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**Birds and Poets : with Other
Papers**

John Burroughs

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: John Burroughs

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-2805-8

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BIRDS AND POETS

WITH OTHER PAPERS

THE WRITINGS OF JOHN BURROUGHS,
VOLUME III WITH PORTRAITS AND MANY
ILLUSTRATIONS

By John Burroughs

PREFACE

I have deliberated a long time about coupling some of my sketches of outdoor nature with a few chapters of a more purely literary character, and thus confiding to my reader what absorbs and delights me inside my four walls, as well as what pleases and engages me outside those walls; especially since I have aimed to bring my outdoor spirit and method within, and still to look upon my subject with the best naturalist's eye I could command.

I hope, therefore, he will not be scared away when I boldly confront him in the latter portions of my book with this name of strange portent, Walt Whitman, for I assure him that in this misjudged man he may press the strongest poetic pulse that has yet beaten in America, or perhaps in modern times. Then, these chapters are a proper supplement or continuation of my themes and their analogy in literature, because in them we shall "follow out these lessons of the earth and air," and behold their application to higher matters.

It is not an artificially graded path strewn with roses that invites us in this part, but, let me hope, something better, a rugged trail through the woods or along the beach where we shall now and then get a whiff of natural air, or a glimpse of something to

"Make the wild blood start
In its mystic springs."

ESOPUS-ON-HUDSON, March, 1877.

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BIRDS AND POETS

I BIRDS AND POETS

"In summer, when the shawes be shene, And leaves be large and long, It is full merry in fair forest To hear the fowlés' song. The wood-wele sang, and wolde not cease, Sitting up on the spray; So loud, it wakened Robin Hood In the green-wood where he lay."

It might almost be said that the birds are all birds of the poets and of no one else, because it is only the poetical temperament that fully responds to them. So true is this, that all the great ornithologists—original namers and biographers of the birds—have been poets in deed if not in word. Audubon is a notable case in point, who, if he had not the tongue or the pen of the poet, certainly had the eye and ear and heart—"the fluid and attaching character"—and the singleness of purpose, the enthusiasm, the unworldliness, the love, that characterize the true and divine race of bards.

So had Wilson, though perhaps not in as large a measure; yet he took fire as only a poet can. While making a journey on foot to Philadelphia, shortly after landing in this country, he caught sight of the red-headed woodpecker flitting among the trees,—a bird that shows like a tricolored scarf among the foliage,—and it so kindled his enthusiasm that his life was devoted to the pursuit of the birds from that day. It was a lucky hit. Wilson had already set up as a poet in Scotland, and was still fermenting when the bird met his eye and suggested to his soul a new outlet for its enthusiasm.

The very idea of a bird is a symbol and a suggestion to the poet. A bird seems to be at the top of the scale, so vehement and intense is his life,—large-brained, large-lunged, hot, ecstatic, his frame charged with buoyancy and his heart with song. The beautiful vagabonds, endowed with every grace, masters of all climes, and knowing no bounds,—how many human aspirations are realized in their free, holiday lives, and how many suggestions to the poet in their flight and song!

Indeed, is not the bird the original type and teacher of the poet, and do we not demand of the human lark or thrush that he "shake out his carols" in the same free and spontaneous manner as his winged prototype? Kingsley has shown how surely the old minnesingers and early ballad-writers have learned of the birds, taking their key-note from the blackbird, or the wood-lark, or the throble, and giving utterance to a melody as simple and unstudied. Such things as the following were surely caught from the fields or the woods:—

"She sat down below a thorn, Fine flowers in the valley, And
there has she her sweet babe borne, And the green leaves
they grow rarely."

Or the best lyric pieces, how like they are to certain bird-songs!—clear, ringing, ecstatic, and suggesting that challenge and triumph which the outpouring of the male bird contains. (Is not the genuine singing, lyrical quality essentially masculine?) Keats and Shelley, perhaps more notably than any other English poets, have the bird organization and the piercing wild-bird cry. This, of course, is not saying that they are the greatest poets, but that they have preëminently the sharp semi-tones of the sparrows and the larks.

But when the general reader thinks of the birds of the poets, he very naturally calls to mind the renowned birds, the lark and the nightingale, Old World melodists, embalmed in Old World poetry, but occasionally appearing on these shores, transported in the verse of some callow singer.

