RUSKIN JOHN

LOVE'S MEINIE: THREE LECTURES ON GREEK AND ENGLISH BIRDS

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Содержание

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PREFACE

Brantwood, 9th June, 1881.
Quarter past five, morning.

The birds chirping feebly,—mostly chaffinches answering each other, the rest discomposed, I fancy, by the June snow;[1] the lake neither smooth nor rippled, but like a surface of perfectly bright glass, ill cast; the lines of wave few and irregular, like flaws in the planes of a fine crystal.

I see this book was begun eight years ago;—then intended to contain only four Oxford lectures: but the said lectures also 'intended' to contain the cream of forty volumes of scientific ornithology. Which intentions, all and sundry, having gone, Carlyle would have said, to water, and more piously-minded persons, to fire, I am obliged now to cast my materials into another form: and here, at all events, is a bundle of what is readiest under my hand. The nature and name of which I must

[1] The summits of the Old Man, of Wetherlam, and Helvellyn, were all white, on the morning when this was written.

try to make a little more intelligible than my books have lately been, either in text or title.

'Meinie' is the old English word for 'Many,' in the sense of 'a many' persons attending one, as bridesmaids, when in sixes or tens or dozens;—courtiers, footmen, and the like. It passes gradually into 'Menial,' and unites the senses of Multitude and Servitude.

In the passages quoted from, or referred to in, Chaucer's translation of the Romance of the Rose, at the end of the first lecture, any reader who cares for a clue to the farther significances of the title, may find one to lead him safely through richer labyrinths of thought than mine: and ladder enough also,—if there be either any heavenly, or pure earthly, Love, in his own breast,—to guide him to a pretty bird's nest; both in the Romances of the Rose and of Juliet, and in the Sermons of St. Francis and St. Bernard.

The term 'Lecture' is retained, for though I lecture no more, I still write habitually in a manner suited for oral delivery, and imagine myself speaking to my pupils, if ever I am happily thinking in myself. But it will be also seen that by the help of this very familiarity of style, I am endeavoring, in these and my other writings on Natural History, to compel in the student a clearness of thought and precision of language which have not hitherto been in any wise the virtues, or skills, of scientific persons. Thoughtless readers, who imagine that my own style (such as it is, the one thing which the British public concedes to

me as a real power) has been formed without pains, may smile at the confidence with which I speak of altering accepted, and even long-established, nomenclature. But the use which I now have of language has taken me forty years to attain; and those forty years spent, mostly, in walking through the wilderness of this world's vain words, seeking how they might be pruned into some better strength. And I think it likely that at last I may put in my pruning-hook with effect; for indeed a time must come when English fathers and mothers will wish their children to learn English again, and to speak it for all scholarly purposes; and, if they use, instead, Greek or Latin, to use them only that they may be understood by Greeks or Latins;[2] and not that they may mystify the illiterate many of their own land. Dead languages, so called, may at least be left at rest, if not honored; and must not be torn in mutilation out of their tumuli, that the skins and bones of them may help to hold our living nonsense together; while languages called living, but which live only to slack themselves into slang, or bloat themselves into bombast, must one day have new grammars written for their license, and new laws for their insolence.

Observe, however, that the recast methods of classification adopted in this book, and in 'Proserpina,' must be carefully distinguished from their recastings of nomenclature. I am perfectly sure that it is wiser to use plain short words than obscure

[2] Greek is now a living nation's language, from Messina to Delos—and Latin still lives for the well-trained churchmen and gentlemen of Italy.

long ones; but not in the least sure that I am doing the best that can be done for my pupils, in classing swallows with owls, or milkworts with violets. The classification is always given as tentative; and, at its utmost, elementary: but the nomenclature, as in all probability conclusive.

For the rest, the success and the service of all depend on the more or less thorough accomplishment of plans long since laid, and which would have been good for little if their coping could at once have been conjectured or foretold in their foundations. It has been throughout my trust, that if Death should write on these, "What this man began to build, he was not able to finish," God may also write on them, not in anger, but in aid,

"A stronger than he, cometh."

"Il etoit tout convert d'oisiaulx."

Romance of the Rose.

