necessary. But please remember that the phrase "set in tune," in the third line of the second stanza, is a

musical term, signifying to prepare an instrument for the playing of music. Silence is personified as the musician, who is asked to prepare the world for the music of the bird. And in the fourth line of the last stanza the phrase "hoist the sail" means only to rise up into the sky as the bird does. Poets often use the word "sail" in speaking of the wings of the bird; thus Smart, in his "Song to David," says—

Strong the gier-eagle on his sail.*

Next to the nightingale in importance—in English poetry at least—we find the cuckoo. As the rose, the violet and the lily are chief subjects in English poetry, so are the nightingale, the cuckoo and the skylark. Of course the difference in merit of the cuckoo and the skylark is exceedingly great, the call of the cuckoo representing only the sweet and simple notes, while the singing of the skylark is a splendid and ecstatic warble. So we might suppose the poetry about the cuckoo to be simple, like the note of the bird, and the poetry about the skylark to be elaborate and wonderful. This is just what we do find. Yet the cuckoo must be ranked in poetry next to the nightingale, notwithstanding that little of the poetry about it is of really great character—like Shelley's ode "To a Skylark," for example.

One reason is perhaps that English poetry about the cuckoo is older than anything of importance about the skylark. The earliest English poem about the cuckoo was written in the thirteenth century. The Norman Conquest was like a blow that stunned English literature, and the poets had nothing to say for more than a hundred years. After that long silence, the first new warble was the famous cuckoo song. But I will not quote it to you, because it is written in early Middle English, and is full of obsolete words. You can find it in the anthologies. When the next great poetical awakening came with Shakespeare, Shakespeare himself made a new cuckoo song. In the classical, or Augustan, era of English literature, a third cuckoo song was

* *A Song to David*, LXXVI

And hear the sound of music sweet
Of birds among the bowers.

The schoolboy, wandering through the wood
To pull the flowers so gay,
Starts, thy curious voice to hear,
And imitates thy lay.

What time the pea puts on the bloom,
Thou fliest thy vocal vale,
An annual guest in other lands,
Another spring to hail.

Sweet bird! thy bower is ever green,
Thy sky is ever clear;
Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,
No winter in thy year!

. . . .
O could I fly, I'd fly with thee!
We'd make, with joyful wing,
Our annual visit o'er the globe,
Companions of the spring.

Really the cuckoo is not a lovable bird; there is even a proverb, "Ungrateful as a cuckoo." For the young cuckoo will dash out the eyes of the mother bird trying to feed it. It is a detestable bird; and it is, I believe, in many ways like the Japanese bird whose name is often incorrectly translated into English as "cuckoo." They may be ornithologically related; the relation is very remote. But the sound of the cuckoo's voice is very sweet and very penetrative; and for that reason the bird has been praised in poetry from very ancient times. The first English song about the cuckoo is almost a song of caress; and that which we have just read is composed in an equally loving tone. Probably Shakespeare's song was suggested by some French poem, but even when speaking of the bird's song as ill-omened, he does so in so merry a way that we think only of the delight of spring. Wordsworth's poem may now be compared with that of Bruce.

O blithe New-comer! I have heard,
 I hear thee and rejoice.
 O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
 Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass
 Thy twofold shout I hear;
 From hill to hill it seems to pass
 At once far off, and near.

Though babbling only to the Vale,
 Of sunshine and of flowers,
 Thou bringest unto me a tale
 Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!
 Even yet thou art to me
 No bird, but an invisible thing,
 A voice, a mystery;

The same whom in my schoolboy days
 I listened to; that Cry
 Which made me look a thousand ways
 In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove
 Through woods and on the green;
 And thou wert still a hope, a love;
 Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet;
 Can lie upon the plain
 And listen, till I do beget
 That golden time again.

O blessèd Bird! the earth we pace
 Again appears to be
 An unsubstantial, faery place;
 That is fit home for Thee!

The stanzas appear weak by the side of Bruce's. But there is beauty in Wordsworth's to me; and his conception of the subject is quite different from Bruce's. To Bruce the cuckoo brought the thought of the joy of spring and the

delight of being able to go from country to country, like the bird of passage, so as to live for ever in one eternal round of spring. To Wordsworth, on the contrary, the cry of the cuckoo chiefly brings the delight of memory—memory of child days. He remembers how he used to try to find the cuckoo, when he heard it, and never could,—and so imagined it to be a ghostly thing. (It is really very hard to find or to see, for it is most skilful in concealing itself.) And so, whenever he hears the cuckoo, the boy hearing it comes back again and, with it, the delightful capacity to imagine the world as a kind of fairy land, peopled by ghosts and elves. Childhood is the real time of romance, when we prefer to believe the impossible rather than the possible, because the impossible appears so much more beautiful. There is better thinking in the Wordsworth poem than in Bruce's poem; but as to form and music, Bruce's stanzas are much the better.

I do not think that it would be worth while to quote to you any more poems about the cuckoo; for these are the most famous, and the rest do not rise to the great height of lyrical poetry. And I will not say anything covering the early symbolic poetry about the cuckoo, for that does not properly belong to our subject. Let us now read some poems—only the very best—about the skylark. After that we shall go to a very splendid subject,—the sea-gull.