The very oldest poets, the towering antique bards, seem to make little mention of the song-birds. They loved better the soaring,

swooping birds of prey, the eagle, the ominous birds, the vultures, the storks and cranes, or the clamorous sea-birds and the screaming hawks. These suited better the rugged, warlike character of the times and the simple, powerful souls of the singers themselves. Homer must have heard the twittering of the swallows, the cry of the plover, the voice of the turtle, and the warble of the nightingale; but they were not adequate symbols to express what he felt or to adorn his theme. Aeschylus saw in the eagle "the dog of Jove," and his verse cuts like a sword with such a conception.

It is not because the old bards were less as poets, but that they were more as men. To strong, susceptible characters, the music of nature is not confined to sweet sounds. The defiant scream of the hawk circling aloft, the wild whinny of the loon, the whooping of the crane, the booming of the bittern, the vulpine bark of the eagle, the loud trumpeting of the migratory geese sounding down out of the midnight sky; or by the seashore, the coast of New Jersey or Long Island, the wild crooning of the flocks of gulls, repeated, continued by the hour, swirling sharp and shrill, rising and falling like the wind in a storm, as they circle above the beach or dip to the dash of the waves,—are much more welcome in certain moods than any and all mere bird-melodies, in keeping as they are with the shaggy and untamed features of ocean and woods, and suggesting something like the Richard Wagner music in the ornithological orchestra.

"Nor these alone whose notes Nice-fingered art must emulate
in vain, But cawing rooks, and kites that swim sublime
In still repeated circles, screaming loud, The jay, the pie, and
even the boding owl, That hails the rising moon, have charms
for me,"

says Cowper. "I never hear," says Burns in one of his letters, "the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of gray plovers in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion or poetry."

Even the Greek minor poets, the swarm of them that are represented in the Greek Anthology, rarely make affectionate mention of

the birds, except perhaps Sappho, whom Ben Jonson makes speak of the nightingale as —

"The dear glad angel of the spring."

The cicada, the locust, and the grasshopper are often referred to, but rarely by name any of the common birds. That Greek grasshopper must have been a wonderful creature. He was a sacred object in Greece, and is spoken of by the poets as a charming songster. What we would say of birds the Greek said of this favorite insect. When Socrates and Phaedrus came to the fountain shaded by the plane-tree, where they had their famous discourse, Socrates said: "Observe the freshness of the spot, how charming and very delightful it is, and how summer-like and shrill it sounds from the choir of grasshoppers." One of the poets in the Anthology finds a grasshopper struggling in a spider's web, which he releases with the words: —

"Go safe and free with your sweet voice of song."

Another one makes the insect say to a rustic who had captured him: —

"Me, the Nymphs' wayside minstrel whose sweet note O'er sultry hill is heard, and shady grove to float."

Still another sings how a grasshopper took the place of a broken string on his lyre, and "filled the cadence due."

"For while six chords beneath my fingers cried, He with his tuneful voice the seventh supplied; The midday songster of the mountain set His pastoral ditty to my canzonet; And when he sang, his modulated throat Accorded with the lifeless string I smote."

While we are trying to introduce the lark in this country, why not try this Pindaric grasshopper also?

It is to the literary poets and to the minstrels of a softer age that we must look for special mention of the song-birds and for poetical

rhapsodies upon them. The nightingale is the most general favorite, and nearly all the more noted English poets have sung her praises. To the melancholy poet she is melancholy, and to the cheerful she is cheerful. Shakespeare in one of his sonnets speaks of her song as mournful, while Martial calls her the "most garrulous" of birds. Milton sang:—

"Sweet bird, that shunn'st the noise of folly, Most musical,
most melancholy, Thee, chantress, oft the woods among I
woo, to hear thy evening song."

To Wordsworth she told another story:—

"O nightingale! thou surely art A creature of ebullient 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."

In a like vein Coleridge sang:—

"'T is the merry nightingale That crowds and hurries and
precipitates With fast, thick warble his delicious notes."

Keats's poem on the nightingale is doubtless more in the spirit of the bird's strain than any other. It is less a description of the song and more the song itself. Hood called the nightingale

"The sweet and plaintive Sappho of the dell."

