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Flights of Fancy: Notes on Bird Imagery in British and American Poems

James E. Kulas

References to birds abound in English poetry from its beginnings. This is less important, of course, than that the poets' descriptions of these creatures often constitute highlights of the poems or passages in which they appear. This is so even where the descrption is scarcely more than a line or two. In the Anglo-Saxon "Genesis" a black raven is let fly by Noah, who reasons that if the bird does not find land it will return to the ark. But the bird "perched exulting upon a floating corpse; the dun-feathered bird was unwilling to return."[1] S.A.J. Bradley's prose translation is equally vivid in telling of the gray wild dove which is later sent forth: "She flew abroad until, dazed by the spaciousness, she found a pleasant resting-place...upon a tree; blithe of mood she enjoyed being able to sit, extremely weary, in the beautiful boughs of a tree. She shook her feathers and went flying back with her presents" (p. 46), a green sprig from an olive-tree, which she gives to Noah.

The raven and other carrion birds are especially prominent in the old poetry, as symbols of death and emphasizing the body's corruptibility. In both "The Fortunes of Men" (p. 342) and *Beowulf* (p. 475) the raven feasts at the gallows; in the latter poem he is also voracious and exultant as he follows fighting men: "the black raven, greedy after men ordained to die, will croak a great deal, telling the eagle how well he had fared in his feasting" (p. 490). In even the short battle poems—"...of Finnsburh," "...of Brunanburh," "...of Maldon" (pp. 509, 517, 522)—the raven hovers round. Sometimes he shares the corpses with the "dun—plumaged white-tailed eagle" and the "greedy war-hawk" (p. 517). More often, though, the hawk is "noble" (*Beowulf*, p. 471), and this "proud wild bird" may even be trained ("Fortunes of Men," p. 343).

Yet while the raven cast his appalling shadow over the Anglo-Saxons, other birds could comfort and delight. Even in many hard days on the sea, the call of birds was a solace: "Sometimes I would take the song of the swan as my entertainment, the cry of the gannet and the call of the curlew in place of human laughter, the sea-mew's singing in place of the mead-drinking. There storms would pound the rocky cliffs whilst the tern, icy-winged, answered them; very often the sea-eagle would screech, wings dappled with spray" ("The Seafarer," p. 332). Here the poet calls together a variety of fowl, whose presence and voices do much to lessen the loneliness of the seafarer.

In "The Phoenix" the author deals with the legendary bird as a symbol of the Christian belief in bodily resurrection. Yet the creature is far from being an abstraction in a didactic treatise. By vigor of style, sincerity of tone and a rich concreteness of detail, the poet brings the bird vitally before us. Bradley points out (p. 285) that the Christian fervor of the interpretation of the bird may have been inspired by the biblical text of Job 29:18, "I shall die with my nest, And I shall multiply my days as the phoenix," though modern translators tend to substitute "sand" or "palm-tree" for "phoenix," perhaps wanting to avoid the implication of reincarnation (repeated worldly rebirths), which may have been the meaning of the phoenix in its origins in Arabia. Unforgettable is this bird, "wonderfully handsome, strong of wings," living on a high, noble plateau, refreshing himself in clear waters, warbling a song "sweeter and more beautiful than all musical instruments and more delightsome than every melody" (pp. 287–8).

Growing old, at the end of a thousand years it bulds itself a nest of sweet herbs; one day in summer with the sun at its hottest, the nest burns, consuming also the phoenix—the bird however being soon reborn again, more glorious than before. "The whole of him, vital being and feather coat, is made new just as he was at the beginning when God, the immutably triumphant, first established him upon that noble plateau" (p. 292). Though the phoenix is unique in appearance, it is "nearest in likeness to the peacock, blissfully mature."

Again nearing his end, the bird is shown as yearning for another life after the cleansing, transforming fire, in a bright lovely place like the paradise which Adam and Eve enjoyed before their sin. This will be a heavenly paradise, the poet implies, gained after purgatory-like fire. In Church teaching, purgatory is a spiritual state after death in which a soul without mortal sin must yet undergo suffering akin to that of fire as punishment for minor sins before reaching heaven. "A great longing is upon him that he might receive a fresh existence again through the holocaust of fire, life after death, and be young anew; and that he might seek his ancient home, a dwelling radiant with sunlight, after his fiery bath" (p. 295). Such desires in the phoenix, apart from his striking individuality, prefigure the increasing tendency in later poets to personify the bird and to treat it more symbolically and metaphorically than for its own sake. Of course, Western literature both secular and religious had elsewhere represented the bird as being more than itself, more than human, notably in the legend of Leda and the Swan and in the coming to Jesus of the Holy Spirit as a dove (Luke 3:22).