LECTURE I.[3]
THE ROBIN

1. Among the more splendid pictures in the Exhibition of the Old Masters, this year, you cannot but remember the Vandyke portraits of the two sons of the Duke of Lennox. I think you cannot but remember it, because it would be difficult to find, even among the works of Vandyke, a more striking representation of the youth of our English noblesse; nor one in which the painter had more exerted himself, or with better success, in rendering the decorous pride and natural grace of honorable aristocracy.

Vandyke is, however, inferior to Titian and Velasquez, in that his effort to show this noblesse of air and persons may always be detected; also the aristocracy of Vandyke's day were already so far fearful of their own position as to feel anxiety that it should be immediately recognized. And the effect of the painter's conscious deference, and of the equally conscious pride of the boys, as they stood to be painted, has been somewhat to shorten the power of the one, and to abase the dignity of the other. And thus, in the midst of my admiration of the youths' beautiful faces, and natural quality of majesty, set off by all splendors of dress and courtesies of art, I could not forbear questioning with myself

[3] Delivered at Oxford, March 15th, 1873.

what the true value was, in the scales of creation, of these fair human beings who set so high a value on themselves; and,—as if the only answer,—the words kept repeating themselves in my ear, "Ye are of more value than many sparrows."

2. Passeres, στρονθος [Greek: strouthos]—the things that open their wings, and are not otherwise noticeable; small birds of the land and wood; the food of the serpent, of man, or of the stronger creatures of their own kind,—that even these, though among the simplest and obscurest of beings, have yet price in the eyes of their Maker, and that the death of one of them cannot take place but by His permission, has long been the subject of declamation in our pulpits, and the ground of much sentiment in nursery education. But the declamation is so aimless, and the sentiment so hollow, that, practically, the chief interest of the leisure of mankind has been found in the destruction of the creatures which they professed to believe even the Most High would not see perish without pity; and, in recent days, it is fast becoming the only definition of aristocracy, that the principal business of its life is the killing of sparrows.

Sparrows, or pigeons, or partridges, what does it matter? "Centum mille perdrices plumbo confecit;"[4] that is, indeed, too often the sum of the life of an English lord; much questionable now, if *indeed* of more value than that of many sparrows.

3. Is it not a strange fact, that, interested in nothing so much for the last two hundred years, as in his horses, he yet left it

[4] The epitaph on Count Zachdarm, in "Sartor Resartus."

to the farmers of Scotland to relieve draught horses from the bearing-rein?[5] Is it not one equally strange that, master of the forests of England for a thousand years, and of its libraries for three hundred, he left the natural history of birds to be written by a card-printer's lad of Newcastle?[6] Written, and not written, for indeed we have no natural history of birds written yet. It cannot be written but by a scholar and a gentleman; and no English gentleman in recent times has ever thought of birds except as flying targets, or flavorous dishes. The only piece of natural history worth the name in the English language, that I know of, is in the few lines of Milton on the Creation. The only example of a proper manner of contribution to natural history is in White's Letters from Selborne. You know I have always spoken of Bewick as pre-eminently a vulgar or boorish person, though of splendid honor and genius; his vulgarity shows in nothing so much as in the poverty of the details he has collected, with the best intentions, and the shrewdest sense, for English ornithology. His imagination is not cultivated enough to enable him to choose, or arrange.

4. Nor can much more be said for the observations of modern science. It is vulgar in a far worse way, by its arrogance and materialism. In general, the scientific natural history of a bird consists of four articles,—first, the name and estate of the gentleman whose gamekeeper shot the last that was seen

[5] Sir Arthur Helps. "Animals and their Masters," p. 67.

[6] Ariadne Florentina, vi. 45.

in England; secondly, two or three stories of doubtful origin, printed in every book on the subject of birds for the last fifty years; thirdly, an account of the feathers, from the comb to the rump, with enumeration of the colors which are never more to be seen on the living bird by English eyes; and, lastly, a discussion of the reasons why none of the twelve names which former naturalists have given to the bird are of any further use, and why the present author has given it a thirteenth, which is to be universally, and to the end of time, accepted.