I mention the nightingale only to point my remarks upon its American rival, the famous mockingbird of the Southern States, which is also a nightingale, — a night-singer, — and which no doubt excels the Old World bird in the variety and compass of its powers. The two birds belong to totally distinct families, there being no American species which answers to the European nightingale, as there are that answer to the robin, the cuckoo, the blackbird, and numerous others. Philomel has the color, manners, and habits of a

thrush,—our hermit thrush,—but it is not a thrush at all, but a warbler. I gather from the books that its song is protracted and full rather than melodious,—a capricious, long-continued warble, doubling and redoubling, rising and falling, issuing from the groves and the great gardens, and associated in the minds of the poets with love and moonlight and the privacy of sequestered walks. All our sympathies and attractions are with the bird, and we do not forget that Arabia and Persia are there back of its song.

Our nightingale has mainly the reputation of the caged bird, and is famed mostly for its powers of mimicry, which are truly wonderful, enabling the bird to exactly reproduce and even improve upon the notes of almost any other songster. But in a state of freedom it has a song of its own which is infinitely rich and various. It is a garrulous polyglot when it chooses to be, and there is a dash of the clown and the buffoon in its nature which too often flavors its whole performance, especially in captivity; but in its native haunts, and when its love-passion is upon it, the serious and even grand side of its character comes out. In Alabama and Florida its song may be heard all through the sultry summer night, at times low and plaintive, then full and strong. A friend of Thoreau and a careful observer, who has resided in Florida, tells me that this bird is a much more marvelous singer than it has the credit of being. He describes a habit it has of singing on the wing on moonlight nights, that would be worth going South to hear. Starting from a low bush, it mounts in the air and continues its flight apparently to an altitude of several hundred feet, remaining on the wing a number of minutes, and pouring out its song with the utmost clearness and abandon,—a slowly rising musical rocket that fills the night air with harmonious sounds. Here are both the lark and nightingale in one; and if poets were as plentiful down South as they are in New England, we should have heard of this song long ago, and had it celebrated in appropriate verse. But so far only one Southern poet, Wilde, has accredited the bird this song. This he has done in the following admirable sonnet:—

TO THE MOCKINGBIRD Winged mimic of the woods! thou
motley fool! Who shall thy gay buffoonery describe? Thine
ever-ready notes of ridicule Pursue thy fellows still with jest

and gibe. Wit—sophist—songster—Yorick of thy tribe, Thou sportive satirist of Nature's school, To thee the palm of scoffing we ascribe, Arch scoffer, and mad Abbot of Misrule! For such thou art by day—but all night long Thou pour'st a soft, sweet, pensive, solemn strain, As if thou didst in this, thy moonlight song, Like to the melancholy Jaques, complain, Musing on falsehood, violence, and wrong, And sighing for thy motley coat again.

Aside from this sonnet, the mockingbird has got into poetical literature, so far as I know, in only one notable instance, and that in the page of a poet where we would least expect to find him,—a bard who habitually bends his ear only to the musical surge and rhythmus of total nature, and is as little wont to turn aside for any special beauties or points as the most austere of the ancient masters. I refer to Walt Whitman's "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking," in which the mockingbird plays a part. The poet's treatment of the bird is entirely ideal and eminently characteristic. That is to say, it is altogether poetical and not at all ornithological; yet it contains a rendering or free translation of a bird-song—the nocturne of the mockingbird, singing and calling through the night for its lost mate—that I consider quite unmatched in our literature:—

Once, Paumanok, When the snows had melted, and the Fifth-month grass was growing, Up this seashore, in some briers, Two guests from Alabama—two together, And their nest, and four light green eggs, spotted with brown, And every day the he-bird, to and fro, near at hand, And every day the she-bird, crouched on her nest, silent, with bright eyes, And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them, Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating. *Shine! Shine! Shine! Pour down your warmth, great Sun! While we bask—we two together. Two together! Winds blow South, or winds blow North, Day come white, or night come black, Home, or rivers and mountains from home, Singing all time, minding no time, If we two but keep together.* Till of a sudden, Maybe killed unknown to her mate, One forenoon the she-bird crouched not on the nest, Nor returned that afternoon, nor the next, Nor ever appeared again. And thenceforward all summer, in the

sound of the sea, And at night, under the full of the moon, in calmer weather, Over the hoarse surging of the sea, Or flitting from brier to brier by day, I saw, I heard at intervals, the remaining one, the he-bird, The solitary guest from Alabama. *Blow! blow! blow! Blow up, sea-winds, along Paumanok's shore! I wait and I wait, till you blow my mate to me.* Yes, when the stars glistened, All night long, on the prong of a moss-scalloped stake, Down, almost amid the slapping waves, Sat the lone singer, wonderful, causing tears. He called on his mate: He poured forth the meanings which I, of all men, know.