"The Cuckoo Song" rings in a medley of birds in the Middle Ages. Whereas the Anglo-Saxon seafarer in his distress had felt the cuckoo's cry as mournful (p. 333), here summer's herald is all promise and joy of new life in meadow, lamb and calf. "Sumer is i-cumen in—/Lhude sing, cuccu!" Shakespeare would turn the sound "cuckoo" into a playful warning to married men ("cuckold") in his song "Spring," but medieval poets had already turned other birds into more caustically ironic uses. The ancient bird of doom, the raven, returns in two popular ballads. In "The Three Ravens" the birds in a tree observe with frustration that they cannot feast on the body of a fallen knight, for "His hawks they fly so eagerly,/There's no fowl dare him come nigh," and they watch the knight's sweetheart come to bury his body. In "The Twa Corbies" the mood is grimmer, as the ravens remark that the knight lies dead, betrayed by his lady, and so now he is theirs. One of the ravens croaks an epitaph for this knight and for a world of missing dead:

> "Mony a one for him makes mane, (mane = moan)
> But nane sall ken where he is gane; (ken = know)
> O'er his white banes, when they are bare,
> The wind sall blaw for evermair."

It is interesting that in another famous ballad of betrayal and murder, that of a man by his wife and son, the hawk is referred to favorably, as in "The Three Ravens." In "Edward," the young man, asked by his mother what he has done, replies, "O I ha'e killed my hawk sae guid." The hunting hawk was precious to his trainer, then as of old. The bird might become faithful.

To return to cheerier notes, there are those of Chaucer's small birds in the opening lines of his Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales.* In the springtime of fresh winds with "sweete breeth" and the "tendre croppes," the "smale fowles maken melodye/That slepen al the night with open iye" (iye=eye). "The Parliament of Fowls" is a humorous display of various birds choosing their mates, and of three eagles' attempts to gain the same female. In the range of wit, feelings and idioms of these speaking birds, Chaucer has no peer. After the eagles have argued loud and long for the favor of their love, the other birds cry impatiently:

> "Have doon, and lat us wende!"* (*go on)
>
> ....
>
> "Come off!" they criden, "allas, ye wole us shende.* (*ruin)
> When shal youre cursed pleting have an ende?
> How sholde a juge either partye leve,* (*believe)
> For ye or nay, withouten other preve?"* (*proof)

The gentle turtledove counsels fidelity in loving: "Nay, God forbede a lovere sholde chaunge...Yit lat him serve hire til that he be deed."* (*dead)

An anonymous Renaissance poet, in "The Silver Swan," has the bird speak only once, upon dying: "Farewell, all joys; Oh death, come close mine eyes;/More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise." The swan is satirical but safe.

Sir Philip Sidney in "The Nightengale" recalls Philomela, ravished by Tereus but transformed into the bird to sing her grief. The poet calls to her, "O Philomela fair, O take some gladness" and to compare her case to his, for although she had too much love he has none! The sentimental singer is the male.

A huddled, shrunken-looking bird is a fit emblem for winter. In a companion song to "Spring" in *Love's Labour's Lost,* "nightly sings the staring owl, Tu-who;/Tu-whit, tu-who: a merry note..." Merry, perhaps, to those warm indoors; other birds "sit brooding in the snow."

Shakespeare's lark is forever waking with the sun: "Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings,/And Phoebus 'gins arise...." Sleepless lovers rise, too. This seeing the lark as a heavenly creature culminates in Percy Bysshe Shelley's ode to a skylark.

John Webster calls "for the robin redbreast and the wren," small, common birds that hover "o'er shady groves," to cover with leaves and flowers "the friendless bodies of unburied men." The idea that the bird is solicitous to mankind is a recurrent one, since the days of the trained hawk, and as seen in the comforting birds of "The Seafarer."

George Herbert in "Easter Wings" prays to the Lord:

With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories.

The shape of the full poem is that of two pairs of wings. And in both rhythm and sound, Herbert's spirit surges, like the bird. Gerard Manley Hopkins' devotional "The Windhover" may have been inspired by "Easter Wings," not in rhythm but mood.