English poetry about the lark begins almost as early, though perhaps not quite so early, as English poetry upon the nightingale. Shakespeare was one of the first English poets to write a really memorable poem on the subject, though there were mentions of the lark's song long before his time. It is a noteworthy fact that Shakespeare's little song, which you will find in the play of "Cymbeline," is still sung, though composed more than three hundred years ago. It contains only a line or two about the lark; but it is so very famous that you ought to know it. Besides, it represents so well that southern French form of song called the *aubade* or "morning song," that we may quote it for

another reason. I think you know that love songs addressed to some lady and intended to be sung at night were called serenades;—the *aubade* or morning song, was a love song with which the lady was supposed to be awakened, after having been pleasantly lulled to sleep by the serenade. This is Shakespeare's morning song:

Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,
 And Phœbus 'gins arise,
 His steeds to water at those springs
 On chaliced flowers that lies;
 And winking Mary-buds begin
 To ope their golden eyes:
 With every thing that pretty bin,
 My lady sweet, arise!
 Arise, arise!*

You know that Phœbus is another name for the sun-god, more commonly called by the Greeks Helios. He was accustomed to drive his chariot across the sky every day, drawn by a team of four steeds abreast; and he was said to give them drink in the morning at the Western spring. But Shakespeare prettily represents him as giving them the morning dew to drink, which lies upon the chalice-shaped flowers.

This joyous mention of the lark introduces a long succession of modern English poems about the bird. But we can quote only some of the best; and we may dismiss the remainder with a few general observations. Most of the really good English poems about the lark are either philosophical or symbolical or both. Why, I am scarcely able to imagine; but I fancy the reason to be that the great poems on the subject date from the close of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, when one or two great singers having set the example of treating the subject reflectively, all the others followed suit. And the tendency strengthens with each generation. The earliest great poem was probably Shelley's—though Wordsworth may have made

* *Cymbeline*, II, iii, 22-30

one skylark poem a little sooner. The last great poem on the subject—philosophically the greatest of all and very much the largest in every way—is George Meredith's, entitled "The Lark Ascending." This is the chief thing to bear in mind about English lark poetry; it is nearly all very serious poetry—poetry of thought even more than poetry of feeling. We may take one of Wordsworth's poems first. There are two; but I will quote only the last one entirely. Of the other an extract or two will suffice.

Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
 Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
 Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
 Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
 Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
 Those quivering wings composed, that music still!

To the last point of vision and beyond,
 Mount, daring warbler!—that love-prompted strain,
 ('Twixt thee and thine a never-failing bond),
 Thrills not the less the bosom of the plain:
 Yet might'st thou seem, proud privilege! to sing
 All independent of the leafy Spring.

Leave to the nightingale her shady wood;
 A privacy of glorious light is thine;
 Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
 Of harmony, with instinct more divine;
 Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
 True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!

This was written in the full maturity of Wordsworth's powers, while his other efforts in the same direction do him less credit. This is really a grand poem, short as it is—though the last thought seems to us a little weak. But even Tennyson could not have surpassed lines such as the first and second of the third stanza, or the third and the fourth of the first stanza. Wordsworth wrote that poem in 1825; and Shelley had written his famous ode "To a Skylark" in 1820. But Wordsworth's first poem on the skylark was

written in 1805 and we may suppose when Shelley's splendid lyric appeared Wordsworth felt ashamed of his first work and tried to do better. He does not even in 1825 come up to Shelley—for Shelley himself was a kind of skylark; but he did very well indeed. Even in his first poem there were some good lines. I quote the following from the verses of 1805:

Alas! my journey, rugged and uneven,
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind;
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,
And hope for higher raptures, when life's day is done.

Now I will not quote to you Shelley's ode partly because I quoted it once before to this very class in a lecture on Shelley*—but chiefly because it is in many of the school-text books; and I think that most of you have read it. But I may tell you that it is worth while to notice the different way in which Shelley felt the delight of the skylark's song. His poem is really very great because he has divined with a poet's instinct that such singing is possible only to a light heart that is very glad and very sincere. And he says that if a man could only get rid of his bad passions—hatred and pride and fear—there would be poetry in the world worthy to compare with the song of the skylark. But as long as men are selfish and bad, the skylark's will always be the best poetry—for he is indeed a "scorner of the ground." That is to say, he cares nothing for what men trouble themselves about incessantly. Even though I do not quote the poem here, let me beg of you to read it again when you have time. Then by comparing it with other poems which I am quoting, you will be able to see what a divine thing it is.

And now I am going to quote the greatest English philosophical poem about the skylark—not all of it, for it is too long, and obscure in parts—but the best of it. It is

* See *On Poets*, pp. 592-5

called "The Lark Ascending," and it is to be found in that volume of George Meredith's poems entitled "Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth."

He rises and begins to round,
 He drops the silver chain of sound,
 Of many links without a break,
 In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,
 All interwoven and spreading wide,
 Like water-dimples down a tide
 Where ripple ripple overcurls
 And eddy into eddy whirls;
 A press of hurried notes that run
 So fleet they scarce are more than one,
 Yet changingly the trills repeat
 And linger ringing while they fleet.

This is a description of the quality of the lark's song; and it far surpasses in musical accuracy anything of the kind ever attempted by any other English poet. Meredith has no superior in finding words and similes to express complex sensations; and only Browning ever rivalled him in this. His fault is, like Browning's, obscurity.

So much for the notes of the lark; the poet goes on to speak of how they reached the brain through the ear,—and reached the soul through the brain. For the ear, he says, is only a handmaid, a servant; the real hearer of beautiful things is not the ear, but the mind. And to the mind what is the song of the skylark?