5. You may fancy this is caricature; but the abyss of confusion produced by modern science in nomenclature, and the utter void of the abyss when you plunge into it after any one useful fact, surpass all caricature. I have in my hand thirteen plates of thirteen species of eagles; eagles all, or hawks all, or falcons all —whichever name you choose for the great race of the hook-headed birds of prey—some so like that you can't tell the one from the other, at the distance at which I show them to you, all absolutely alike in their eagle or falcon character, having, every one, the falx for its beak, and every one, flesh for its prey. Do you suppose the unhappy student is to be allowed to call them all eagles, or all falcons, to begin with, as would be the first condition of a wise nomenclature, establishing resemblance by specific name, before marking variation by individual name? No such luck. I hold you up the plates of the thirteen birds one by one, and read you their names off the back:—

The first, is	an Aquila.
The second,	a Haliaetus.
The third,	a Milvus.
The fourth,	a Pandion.
The fifth,	an Asturi.
The sixth,	a Falco.
The seventh,	a Pernis.
The eighth,	a Circus.
The ninth,	a Buteo.
The tenth,	an Accipitrino.
The eleventh,	an Accipiter.
The twelfth,	an Erythropus.
And the thirteenth,	a Tinnunculus.

There's a nice little lesson to entertain a parish school-boy with, beginning his natural history of birds!

6. There are not so many varieties of robin as of hawk, but the scientific classifiers are not to be beaten. If they cannot find a number of similar birds to give different names to, they will give two names to the same one. Here are two pictures of your own redbreast, out of the two best modern works on ornithology. In one, it is called "Motacilla rubecula;" in the other, "Rubecula familiaris."

7. It is indeed one of the most serious, as one of the most absurd, weaknesses, of modern naturalists to imagine that *any* presently invented nomenclature can stand, even were it adopted by the consent of nations, instead of the conceit of individuals. It will take fifty years' digestion before the recently ascertained elements of natural science can permit the arrangement of species in any permanently (even over a limited period) namable order; nor then, unless a great man is born to perceive and exhibit such order. In the meantime, the simplest and most descriptive nomenclature is the best. Every one of these birds, for instance, might be called falco in Latin, hawk in English, some word being added to distinguish the genus, which should describe

its principal aspect or habit. Falco montium, Mountain Hawk; Falco silvarum, Wood Hawk; Falco procellarum, Sea Hawk; and the like. Then, one descriptive epithet would mark species. Falco montium, aureus, Golden Eagle; Falco silvarum, apivorus, Honey Buzzard; and so on; and the naturalists of Vienna, Paris, and London should confirm the names of known creatures, in conclave, once every half-century, and let them so stand for the next fifty years.

8. In the meantime, you yourselves, or, to speak more generally, the young rising scholars of England,—all of you who care for life as well as literature, and for spirit,—even the poor souls of birds,—as well as lettering of their classes in books,—you, with all care, should cherish the old Saxon-English and Norman-French names of birds, and ascertain them with the most affectionate research—never despising even the rudest or most provincial forms: all of them will, some day or other, give you clue to historical points of interest. Take, for example, the common English name of this low-flying falcon, the most tamable and affectionate of his tribe, and therefore, I suppose, fastest vanishing from field and wood, the buzzard. That name comes from the Latin "buteo," still retained by the ornithologists; but, in its original form, valueless, to you. But when you get it comfortably corrupted into Provençal "Busac," (whence gradually the French busard, and our buzzard,) you get from it the delightful compound "busacador," "adorer of buzzards"—meaning, generally, a sporting person; and then you have Dante's

Bertrand de Born, the first troubadour of war, bearing witness to you how the love of mere hunting and falconry was already, in his day, degrading the military classes, and, so far from being a necessary adjunct of the noble disposition of lover or soldier, was, even to contempt, showing itself separate from both.

> "Le ric home, cassador,
> M'enneion, e'l buzacador.
> Parlan de volada, d'austor,
> Ne jamais, d'armas, ni d'amor."
>
> The rich man, the chaser,
> Tires me to death; and the adorer of buzzards.
> They talk of covey and hawk,
> And never of arms, nor of love.