Lovers, to Andrew Marvell, should not be too high-minded nor gentle and dallying. Not like larks or turtledoves but rather "like amorous birds of prey," in "To His Coy Mistress," he says, "let us sport us while we may" and "at once our time devour." For time flies, too. Perhaps this fresh, affirmative attitude towards fierce carrion birds gave a cue to the American poet Robinson Jeffers, who in old age apologizes, in "Vulture," as he lies on a hillside and the great bird circles him, for not allowing it to eat him, thus becoming part of "those wings and those eyes—... what an enskyment."

In the Restoration and 18th-century poetry there are few memorable references to birds. In Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," where all is quiet and growing dark, there is a sudden call: "The moping owl does to the moon complain/Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,/Molest her ancient solitary reign." In the down-to-earth practicality and rationality of neo-classicism, birds did not excite the imagination.

Coleridge's albatross heralds the Romantic Age. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" this strange large seabird comes to the mariner's ship "As if it had been a Christian soul"—yet the mariner shoots it with his crossbow, bringing bad luck to all on board the ship. It hangs about his neck until one day when he sees beautiful water creatures and feels love and blessing for them, whereupon the dead bird falls into the sea and the fortunes of the mariner improve. In Coleridge's long allegory of sin, guilt and redemption, the bird is innocence violated by man, and man must respect all life if he is to be happy. All life is precious: "He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast./He prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small." The albatross is no phoenix, yet its death leads to love.

Shelley and Keats each wrote an outstanding long poem celebrating a bird, as did their American contemporary William Cullen Bryant. Their poems, respectively, "To a Skylark," "Ode to a Nightengale" and "To a Waterfowl," are probably the best known longer bird poems in English. Perhaps only Alfred Lord Tennyson's six-lined "The Eagle" is a better known 19th-century bird poem, one conned by generations of schoolchildren. (Ironically, it was Shelley's poem that provoked an impassioned criticism in Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counterpoint*, and added to the early-twentieth century's anti-Romantic sentiments in poetry.2))

To Shelley as to Herbert, the lark is a celestial creature, but Shelley goes farther and calls it "blithe Spirit," which pours its "full heart/In profuse strains of unpremeditated art." It is "a star of heaven," "a poet hidden," possessed of mysterious powers. "Teach us," Shelley calls, "What sweet thoughts are thine." And the poet ends with a plea that the bird teach him its gladness, so that he in turn might, in "harmonious madness," teach the world. The idea that such a bird is teacher and guide to mankind is at its height in Shelley's impassioned and lovely stanzas, but if the reader looks closely for what it is that the bird should teach, or even for the meaning of its joy, he may look in vain.

Comparisons between poems in different languages are not only odious but unfair, especially when the poems on one side are much longer than those on the other, and when moreover translation is involved. Yet one cannot forbear quoting here translations of traditional haiku that present the skylark (and later, the nightengale and waterfowl). They are given without comment, simply in the hope of affording readers a few moments of appreciation of

Japanese poets' sensibilities in showing the subject, insofar as translation allows.[3]

One sneeze—
skylarks's
out of sight.
Yayu (1701-83)

Skylarks singing—
the farmer
makes a pillow of his hoe.
Issa (1763-1827)

Keats, unlike Shelley, is restrained and meditative, even somber, in pondering his bird. Like the skylark, the nightengale is immortal, and Keats feels drawn by the magic of its happiness. His yearning to follow the bird to a place of peace succeeds imaginatively, "on the viewless wings of Poesy,...Already with thee! tender is the night!" He feels it were good to die now, charmed by the bird's ecstatic singing—but no, for once dead he should hear the bird no more. Slowly he comes back to reality; the bird's "plaintive anthem fades." At last he wonders whether he has had a vision or a daydream: "Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?" Keats's use of the bird and its song to lead to a meditation on beauty, on escape from suffering, on the nature of reality, and his final uncertainty, makes of "Ode to a Nightengale" an informing experience. A moving one, too, as the smooth and stately iambic lines lend dignity to the solemn theme.

Nightengale,
rarely seen,
came twice today.
Kito (1740–89)

Aged nightengale—
how sweet
the cuckoo's cry.
Shiki (1867–1902)

One more: "Don't fly off, nightengale—/though your song's poor,/you're mine." (Issa)

Bryant is more naturalistic than Shelley and Keats. The waterfowl is but a bird. And it is not the bird's voice that interests the poet but its flight, high and far, solitary and tireless and secure, as in the autumn evening it heads for its distant summer home. The poet sees the fowl guided and protected on its way by God: "There is a Power, whose care/Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,—/...Lone wandering, but not lost." When the bird passes out of sight, its lesson to the poet is heartfelt: the same God cares for him on his way.

He, who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must trace alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

Yet thus Zen master Dogen (1200-53): "Coming, going, the waterfowl/leaves not a trace,/nor does it need a guide."