It seems the very jet of earth
 At sight of sun, her music's mirth,
 As up he wings the spiral stair,
 A song of light, and pierces air
 With fountain ardour, fountain play,
 To reach the shining tops of day,

Unthinking save that he may give
 His voice the outlet, there to live
 Renewed in endless notes of glee.
 So thirsty of his voice is he.

That song is like a something springing out of the very earth itself,—a gush of life towards the joyful sight of the sun,—the very laughter and music of the sun of the world. So it seems as the lark keeps circling up—circling and circling, like a spirit mounting some spiral stair to heaven. That song is very deep, like a song of light, rising like a luminous fountain, strongly playing, strongly aspiring to reach the very top of day. And all the while the bird is not thinking about doing anything wonderful; he is only expressing the joy of his little heart; he does not want anything in the world except the pleasure of his own singing—except the delight of expressing his delight. As a thirsty man needs water, so only this bird needs song.

Then follows another description of the music, still finer than before, but rather difficult, and we need not quote it all—only this:

Wider over many heads
The starry voice ascending spreads,
Awakening, as it waxes thin,
The best in us to him akin;
And every face to watch him raised,
Puts on the light of children praised,
So rich our human pleasure ripes
When sweetness on sincereness pipes,
Though nought be promised from the seas.

Many people stop work in the fields and look up to watch the lark rising; and his starry voice seems to spread wider as it becomes fainter in ascension. And that high faint sweet sound somehow awakens in the heart of each person the best quality in the heart—the best emotions in us, which are indeed nothing to be compared with the joy of the lark. Whatever in us aspires to heaven is of kinship with the soul of the lark. Look at the faces of the people watching the bird; all those faces are smiling happily just as children smile when we praise them. But why does the song of the bird make us smile? Simply because we are always happy when we see or hear what is sincere mingling

with what is really sweet. The sweetness alone, whether of form or sound, is of little consequence, if it be not made by something which is warm and true. And when we find sincerity and sweetness together, then we become so happy that we do not want anything more—happy like children when they are looking at some wonderful thing. It would not make children any more happy in that moment to offer them a present from beyond the seas. And you do not want anything more from sincerity and sweetness than the pleasure of seeing and hearing them.

But what is the quality of this sweetness and this sincerity in the song of the lark? In other words, what does the song mean? There is nothing mystical about George Meredith when he comes to the study of natural facts. He tells us very plainly that the delight of the song, even while appealing to the mind and to the higher qualities of mind, rests altogether in the *naturalness* of it.

For singing till his heaven fills,
 'Tis love of earth that he instils,
 And ever winging up and up,
 Our valley is his golden cup,
 And he the wine which overflows
 To lift us with him as he goes:
 The woods and brooks, the sheep and kine,
 He is, the hills, the human line,
 The meadows green, the fallows brown,
 The dreams of labour in the town;
 He sings the sap, the quickened veins;
 The wedding song of sun and rains
 He is, the dance of children, thanks
 Of sowers, shout of primrose-banks,
 And eye of violets while they breathe;
 All these the circling song will wreath,
 And you shall hear the herb and tree,
 The better heart of men shall see,
 Shall feel celestially, as long
 As you crave nothing save the song.

For while the lark sings and fills all the sky with his

singing, what he is really teaching us is a proper love of earth and of nature. This beautiful world in which we live has been too often called a "Vale of Tears." But it is not a Vale of Tears to the skylark—not at all! To him it is like a great cup of gold, as the sun fills it; and his song is the wine of the cup, which, if we drink, we shall be able to rise heavenward with the singer. The name of that wine is Joy; and it is our duty to be joyful. That lark is in itself an epitome of joy to the world; and his song is the song of the joy of all things—woods and rivers—sheep and cattle—the mountains—the human race—the green valley—the untilled fields—even the dreams of the men who labour in the great city, and long while they labour for the blue sky and the smell of fresh grass. What does he sing of? He sings of spring—the rising of the new sap in the trees—the quickening of blood in the hearts both of men and of birds; he sings the wedding song of sun and rain—the sun and rain of Springtime. Nay! he is himself the song, and he is also the dance of happy children—the happiness of prosperous farmers—the beautiful colour of banks of primrose flowers—the colour so bright that it seems to shout when you look at it;—and he is also the eye of the perfume-breathing violet. All those things you will find repeated and mingled together in his singing. Listen to it properly, and you will hear the grass speak and the trees speak,—and you will see the better side of the hearts of men,—and you will even feel as if you were in heaven, provided that you be contented to hear, and do not allow your mind to be disturbed by a foolish desire for something else.

At this point the poet reminds us of one astounding difference between the charm of a bird's song and the charm of any human utterance. The greatest poet, the greatest musician can only touch the hearts of a chosen few, but the bird can delight every ear that listens to its song of joy. The highest possible form of all human poetry would be that which is at once simple enough to be understood by everybody and sweet enough to touch everybody; that is to

say, it would be like the song of the skylark. This is the teaching also of Tolstoi, about the supreme expression of the highest art; but Meredith wrote this poem long before the Russian writer had composed his famous essay.

Was never voice of ours could say
Our inmost in the sweetest way,
Like yonder voice aloft, and link
All hearers in the song they drink.
Our wisdom speaks from failing blood,
Our passion is too full in flood,
We want the key of his wild note
Of truthful in a tuneful throat,
The song seraphically free
Of taint of personality,
So pure that it salutes the suns
The voice of one for millions,
In whom the millions rejoice
For giving their one spirit voice.