"Cassador," of course, afterwards becomes "chasseur," and "austor" "vautour." But after you have read this, and familiarized your ear with the old word, how differently Milton's phrase will ring to you,—"Those who thought no better of the Living God than of a buzzard idol,"—and how literal it becomes, when we think of the actual difference between a member of Parliament in Milton's time, and the Busacador of to-day;—and all this freshness and value in the reading, observe, come of your keeping the word which great men have used for the bird, instead of letting the anatomists blunder out a new one from their Latin dictionaries.

9. There are not so many namable varieties, I just now said, of robin as of falcon; but this is somewhat inaccurately stated. Those thirteen birds represented a very large proportion of the entire group of the birds of prey, which in my sevenfold classification I recommended you to call universally, "hawks." The robin is only one of the far greater multitude of small birds which live almost indiscriminately on grain or insects, and which I recommended you to call generally "sparrows"; but of the robin itself, there are two important European varieties—one red-breasted, and the other blue-breasted.

10. You probably, some of you, never heard of the blue-breast; very few, certainly, have seen one alive, and, if alive, certainly not wild in England.

Here is a picture of it, daintily done,[7] and you can see the pretty blue shield on its breast, perhaps, at this distance. Vain shield, if ever the fair little thing is wretched enough to set foot on English ground! I find the last that was seen was shot at Margate so long ago as 1842,—and there seems to be no official record of any visit before that, since Mr. Thomas Embledon shot one on Newcastle town moor in 1816. But this rarity of visit to us is strange; other birds have no such clear objection to being shot, and really seem to come to England expressly for the purpose. And yet this blue-bird—(one can't say "blue robin"—I think we shall have to call him "bluet," like the cornflower)—stays in Sweden, where it sings so sweetly that it is called "a hundred

[7] Mr. Gould's, in his "Birds of Great Britain."

tongues."

11. That, then, is the utmost which the lords of land, and masters of science, do for us in their watch upon our feathered suppliants. One kills them, the other writes classifying epitaphs.

We have next to ask what the poets, painters, and monks have done.

The poets—among whom I affectionately and reverently class the sweet singers of the nursery, mothers and nurses—have done much; very nearly all that I care for your thinking of. The painters and monks, the one being so greatly under the influence of the other, we may for the present class together; and may almost sum their contributions to ornithology in saying that they have plucked the wings from birds, to make angels of men, and the claws from birds, to make devils of men.

If you were to take away from religious art these two great helps of its—I must say, on the whole, very feeble—imagination; if you were to take from it, I say, the power of putting wings on shoulders, and claws on fingers and toes, how wonderfully the sphere of its angelic and diabolic characters would be contracted! Reduced only to the sources of expression in face or movements, you might still find in good early sculpture very sufficient devils; but the best angels would resolve themselves, I think, into little more than, and not often into so much as, the likenesses of pretty women, with that grave and (I do not say it ironically) majestic expression which they put on, when, being very fond of their husbands and children, they seriously think either the one or the

other have misbehaved themselves.

12. And it is not a little discouraging for me, and may well make you doubtful of my right judgment in this endeavor to lead you into closer attention to the bird, with its wings and claws still in its own possession;—it is discouraging, I say, to observe that the beginning of such more faithful and accurate observation in former art, is exactly coeval with the commencement of its decline. The feverish and ungraceful natural history of Paul, called, "of the birds," Paolo degli Uccelli, produced, indeed, no harmful result on the minds of his contemporaries, they watched in him, with only contemptuous admiration, the fantasy of zoological instinct which filled his house with painted dogs, cats, and birds, because he was too poor to fill it with real ones. Their judgment of this morbidly naturalistic art was conclusively expressed by the sentence of Donatello, when going one morning into the Old Market, to buy fruit, and finding the animal painter uncovering a picture, which had cost him months of care, (curiously symbolic in its subject, the infidelity of St. Thomas, of the investigatory fingering of the natural historian,) "Paul, my friend," said Donatello, "thou art uncovering the picture just when thou shouldst be shutting it up."

13. No harm, therefore, I repeat, but, on the contrary, some wholesome stimulus to the fancy of men like Luca and Donatello themselves, came of the grotesque and impertinent zoology of Uccello.