.....

Soothe! soothe! soothe! Close on its wave soothes the wave behind, And again another behind, embracing and lapping, every one close, But my love soothes not me, not me. Low hangs the moon – it rose late. Oh it is lagging – oh I think it is heavy with love, with love. Oh madly the sea pushes, pushes upon the land, With love – with love. O night! do I not see my love fluttering out there among the breakers! What is that little black thing I see there in the white? Loud! loud! loud! Loud I call to you, my love! High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves: Surely you must know who is here, is here; You must know who I am, my love. Low-hanging moon! What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow? Oh it is the shape, the shape of my mate! O moon, do not keep her from me any longer. Land! land! O land! Whichever way I turn, oh I think you could give my mate back again, if you only would; For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look. O rising stars! Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you. O throat! O trembling throat! Sound clearer through the atmosphere! Pierce the woods, the earth; Somewhere listening to catch you, must be the one I want. Shake out, carols! Solitary here – the night's carols! Carols of lonesome love! Death's carols! Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon! Oh, under that moon, where she droops almost down into the sea! O reckless, despairing carols. But soft! sink low! Soft! let me just murmur; And do you wait a moment, you husky-noised sea; For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me, So faint – I must be still, be still to listen! But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to

*me.Hither, my love! Here I am! Here! With this just-sustained note
I announce myself to you; This gentle call is for you, my love, for
you.Do not be decoyed elsewhere! That is the whistle of the wind –
it is not my voice; That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray;
Those are the shadows of leaves.O darkness! Oh in vain! Oh I am
very sick and sorrowful.*

.....

The bird that occupies the second place to the nightingale in British poetical literature is the skylark, a pastoral bird as the Philomel is an arboreal, — a creature of light and air and motion, the companion of the plowman, the shepherd, the harvester, — whose nest is in the stubble and whose tryst is in the clouds. Its life affords that kind of contrast which the imagination loves, — one moment a plain pedestrian bird, hardly distinguishable from the ground, the next a soaring, untiring songster, reveling in the upper air, challenging the eye to follow him and the ear to separate his notes.

The lark's song is not especially melodious, but is blithesome, sibilant, and unceasing. Its type is the grass, where the bird makes its home, abounding, multitudinous, the notes nearly all alike and all in the same key, but rapid, swarming, prodigal, showering down as thick and fast as drops of rain in a summer shower.

Many noted poets have sung the praises of the lark, or been kindled by his example. Shelley's ode and Wordsworth's "To a Skylark" are well known to all readers of poetry, while every schoolboy will recall Hogg's poem, beginning: —

"Bird of the wilderness, Blithesome and cumberless, Sweet be thy matin o'er moorland and lea! Emblem of happiness, Blest is thy dwelling-place — Oh to abide in the desert with thee!"

I heard of an enthusiastic American who went about English fields hunting a lark with Shelley's poem in his hand, thinking no doubt to use it as a kind of guide-book to the intricacies and harmonies of the song. He reported not having heard any larks, though I have little doubt they were soaring and singing about him all the time, though of course they did not sing to his ear the song that Shelley heard. The poets are the best natural historians, only you

must know how to read them. They translate the facts largely and freely. A celebrated lady once said to Turner, "I confess I cannot see in nature what you do." "Ah, madam," said the complacent artist, "don't you wish you could!"

Shelley's poem is perhaps better known, and has a higher reputation among literary folk, than Wordsworth's; it is more lyrical and lark-like; but it is needlessly long, though no longer than the lark's song itself, but the lark can't help it, and Shelley can. I quote only a few stanzas:—

"In the golden lightning Of the sunken sun, O'er which
clouds are bright'ning Thou dost float and run, Like an un-
bodied joy whose race is just begun. "The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight; Like a star of heaven, In the broad
daylight Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,
"Keen as are the arrows Of that silver sphere, Whose intense
lamp narrows In the white dawn clear, Until we hardly see—
we feel that it is there; "All the earth and air With thy voice is
loud, As, when Night is bare, From one lonely cloud The
moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflowed."