You will see the beauty of this better in the paraphrase, for the verses are suggestive rather than didactic:

“There never was a human voice in our world which could speak the innermost thoughts of the human heart in the most beautiful way possible—as that bird speaks all its heart in the sweetest possible manner. And even if there were such a human voice, it would not be able to speak to all human hearts alike—as that bird can. For wisdom comes to us, poor human beings, only when we are getting old—when our blood is growing chill, and when we do not care to sing. On the other hand, in the time of our youth, when we want to sing—want to write beautiful poetry—then we are too impulsive, too passionate, too selfish, to sing a perfect song. We think too much about ourselves; and that makes us insincere. But there is no insincerity in that bird. If we could but utter the truth of our hearts as he can! There is no selfishness in the song of that bird, nothing of individual desire; such a song is indeed like the song of a seraph, highest of angels—so pure is it, so untouched by the

least personal quality. Only such an impersonal song is suited to express the gratitude of all life to that great Giver of Life, the sun. And that is just what the song does express—one voice speaking for millions of creatures,—and no one of all those millions feeling in the least envious of the singer, but all, on the contrary, loving him for uttering their joy of heart so well.”

Now comes, at the close of the poem, the beautiful suggestion that, although we have no human voices so pure and sweet as the voice of the skylark—that is to say, no human poet capable of composing a poem as sincere and as sweet as its song—nevertheless we have at least among us skylark souls:

Yet men have we, whom we revere,
 Now names, and men still housing here,
 Whose lives, by many a battle-dint
 Defaced, and grinding wheels on flint,
 Yield substance, though they sing not, sweet
 For song our highest heaven to greet:
 Whom heavenly singing gives us new,
 Enspheres them brilliant in our blue,
 From firmest base to farthest leap,
 Because their love of Earth is deep,
 And they are warriors in accord
 With life to serve, and pass reward,
 So touching purest and so heard
 In the brain's reflex of yon bird:
 Wherefore their soul in me, or mine,
 Through self-forgetfulness divine,
 In them, that song aloft maintains,
 To fill the sky and thrill the plains
 With showerings drawn from human stores,
 As he to silence nearer soars,
 Extends the world at wings and dome,
 More spacious making more our home
 Till lost on his aërial rings
 In light, and then the fancy sings.

This is not only difficult poetry to read; it is difficult

even to divide into sentences—just as obscure as anything of Browning, but full of beautiful suggestions. I think this is the meaning—but I am not quite sure about some lines:

“Nevertheless we have men in this world,—some who are dead, and some who are still alive—men whom we reverence greatly, and who may be called our human skylarks. Perhaps they do not sing themselves; but their lives, although very unhappy, yield us material for song worthy to compare with the skylark’s song, and worthy of being heard in the highest heaven. And about some of these men great poems have been written; and the names of them remain shining for ever, like stars in the arc of heaven. Why are they beloved and famous? Because they were, or are, great lovers of life and of humanity, and therefore in the eternal struggle they are soldiers whose acts are in accord with the eternal purpose. They performed, or perform, their duty without ever thinking about reward. And their unselfishness enabled them to rise to the highest and purest things—so that when we hear of them, their very names sound in our ears as sweet as the song of a skylark. The spirit of those men, whether in me or in those whom I love, still lives because of their divine unselfishness, and keeps within me a strength of inspiration, sweet as the song of a skylark. But the song of those human souls is of human things; the great poet, singing of human things, resembles the lark in this,—that the world grows larger to him as he nears death, just as to the lark the world seems to be widened and the sky to heighten, the more he ascends towards the heights where all is silence. The poet, thus growing wiser, makes the world appear larger and better to us, through his understanding of it; and when he dies, we still hear his voice and imagine that we can feel the sweetness of his presence. Even so we listen to a skylark singing, until he aspires up out of sight—until he is lost in the great light, and we cannot see him any more. Even then we still imagine that we can hear him sing, after he has really passed out of hearing.”

The next bird most worthy to rank after the skylark in the gallery of poetry, is the sea-gull. You have observed, I think, that the poems about the skylark all tell us about the sense of joy which the bird's song gives. The sea-gull gives us the sensation also of joy, but of a very different kind of joy—the joy of perfect freedom. The joy of the lark is in its singing, the joy of the sea-gull is in its wings. No poet could praise the cry of the sea-gull—not at least of an English sea-gull; for the note is very harsh and unpleasant. I believe in Japan the cry of the gull is considered a melancholy sound. Some kinds of gulls utter cries much like the cry of a cat, and they are not inexpressively called by the name of “mews.”

You might ask, why should the sea-gull be considered as a type of freedom in preference to the eagle or some other bird of prey? The eagle and the hawk and many kinds of vultures are indeed types of freedom of a certain kind; but they are not birds which revel in storms and follow in the wake of tempests. I am not speaking of the sea-eagle, nor of the albatross, nor of the frigate-bird; these indeed revel in the tempest quite as boldly as the sea-gull, or even more so. But they are much less familiar birds—poets do not so often have the chance of seeing them. Neither do poets catch sight of that most wonderful little creature which sailors call the “stormy petrel” or “Mother Carey's chicken,”—a tiny creature which can be seen dancing over the waves in time of great storm, hundreds of miles away from land. But sea-gulls can be seen everywhere, and the freedom of the bird to fly in the face of the storm, to dive into rising surge, to play perpetually with death and yet remain unharmed, could not but impress any poetical imagination. Other birds need at least a home, a mountain-top or tree, a hollow of some sort in which to dwell. But the sea-gull appears to be independent of all wants, except air and sea. The best poem in English on this bird is Swinburne's “To a Seamew.” It is too long for complete quotation; I can give extracts only. But it is not too much

to say that Shelley himself could not have equalled this; indeed, he is the only poet in English literature who ever accomplished anything to compare with it.