But the fatalest institutor of proud modern anatomical and

scientific art, and of all that has polluted the dignity, and darkened the charity, of the greater ages, was Antonio Pollajuolo of Florence. Antonio (that is to say) the Poulterer—so named from the trade of his grandfather, and with just so much of his grandfather's trade left in his own disposition, that being set by Lorenzo Ghiberti to complete one of the ornamental festoons of the gates of the Florentine Baptistery, there, (says Vasari) "Antonio produced a quail, which may still be seen, and is so beautiful, nay, so perfect, that it wants nothing but the power of flight."

14. Here, the morbid tendency was as attractive as it was subtle. Ghiberti himself fell under the influence of it; allowed the borders of his gates, with their fluttering birds and bossy fruits, to dispute the spectators' favor with the religious subjects they inclosed; and, from that day forward, minuteness and muscularity were, with curious harmony of evil, delighted in together; and the lancet and the microscope, in the hands of fools, were supposed to be complete substitutes for imagination in the souls of wise men: so that even the best artists are gradually compelled, or beguiled, into compliance with the curiosity of their day; and Francia, in the city of Bologna, is held to be a "kind of god, more particularly" (again I quote Vasari) "after he had painted a set of caparisons for the Duke of Urbino, on which he depicted a great forest all on fire, and whence there rushes forth an immense number of every kind of animal, with several human figures. This terrific, yet truly beautiful representation,

was all the more highly esteemed for the time that had been expended on it in the plumage of the birds, and other minutiæ in the delineation of the different animals, and in the diversity of the branches and leaves of the various trees seen therein;" and thenceforward the catastrophe is direct, to the ornithological museums which Breughel painted for gardens of Eden, and to the still life and dead game of Dutch celebrities.

15. And yet I am going to invite you to-day to examine, down to almost microscopic detail, the aspect of a small bird, and to invite you to do this, as a most expedient and sure step in your study of the greatest art.

But the difference in our motive of examination will entirely alter the result. To paint birds that we may show how minutely we can paint, is among the most contemptible occupations of art. To paint them, that we may show how beautiful they are, is not indeed one of its highest, but quite one of its pleasantest and most useful; it is a skill within the reach of every student of average capacity, and which, so far as acquired, will assuredly both make their hearts kinder, and their lives happier.

Without further preamble, I will ask you to look to-day, more carefully than usual, at your well-known favorite, and to think about him with some precision.

16. And first, Where does he come from? I stated that my lectures were to be on English and Greek birds; but we are apt to fancy the robin all our own. How exclusively, do you suppose, he really belongs to us? You would think this was the first point

to be settled in any book about him. I have hunted all my books through, and can't tell you how much he is our own, or how far he is a traveler.

And, indeed, are not all our ideas obscure about migration itself? You are broadly told that a bird travels, and how wonderful it is that it finds its way; but you are scarcely ever told, or led to think, what it really travels for—whether for food, for warmth, or for seclusion—and how the traveling is connected with its fixed home. Birds have not their town and country houses,—their villas in Italy, and shooting boxes in Scotland. The country in which they build their nests is their proper home,—the country, that is to say, in which they pass the spring and summer. Then they go south in the winter, for food and warmth; but in what lines, and by what stages? The general definition of a migrant in this hemisphere is a bird that goes north to build its nest, and south for the winter; but, then, the one essential point to know about it is the breadth and latitude of the zone it properly inhabits, —that is to say, in which it builds its nest; next, its habits of life, and extent and line of southing in the winter; and finally, its manner of traveling.

17. Now, here is this entirely familiar bird, the robin. Quite the first thing that strikes me about it, looking at it as a painter, is the small effect it seems to have had on the minds of the southern nations. I trace nothing of it definitely, either in the art or literature of Greece or Italy. I find, even, no definite name for it; you don't know if Lesbia's "passer" had a red breast, or

a blue, or a brown. And yet Mr. Gould says it is abundant in all parts of Europe, in all the islands of the Mediterranean, and in Madeira and the Azores. And then he says—(now notice the puzzle of this),—"In many parts of the Continent it is a migrant, and, contrary to what obtains with us, is there treated as a vagrant, for there is scarcely a country across the water in which it is not shot down and eaten."