The common, excellent-voiced thrush peals sad notes in Walt Whitman's elegy for Lincoln. "Solitary the thrush,/The hermit withdrawn to himself,.../Sings by himself a song./Song of the bleeding throat..." in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." On the other hand, Thomas Hardy's "aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small," on the last desolate evening of the century breaks out "In a full-hearted evensong/Of joy illimited," making the startled poet almost believe in "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew/And I was unaware." As often in the tradition, the bird's voice charms, and soothes or cheers—even, in "The Darkling Thrush," when the bird is unhandsome and old.

In the twentieth century, two poems stand above others. Gerard Manley Hopkins in "The Windhover" (published 1918) celebrates in fresh images and sweeping rhythms the "mastery" of the kestrel, a small hawk, in hovering and veering smoothly against "the big wind." In dedicating the poem "To Christ Our Lord," the poet implies that the bird is like the Lord, boldly and gracefully and triumphantly striving against adversity, and he asks that these qualities of the bird (Lord) may become his own, to his own greater life of the spirit: "Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here/Buckle!"—that is, in his heart. Once again, as in the Old English "The Phoenix," and in Herbert, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Bryant, the bird has spiritual or high moral significance.

Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" employs the birds as symbols of immortality, of unchanging life in life or a life more than life. The fifty-nine swans now "drift on the still water,/Mysterious, beautiful," in the October twilight. He had first seen them in an autumn evening nineteen years ago. Then his heart was lighter; now "All's changed," and "my heart is sore." The swans, however, are "Unwearied still, lover by lover," and are at ease in the streams or the air. The poet knows he must "awake some day" after death "To find they have flown away," yet will he not miss them even in eternity?: "Among what rushes will they build,/By what lake's edge or pool/Delight men's eyes...?" The questioning note, as at the end of Keats's ode, brings the reader into the poem's crux: if there is unchanging beauty, where is it and can we have it? Yeats's swans unite water and air, earth and sky; is such unity within human reach or only for our yearning dream; is not the dream attainment enough, even all? Yeats's poem, free from sentimental or didactic strains, abides in our memory, not as clear or sweet statement or melody only, though this is there, but as monument to the willing trust we put in wonder.

One last poem (well, two, please). In Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," one way is "I was of three minds,/Like a tree/In which there are three blackbirds."

Robinson Jeffers gives us, besides "Vulture," "Hurt Hawks." Herein Jeffers tells, in stark, strong free verse, of a hawk with broken wing, land-locked but fearless, fed for six weeks by the author until it came asking for death one day, proudly. In death, "What fell was relaxed,/Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what/Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising/Before it was quite unsheathed from reality." To the poets, our seers, a rare bird's death may live in memory more than life.

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These feebly impressionistic notes in a scanty survey—to what purpose? To little purpose, I fear. But hopefully the notes and quotes have helped us to call, or recall, to mind special moments in our literary heritage. These are moments when certain feathered creatures, in their mien and movements and callings, struck the attention and roused the skill of poets, who would have these creatures remembered.

In our urban lives, with countrysides increasingly despoiled, under skies gray with soot and with cacophony of engines around and above us, we have become unaware of the many kinds of our fellow creatures that our ancestors lived close to. If we visit our zoos we may wish we could see happier members of the animal family than we find there, especially in the aviaries.

Then we may turn to our old poets, ever close at hand, and we find, once again or in first discovery, birds great and small calling to one another, rising and swooping and hovering, sharing skies with rain, sun and moon, clouds and treetops, or quiet in grass and swamp and coves.

NOTES:

1. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. and ed. by S.A.J. Bradley. London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., Everyman's Library, 1982, p. 46. All quotations from Anglo-Saxon poems are from this anthology. References to later English poems are not documented, as these poems are well known and may readily be found in current anthologies, for example *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd Ed., ed. A. Allison *et al.*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1983.
2. Huxley's character Rampion says, "I wish to God the bird had ... dropped a good large mess in his eye. It would have served him damned well right for saying it wasn't a bird. Blithe spirit, indeed!" Rampion's words conclude Chapter 10 in the novel. (Issa, more gently, reflects another threat of birds to humans: "Be respectful,/sparrows,/of our old bedding.")
3. All the haiku translations are found in *The Penguin Book of Zen Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto. Penguin Books, New York, 1981, pp. 120, 108, 115, 128, 104, 63, 111. I apologize particularly to Japanese readers, and to others who know Japanese, that I am unable to supply the haiku in the original script or in romaji.