When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine;
Such life my heart remembers
In all as wild Septembers
As this when life seems other,
Though sweet, than once was mine;
When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine.

Such life as thrills and quickens
The silence of thy flight,
Or fills thy note's elation
With lordlier exultation
Than man's, whose faint heart sickens
With hopes and fears that blight
Such life as thrills and quickens
The silence of thy flight.

Thy cry from windward clanging
Makes all the cliffs rejoice;
Though storm clothe seas with sorrow,
Thy call salutes the morrow;
While shades of pain seem hanging
Round earth's most rapturous voice,
Thy cry from windward clanging
Makes all the cliffs rejoice.

We, sons and sires of seamen,
Whose home is all the sea,
What place man may, we claim it;
But thine—whose thought may name it?
Free birds live higher than freemen,
And gladlier ye than we—
We, sons and sires of seamen,
Whose home is all the sea.

In reading this poem, one can scarcely forget that the poet is a descendant of a great seaman, and that Admiral

Swinburne was one of his immediate ancestors. I do not mean to say that he wishes the reader to know this—not at all; but the fact is worth remembering. The beginning of the poem is a sort of reminiscence of former lives, however—not of the time when the soul of the poet was in the body of the seaman, but in the body of a sea-bird; and the poet continues—

“We Englishmen are the descendants and also the fathers of seamen; and we are the sons and the fathers of men who called the whole sea their home. Indeed, whatever right poor human beings can have to call the sea their home, we Englishmen may justly claim that right. But our right to call the sea our home—what is it compared with yours? What man can even imagine the whole extent of your claim to that privilege? We call ourselves free Englishmen; we are proud of being freemen; but the free bird is higher than the freeman, and more joyful is the bird’s life.”

There are times indeed when even Englishmen might be inclined to doubt their right to the sea—times of storm in which no ship can live. But in such a time the sea-gull is especially joyful; for the storm brings wreck and death and plenty of good things to eat—though Swinburne does not exactly say so.

The sea and the storm-wind can terrify man; no matter how brave we may be, there are moments when, face to face with death, we feel affrighted. The bravest soldier even knows what it is to be afraid,—fear being a natural emotion which no amount of reason can extinguish. Every man, except a fool of the most foolish kind, is subject to fear,—we call “brave” the man who, in spite of this natural emotion, acts in the face of danger just as if there were no danger at all. He is brave by force of will. But in the face of storm, when man needs all his bravery, the sea-gull only seems to rejoice.

For you the storm sounds only
 More notes of more delight
 Than earth’s in sunniest weather:
 When heaven and sea together

Join strengths against the lonely
Lost bark borne down by night,
For you the storm sounds only
More notes of more delight.

With wider wing, and louder
Long clarion-call of joy,
Thy tribe salutes the terror
Of darkness, wild as error,
But sure as truth, and prouder
Than waves with man for toy;
With wider wing, and louder
Long clarion-call of joy.

The wave's wing spreads and flutters,
The wave's heart swells and breaks;
One moment's passion thrills it,
One pulse of power fulfils it
And ends the pride it utters
When, loud with life that quakes,
The wave's wing spreads and flutters,
The wave's heart swells and breaks.

But thine and thou, my brother,
Keep heart and wing more high
Than aught may scare or sunder;
The waves whose throats are thunder
Fall hurtling each on other,
And triumph as they die;
But thine and thou, my brother,
Keep heart and wing more high.

More high than wrath or anguish,
More strong than pride or fear,
Than sense or soul half hidden
In thee, for us forbidden,
Bids thee nor change nor languish,
But live thy life as here,
More high than wrath or anguish,
More strong than pride or fear.

The poet makes the comparison between the conception of life, as man has it, and the sense of life the bird has;

man is less obedient to the eternal law than is the bird. And therefore man is weaker than the bird, and may take from it a great example, a great moral lesson. What is life but a great sea—the sea of birth and death—and we but as birds upon the shores of it? We always complain if the weather be stormy. We want perpetual rest, everlasting summer weather, eternal calm. That is why we are so unhappy in this world; we want the impossible, something contrary to the laws of the universe. The sea cannot be eternally calm,—for that were death; life is a sea that must be in perpetual agitation, must be purified by storm. Very different is the soul of the sea-bird; it is most happy when the storm comes.

We are fallen, even we, whose passion
 On earth is nearest thine;
 Who sing, and cease from flying;
 Who live, and dream of dying:
 Grey time, in time's grey fashion,
 Bids wingless creatures pine:
 We are fallen, even we, whose passion
 On earth is nearest thine.

That is to say, “We, the poets, who of all men are nearest to the sea-birds in love of freedom, and joy of earth, and perception of nature's laws,—even we the poets are half cowards. We are afraid to live. We sing, but soon get tired. We seek pleasure—but we are always thinking about death. Perhaps it is because we have no wings; and as we become old, we feel more and more our helplessness in the struggle with nature's forces. But to you, O sea-bird, the struggle is joy, the fight is only triumph.”