Wordsworth has written two poems upon the lark, in one of which he calls the bird "pilgrim of the sky." This is the one quoted by Emerson in "Parnassus." Here is the concluding stanza:—

"Leave to the nightingale her shady wood; A privacy of glo-
rious 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."

The other poem I give entire:—

"Up with me! up with me into the clouds! For thy song, Lark,
is strong; Up with me, up with me into the clouds! Singing,
singing, With clouds and sky about thee ringing, Lift me,
guide me till I find That spot which seems so to thy mind! "I
have walked through wilderness dreary, And to-day my

heart is weary; Had I now the wings of a Faery Up to thee would I fly. There is madness about thee, and joy divine In that song of thine; Lift me, guide me high and high To thy banqueting-place in the sky. "Joyous as morning Thou art laughing and scorning; Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest, And, though little troubled with sloth, Drunken Lark! thou wouldst be loth To be such a traveler as I. Happy, happy Liver! With a soul as strong as a mountain river, Pouring out praise to the Almighty Giver, Joy and jollity be with us both! "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."

But better than either — better and more than a hundred pages — is Shakespeare's simple line, —

"Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings,"

or John Lyly's, his contemporary, —

"Who is't now we hear? None but the lark so shrill and clear;
Now at heaven's gate she claps her wings, The morn not waking till she sings."

We have no well-known pastoral bird in the Eastern States that answers to the skylark. The American pipit or titlark and the shore lark, both birds of the far north, and seen in the States only in fall and winter, are said to sing on the wing in a similar strain. Common enough in our woods are two birds that have many of the habits and manners of the lark — the water-thrush and the golden-crowned thrush, or oven-bird. They are both walkers, and the latter frequently sings on the wing up aloft after the manner of the lark. Starting from its low perch, it rises in a spiral flight far above the tallest trees, and breaks out in a clear, ringing, ecstatic song, sweeter and more richly modulated than the skylark's, but brief, ceasing almost before you have noticed it; whereas the skylark goes singing away

after you have forgotten him and returned to him half a dozen times.

But on the Great Plains, of the West there; is a bird whose song resembles the skylark's quite closely and is said to be not at all inferior. This is Sprague's pipit, sometimes called the Missouri skylark, an excelsior songster, which from far up in the transparent blue rains down its notes for many minutes together. It is, no doubt, destined to figure in the future poetical literature of the West.

Throughout the northern and eastern parts of the Union the lark would find a dangerous rival in the bobolink, a bird that has no European prototype, and no near relatives anywhere, standing quite alone, unique, and, in the qualities of hilarity and musical tintinnabulation, with a song unequalled. He has already a secure place in general literature, having been laureated by no less a poet than Bryant, and invested with a lasting human charm in the sunny page of Irving, and is the only one of our songsters, I believe, that the mockingbird cannot parody or imitate. He affords the most marked example of exuberant pride, and a glad, rollicking, holiday spirit, that can be seen among our birds. Every note expresses complacency and glee. He is a beau of the first pattern, and, unlike any other bird of my acquaintance, pushes his gallantry to the point of wheeling gayly into the train of every female that comes along, even after the season of courtship is over and the matches are all settled; and when she leads him on too wild a chase, he turns, lightly about and breaks out with a song is precisely analogous to a burst of gay and self-satisfied laughter, as much as to say, "*Ha! ha! ha! I must have my fun, Miss Silverthimble, thimble, thimble, if I break every heart in the meadow, see, see, see!*"

At the approach of the breeding season the bobolink undergoes a complete change; his form changes, his color changes, his flight changes. From mottled brown or brindle he becomes black and white, earning, in some localities, the shocking name of "skunk bird;" his small, compact form becomes broad and conspicuous, and his ordinary flight is laid aside for a mincing, affected gait, in which he seems to use only the very tips of his wings. It is very noticeable what a contrast he presents to his mate at this season, not only in color but in manners, she being as shy and retiring as he is forward and hilarious. Indeed, she seems disagreeably serious and indis-