"In many parts of the Continent it is a migrant." In what parts—how far—in what manner?

18. In none of the old natural history books can I find any account of the robin as a traveler, but there is, for once, some sufficient reason for their reticence. He has a curious fancy in his manner of traveling. Of all birds, you would think he was likely to do it in the cheerfulest way, and he does it in the saddest. Do you chance to have read, in the Life of Charles Dickens, how fond he was of taking long walks in the night and alone? The robin, en voyage, is the Charles Dickens of birds. He always travels in the night, and alone; rests, in the day, wherever day chances to find him; sings a little, and pretends he hasn't been anywhere. He goes as far, in the winter, as the north-west of Africa; and in Lombardy, arrives from the south early in March; but does not stay long, going on into the Alps, where he prefers wooded and wild districts. So, at least, says my Lombard informant.

I do not find him named in the list of Cretan birds; but even if often seen, his dim red breast was little likely to make much impression on the Greeks, who knew the flamingo, and had made

it, under the name of Phœnix or Phœnicopterus, the center of their myths of scarlet birds. They broadly embraced the general aspect of the smaller and more obscure species, under the term ξονθος [Greek: xonthos], which, as I understand their use of it, exactly implies the indescribable silky brown, the groundwork of all other color in so many small birds, which is indistinct among green leaves, and absolutely identifies itself with dead ones, or with mossy stems.

19. I think I show it you more accurately in the robin's back than I could in any other bird; its mode of transition into more brilliant color is, in him, elementarily simple; and although there is nothing, or rather because there is nothing, in his plumage, of interest like that of tropical birds, or even of our own game-birds, I think it will be desirable for you to learn first from the breast of the robin what a feather is. Once knowing that, thoroughly, we can further learn from the swallow what a wing is; from the chough what a beak is; and from the falcon what a claw is.

I must take care, however, in neither of these last two particulars, to do injustice to our little English friend here; and before we come to his feathers, must ask you to look at his bill and his feet.

20. I do not think it is distinctly enough felt by us that the beak of a bird is not only its mouth, but its hand, or rather its two hands. For, as its arms and hands are turned into wings, all it has to depend upon, in economical and practical life, is its beak. The beak, therefore, is at once its sword, its carpenter's tool-box,

and its dressing-case; partly also its musical instrument; all this besides its function of seizing and preparing the food, in which functions alone it has to be a trap, carving-knife, and teeth, all in one.

21. It is this need of the beak's being a mechanical tool which chiefly regulates the form of a bird's face, as opposed to a four-footed animal's. If the question of food were the only one, we might wonder why there were not more four-footed creatures living on seeds than there are; or why those that do—field-mice and the like—have not beaks instead of teeth. But the fact is that a bird's beak is by no means a perfect eating or food-seizing instrument. A squirrel is far more dexterous with a nut than a cockatoo; and a dog manages a bone incomparably better than an eagle. But the beak has to do so much more! Pruning feathers, building nests, and the incessant discipline in military arts, are all to be thought of, as much as feeding.

Soldiership, especially, is a much more imperious necessity among birds than quadrupeds. Neither lions nor wolves habitually use claws or teeth in contest with their own species; but birds, for their partners, their nests, their hunting-grounds, and their personal dignity, are nearly always in contention; their courage is unequaled by that of any other race of animals capable of comprehending danger; and their pertinacity and endurance have, in all ages, made them an example to the brave, and an amusement to the base, among mankind.

22. Nevertheless, since as sword, as trowel, or as pocket-

comb, the beak of the bird has to be pointed, the collection of seeds may be conveniently intrusted to this otherwise penetrative instrument, and such food as can only be obtained by probing crevices, splitting open fissures, or neatly and minutely picking things up, is allotted, pre-eminently, to the bird species.