The lark knows no such rapture,
 Such joy no nightingale,
 As sways the songless measure
 Wherein thy wings take pleasure:
 Thy love may no man capture,
 Thy pride may no man quail;
 The lark knows no such rapture,
 Such joy no nightingale.

And we, whom dreams embolden,
 We can but creep and sing
 And watch through heaven's waste hollow
 The flight no sight may follow
 To the utter bourne beholden
 Of none that lack thy wing:
 And we, whom dreams embolden,
 We can but creep and sing.

Our dreams have wings that falter;
 Our hearts bear hopes that die;
 For thee no dream could better
 A life no fears may fetter,
 A pride no care can alter,
 That wots not whence nor why.

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Ah, well were I for ever,
 Wouldst thou change lives with me,
 And take my song's wild honey,
 And give me back thy sunny
 Wide eyes that weary never,
 And wings that search the sea;
 Ah, well were I for ever,
 Wouldst thou change lives with me.

This is a very noble poem—so fine, indeed, that it would be a pity to quote any other on the same subject. Indeed there is no other English poem about sea-birds even faintly comparable to it. I had better now turn to the subject of miscellaneous poems about birds of different kinds. Something about cranes (storks, if you like) ought to have a Japanese interest. Perhaps this is the prettiest, a little composition by Lord De Tabley (John Leicester Warren), who was a great poet:

THE PILGRIM CRANES

The pilgrim cranes are moving to their south,
 The clouds are herded pale and rolling slow.
 One flower is withered in the warm wind's mouth,
 Whereby the gentle waters always flow.

The cloud-fire wanes beyond the lighted trees.
 The sudden glory leaves the mountain dome.
 Sleep into night, old anguish mine, and cease
 To listen for a step that will not come.

It is especially the sight of these birds flying against the sky that has impressed Western poets; but the mournful cry is also often referred to in verse. For instance, Longfellow, in describing the death of Balder, speaks of the cry announcing the death of the god as being—

Like the mournful cry
 Of sunward sailing cranes.

Otherwise, however, the crane or stork figures little in poetry. It chiefly appears as a detail of the landscape,—a part of a description of nature, or of the emotion aroused by nature.

And this is the case with many other birds—even in the poems of Wordsworth. Wordsworth has poems on the thrush, the robin redbreast, the linnet, and the skylark,—besides the poems already quoted about the cuckoo and the nightingale. But I do not think that any of these are important enough to quote; they do not show Wordsworth at his best, or else they are not intimately connected with our subject. The poem on the thrush is very beautiful; but I quoted it to you last year*—it is about a country girl employed as a servant in London, who hears a thrush singing in a cage, and suddenly remembers her home in the country, where she heard the same bird singing in the time she was a little child. The poems about the linnet and the redbreast are not very good—they are prosaic. Also Wordsworth has a poem about an eagle which is not very good—though there is a notable moral in it. It is entitled “Eagles.” While visiting Dunollie Castle, Wordsworth saw an eagle in a cage and pitied it. One day it escaped; and he was very glad. But the bird had been in the cage for years, and it flew away and was frightened at its new freedom and came

* See *On Poets* pp. 509-11.

back again to slavery. So that little incident inspired Wordsworth to write his poem—which is really a poem about the evil consequences of slavery. As for eagle poetry, I think there is nothing much better than Tennyson's six lines:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

These lines on the eagle are greatly admired—and they ought to be. Nobody could have written them who had not studied a landscape from the top of some very high mountain. When you stand upon such a height, and look about you, of course the world looks much larger than when you are below; but that is not all—it also looks blue. All the distances are beautifully blue, and the horizon enormously wide and enormously high. Then, if you look at the sea, you will observe that its waves only appear like tiny wrinkles which move very, very slowly, with a crawling motion as of an insect. By standing upon the top of Fuji, for example, we may imagine imperfectly how the world looks to the eagle from the top of a peak. But, remember, we can only imagine it imperfectly; for no man, even with a good telescope, can see as an eagle sees. It has the extraordinary power of being able to change the shape of the lens in its eye at will,—so as to obtain the focus for any distance from a mile to ninety miles. From the top of Fuji, for example, you can hardly see a large tree in the plain below. But an eagle could see from ten times that height even a little mouse running along the ground. Still this poem is great, because it gives us the sensation of seeing from a height according to our human senses, though not according to the power of an eagle.

Longfellow has been a great poet of birds. He has a

poem about herons—but that is a local legend; also a poem about the crossbill; also poems about various kinds of American as well as European birds. It is no use to quote these, for Longfellow is readily accessible, and he is not difficult to study. But I may mention something about the story of a crossbill. The crossbill is a bird whose beak is differently shaped from that of other birds, and it has a red spot on its breast. The lower bill and the upper do not touch throughout their length, but cross each other when closed, so that the beak looks crooked. There is a pretty Christian story to account for the shape. It is said that when Christ was dying on the cross, a little bird came and tried to pull out the nails which had been driven through his hands, and continued to pull until its beak was twisted and broken, and its breast covered with blood from the throat. So Christ blessed it, and said that all men who loved him should also love that bird in aftertime. This pretty story formed the subject of a Danish poem, and Longfellow made a good translation of it. But of all Longfellow's poems about birds, I think the best is that entitled "The Emperor's Bird's-Nest." It is founded upon a story told about the Emperor Charles V. He was by no means a lovable emperor; there was a great deal of cunning and cruelty in his character, and he showed no scruple at all in dealing with those whom he found in his way. He was a religious persecutor—the father of that still more cruel and superstitious Philip II of Spain; and both he and his son would have put the whole world under the rule of the infamous inquisition if they could have done so. Philip II indeed bankrupted Spain in trying to do that. But this terrible Charles had sometimes gleams of kindness in his nature,—kindness of a surprising kind. He ordered a man to be burned alive for heresy; but he could be kind to little birds. That is what the poem is about—and it is a pretty poem. First we have an account of the dreadful weather in Flanders, when Charles and his Spanish soldiers were making war; and the Spanish officers were in very bad humour because of the rains, and the con-

