

Birds the Poets Have Made Famous

My childhood love of birds was pretty intense and gave me the first subject I wanted to study. Hearing various birds mentioned by poets, also really piqued my interest in poetry, and now, late in my life, I realize I could do pretty well on *Jeopardy* on the topic, poets and their birds. Here are a few of the verses whose birds still sing to me.

Robins were, I think, the first birds I heard serenaded: Dig these: Poor little robin, walkin,' walkin,' walkin' to Missouri/ He can't afford to fly...Got a tear drop in his eye." or "Oh he rocks in the treetop all day long/ Rockin' and boppin' and a singin' his song/ All the little birds on Jay Bird Street/ Hear Rockin' Robin goin' tweet, tweet, tweet/ Rockin' Robin, tweet, tweedily deet ... Hey rockin' Robin we're really gonna rock to night."

And another early bird I heard sung about, was the bluebird: *Bluebird of Happiness* was a huge hit once, but the song that brought hope to many enduring WWII, was this one: "There'll be bluebirds flying over/ The white cliffs of Dover/ Tomorrow when the world is free." The Brits were used to seeing flights of German bombers flying over those cliffs. That song, *White Cliffs of Dover* became the theme for victory in Europe.

A bird many of the great English poets sang of was the skylark, "the herald of the morn." Shelley's "Ode" is the best known: "Hail to thee blithe spirit/ Bird thou never wert/ That from Heaven or near it/ Pourest thy full heart/In profuse strains of unpremeditated art." And that's where Noel Coward got the title for his Broadway hit, *Blithe Spirit*.

Wordsworth, the poet laureate of the period also praised that amazing bird: "Up with thee/ Up with thee into the clouds/ For thy song, lark, is strong." And Juliet urges Romeo to go because it's almost dawn: "It is the lark that sings so out of tune, straining harsh discords and unpleasant sharps." Romeo longed to linger on.

But if the lark was lauded by many, it was no match for the nightingale, because John Keats' matchless, "Ode" immortalized that bird for all time: "Thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees/ In some melodious plot of beechen green/ And shadows numberless/Singest of Summer in full-throated ease."

Another laureate, Tennyson, lauded the eagle: "He clasps the crags with crooked hands/ Close to the sun in lonely lands/ The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls,/ He watches from the mountain walls/ And like a thunderbolt/He falls."

His rival, Robert Browning loved another bird: "Oh to be in England/ Now that April's there...And the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough/ In England now"

And Ireland's W.B. Yeats immortalized the curlew with this amazing "reproof," "O curlew cry no more to the air/ Or ever to the water in the west/ Because your crying brings to mind/ Passion-dimmed eyes/ And long heavy hair/ That was shaken out over my breast."

Or who could forget Hopkins' falcon: "I caught this morning/ Morning's minion/Kingdom of daylight's dauphin/ Dappled dawn-drawn falcon/ In his riding of the rolling, underneath him, steady, air...How he wrung on the rein of a wimpling wing."

I know I've written of Hardy and Frost's thrushes before, but their salutes to that melodious bird are unparalleled. Hardy's "Darkling Thrush," defies the winter's chill: "At once a voice arose/ Among the bleak twigs over head/ In a full-throated evensong/ Of joy illimited/ An aged thrush, frail gaunt and small/ In blast-beruffled plume/ Had chosen thus to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom."

And Robert Frost is never more lyrical than in "Come In," -- "As I came to the edge of the woods/ Thrush music, Hark! Now if it was dark outside/ Inside it was dark. Too dark in the woods for a bird by slight of wing/ To better its perch for the night though it still could sing./ Far in the pillard dark thrush music went,/ Almost

like a call to come in to the dark and lament/ But no; I was out for stars/ I would not come in/ I meant not even if asked; and I hadn't been."

The many anapests create a rhythmical echo of the lilting song of the thrush. Whitman also used the thrush to mourn Lincoln's death in "When Lilacs Last in the Door Yard Bloomed."

Swallows appear in many poems. Wallace Stevens' in "Sunday Morning" has an "evening tipped by the consummation of the swallow's wing." And Oscar Wilde's children's story "The Happy Prince," is truly powerful, "Swallow, Swallow, little swallow, far across the city, a poor widow, frail & weak with hunger, shivers in an unheated room. Pluck out the gem of my remaining eye and take it to her." With that final flight of mercy, the swallow, who should have flown south long ago, dies, and the prince's statue stands bare, stripped of all its glory.

Wrens too, have their singers. In *Elegy for Jane*, Theodore Roethke laments the death of a cherished student, "And how, once startled into talk/ The light syllables leapt for her/ A wren, happy, tail into the wind/ Her song trembling the leaves and small branches...If only I could nudge you from this sleep/ My maimed darling/ My skittery pigeon...Over this damp grave, I speak the words of my love/ I with no rights in this matter,/ Neither father nor lover."

Owls haunt *Macbeth*, "It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman that gives the stearnst 'good night' to the murdered king Duncan. And, by contrast, Debby Reynolds in her first hit movie sings, "The old hooty owl, hooty-hoos to the dove: Tammy, Tammy, Tammy's in love." And the dove receives more eternal prominence, symbolizing the Holy Spirit bringing Christ's transfiguration.

Hundreds of other birds grace verse and song; these few caught my ear.
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