dition of the country, which rendered military operations excessively difficult. They were besieging a town and they could not take it. Suddenly those officers observed that a swallow had her nest made on the top of the Emperor's tent. That was a very extraordinary thing—for it was the very last place in the world where a nest would have been safe:

Yes, it was a swallow's nest,
 Built of clay and hair of horses,
 Mane, or tail, or dragoon's crest,
 Found on hedgerows east and west,
 After skirmish of the forces.

Then an old Hidalgo said,
 As he twirled his gray moustachio,
 "Sure this swallow overhead
 Thinks the Emperor's tent a shed,
 And the Emperor but a Macho!"

The word "macho" in Spanish means a mule;—the Hidalgo suggests that the bird might have supposed the Emperor's tent a mule's stable. He did not think that the Emperor was listening, but Charles overheard this reference to his obstinacy of character, and he looked up and saw the nest. But when he saw it he was pleased, and gave orders that nobody should annoy the bird.

"Let no hand the bird molest,"
 Said he solemnly, "nor hurt her!"
 Adding then, by way of jest,
 "Golondrina is my guest,
 'Tis the wife of some deserter!"

"Golondrina" in Spanish means a swallow. But soldiers who deserted used to be jokingly described as swallows. So the Emperor, by using the feminine of the word, made an excellent pun, suggesting that the wife of some one of his deserting soldiers had come to the camp in spirit to atone for the fault of her husband.

And when the camp was being removed and the men came to pull down the Emperor's tent and carry it away, the Emperor ordered the men to leave the tent standing there, for the sake of the swallow.

So unharmed and unafraid
Sat the swallow still and brooded,
Till the constant cannonade
Through the walls a breach had made
And the siege was thus concluded.

Then the army, elsewhere bent,
Struck its tents as if disbanding,
Only not the Emperor's tent,
For he ordered, ere he went,
Very curtly, "Leave it standing!"

So it stood there all alone,
Loosely flapping, torn and tattered,
Till the brood was fledged and flown,
Singing o'er those walls of stone
Which the cannon-shot had shattered.

In many pictures—emblematic pictures—of Peace, I think you have seen birds represented building their nest in the mouth of abandoned cannon; it is really a fact that birds do such things. In time of war also, once they know that nobody desires to hurt them, they will build their nest even where heavy batteries are firing. They seem to take life very philosophically indeed. Does not this story of the grim Charles V remind you of the story of Mahomet and his cat? Mahomet was very fond of cats; and one of his favourites happened to be sleeping beside him one day when the call to prayer sounded. Mahomet was about to rise, when he found the cat was lying upon a part of his dress, so that he could not get up without disturbing it—unless he did the thing which he is celebrated for doing. Rather than wake the cat he cut off that part of his robe on which the cat was sleeping, and then went to the house of prayer.

You will find other poems about birds in Longfellow for

yourself without any trouble, but please do not forget to read his little romance in verse called "The Falcon of Ser Federigo." This is a version of the beautiful Italian story which Tennyson also treated in verse under the title of "The Falcon." But Tennyson treats the story dramatically, and Longfellow only turns it into a charming narrative, and exquisite as Tennyson's verse is, I think you would prefer Longfellow's poem. I need not quote from either of them; this would not particularly help the general subject of the lecture, for both are much too long to permit of adequate quotation, and there are no passages of such exceptional value as to justify the quotation of a few lines. So I shall only tell this old Italian story—old, I believe, as the time of Boccaccio. There was a gentleman who had a tame hawk or falcon, of which he was very fond—a bird so intelligent that it would do almost anything which he told it to do. In the neighbourhood where he lived there also lived a beautiful lady—a widow, whom he loved very much and wished to marry; but as she happened to be of superior rank, it was difficult for him to win her. She had a little boy of five or six years old; and one day, in company with this little boy, she paid a visit to the owner of the falcon. The boy was very much astonished and delighted by the intelligence and beauty of the bird. Some time after he fell sick; and while sick he asked his mother to give him the falcon of Ser Federigo. The mother at once went alone to the house of Ser Federigo to ask for the bird. But, according to the rules of Italian courtesy, she could not make the request immediately upon arrival; it was necessary first to accept the hospitality of the house. Now the knight happened to have no good food in the castle at the time. He therefore secretly killed the falcon, and cooked it, and gave the fair lady a very nice dinner. After the dinner she ventured to ask him to let her have the hawk for the sick boy's sake. In great pain he answered that he could not. She imagined that his refusal was merely selfish—a proof that he did not really love her. And she was about to go away, very un-

happy, when the knight, divining her thoughts, confessed to her that he had already killed the hawk for her sake, and that was the reason why he could not give it. On learning the truth, the lady herself loved him for his courtesy and tact and generosity; and the result was a happy marriage. Probably a score of poems as well as prose versions of the story have been inspired by the Italian original; and that Tennyson should find it a worthy subject in the later years of his life ought to be sufficient proof of its value.

I believe that these are the most noteworthy poems about the hawk or falcon, in English literature. But there are many old ballads and songs about hawks; and you will find several of them in the ordinary anthologies. I do not quote any of them because, as in the case of "The Gay Goshawk," the birds of these ballads are magical birds—hawks that tell stories and carry letters, and act so much like human beings that there is nothing of the bird left in their character. Speaking of Longfellow, I must, however, remind you of another American poet who wrote a very famous poem about a bird—perhaps the only poem by which he will be permanently remembered. Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl" you will meet with even in school readers, and I believe, in all the anthologies especially compiled for children. The verse is really very fine and musical, the language pure and richly coloured. But there is nothing particularly thoughtful in the poem,—indeed, its subject, the homing instinct of the bird, is theologically accounted for, after the fashion of the eighteenth century. It is a good school poem, for very young children; and that is about all that need be said concerning it.

As for birds in general, I do not know of any more remarkable poem than Arnold's "Lines Written in Kensington Gardens." Kensington Gardens is the name of one of the great parks in London. I think you know that the Zoological Garden and other famous institutions are situated in that neighbourhood. There are beautiful trees there and grass and flowers, and many birds. All about the garden is the

roar of the city, like the sound of the sea; but within the gardens there is light and peace and blue air. The poem which I am going to quote, describes the thoughts of a man who listens to the singing of birds in this place,—in the heart of London.

In this lone open glade I lie,
Screen'd by deep boughs on either hand;
And at its end, to stay the eye,
Those black-crown'd, red-boled pine-trees stand.

Birds here make song, each bird has his,
Across the girdling city's hum.
How green under the boughs it is!
How thick the tremulous sheep-cries come!

Sometimes a child will cross the glade
To take his nurse his broken toy;
Sometimes a thrush flit overhead
Deep in her unknown day's employ.

Here at my feet what wonders pass,
What endless, active life is here!
What blowing daisies, fragrant grass!
An air-stirr'd forest, fresh and clear.

Scarce fresher is the mountain sod
Where the tired angler lies, stretch'd out,
And, eased of basket and of rod,
Counts his day's spoil, the spotted trout.

In the huge world which roars hard by
Be others happy, if they can!
But in my helpless cradle I
Was breathed on by the rural Pan.

I, on men's impious uproar hurl'd,
Think often, as I hear them rave,
That peace has left the upper world,
And now keeps only in the grave.

Yet here is peace for ever new!
When I, who watch them, am away,

Still all things in this glade go through
The changes of their quiet day.

Then to their happy rest they pass;
The flowers close, the birds are fed,
The night comes down upon the grass,
The child sleeps warmly in his bed.

Calm soul of all things! make it mine
To feel, amid the city's jar,
That there abides a peace of thine,
Man did not make, and cannot mar!

The will to neither strive nor cry,
The power to feel with others give!
Calm, calm me more! nor let me die
Before I have begun to live.

The last stanza but one,—and the most beautiful in the poem, refers to that peace of mind and heart which pious moral wisdom gives, the peace that is obtained through self-control. Just as that part in the heart of noisy London contains within itself a peace like that of the country, so a brave man of good understanding, though obliged to work and suffer among men who do not think rightly or uprightly, may keep in his own heart a certain heavenly peace and resignation and love for humanity. The words “before I have begun to live,” really mean “before I have begun to live the higher moral life, which teaches us not to complain and never to hate.” You might ask whether this is really a bird-poem—because birds are only mentioned three or four times in it. But originally this poem was entitled “On Hearing a Bird's Singing in Kensington Gardens;” and the whole composition appears to have been inspired as stated.

I believe that I have given you the cream, at least, of the English poetry about birds. But I need scarcely tell you that the subject is far from being exhausted. There are hosts of other poems about birds—not only English poems about English birds, but also English poems about foreign

birds. They are not, however, of a high order, and we must leave the inferior orders alone for the present, or let them be sufficiently represented by a reference. Cowper's poem about the crow is not a second rate poem; but the kind is the humorous kind, and I quoted the poem for you last year. Thomson's poem contained lines about every kind of English bird—I refer especially to his descriptions of awakening life in "Spring"—and Thomson is a great poet. But he cannot be justly represented here by a few lines, and it would be of small use to quote him by pages. Otherwise I doubt whether anything important has been overlooked.

I might mention, however, that some birds belong to literature in an emblematical way which might be worth some private study. The dove, for example, has long been the Christian emblem of the Holy Ghost—you may have remarked one beautiful reference to this in Rossetti's poem of "The Blessed Damozel." But I do not dwell on this matter, simply because it is most intimately related to Christian iconography, which is a subject for the specialist. Neither have I said much about the likening of angels to birds; or about the white wings given to angels in pictures and paintings. That also belongs to iconography. However, you should at least remember the fact—otherwise you could scarcely appreciate the charming surprise of Browning's delightful address to the angel in the painting—"Thou bird of God!"*

In conclusion I think this much may be said: English poetry about birds represents a very large proportion of lyrical expression of the highest order. It is emotional or meditative poetry of the most complex kind at its best. Perhaps there is no other simple subject which poets have treated in a higher and more complex way.

* *The Guardian-Angel—a Picture at Fano*