The food of the robin, as you know, is very miscellaneous. Linnæus says of the Swedish one, that it is "delectatus euonymi baccis,"—"delighted with dogwood berries,"—the dogwood growing abundantly in Sweden, as once in Forfarshire, where it grew, though only a bush usually in the south, with trunks a foot or eighteen inches in diameter, and the tree thirty feet high. But the Swedish robin's taste for its berries is to be noted by you, because, first, the dogwood berry is commonly said to be so bitter that it is not eaten by birds (Loudon, "Arboretum," ii., 497, 1.); and, secondly, because it is a pretty coincidence that this most familiar of household birds should feed fondly from the tree which gives the housewife her spindle,—the proper name of the dogwood in English, French, and German being alike "Spindle-tree." It feeds, however, with us, certainly, most on worms and insects. I am not sure how far the following account of its mode of dressing its dinners may be depended on: I take it from an old book on Natural History, but find it, more or less, confirmed by others: "It takes a worm by one extremity in its beak, and beats it on the ground till the inner part comes away. Then seizing it in a similar manner by the other end, it entirely cleanses the outer part, which alone it eats."

One's first impression is that this must be a singularly unpleasant operation for the worm, however fastidiously delicate and exemplary in the robin. But I suppose the real meaning is, that as a worm lives by passing earth through its body, the robin merely compels it to quit this—not ill-gotten, indeed, but now quite unnecessary—wealth. We human creatures, who have lived the lives of worms, collecting dust, are served by Death in exactly the same manner.

23. You will find that the robin's beak, then, is a very prettily representative one of general bird power. As a weapon, it is very formidable indeed; he can kill an adversary of his own kind with one blow of it in the throat; and is so pugnacious, "valde pugnax," says Linnæus, "ut non una arbor duos capiat erithacos,"—"no single tree can hold two cock-robins;" and for precision of seizure, the little flat hook at the end of the upper mandible is one of the most delicately formed points of forceps which you can find among the grain eaters. But I pass to one of his more special perfections.

24. He is very notable in the exquisite silence and precision of his movements, as opposed to birds who either creak in flying, or waddle in walking. "Always quiet," says Gould, "for the silkiness of his plumage renders his movements noiseless, and the rustling of his wings is never heard, any more than his tread on earth, over which he bounds with amazing sprightliness." You know how much importance I have always given, among the fine arts, to good dancing. If you think of it, you will find

one of the robin's very chief ingratiatory faculties is his dainty and delicate movement,—his footing it featly here and there. Whatever prettiness there may be in his red breast, at his brightest he can always be outshone by a brickbat. But if he is rationally proud of anything about him, I should think a robin must be proud of his legs. Hundreds of birds have longer and more imposing ones—but for real neatness, finish, and precision of action, commend me to his fine little ankles, and fine little feet; this long stilted process, as you know, corresponding to our ankle-bone. Commend me, I say, to the robin for use of his ankles—he is, of all birds, the pre-eminent and characteristic Hopper; none other so light, so pert, or so swift.

25. We must not, however, give too much credit to his legs in this matter. A robin's hop is half a flight; he hops, very essentially, with wings and tail, as well as with his feet, and the exquisitely rapid opening and quivering of the tail-feathers certainly give half the force to his leap. It is in this action that he is put among the motacillae, or wagtails; but the ornithologists have no real business to put him among them. The swing of the long tail feathers in the true wagtail is entirely consequent on its motion, not impulsive of it—the tremulous shake is *after* alighting. But the robin leaps with wing, tail, and foot, all in time, and all helping each other. Leaps, I say; and you check at the word; and ought to check: you look at a bird hopping, and the motion is so much a matter of course, you never think how it is done. But do you think you would find it easy to hop like a robin

if you had two—all but wooden—legs, like this?

26. I have looked wholly in vain through all my books on birds, to find some account of the muscles it uses in hopping, and of the part of the toes with which the spring is given. I must leave you to find out that for yourselves; it is a little bit of anatomy which I think it highly desirable for you to know, but which it is not my business to teach you. Only observe, this is the point to be made out. You leap yourselves, with the toe and ball of the foot; but, in that power of leaping, you lose the faculty of grasp; on the contrary, with your hands, you grasp as a bird with its feet. But you cannot hop on your hands. A cat, a leopard, and a monkey, leap or grasp with equal ease; but the action of their paws in leaping is, I imagine, from the fleshy ball of the foot; while in the bird, characteristically γαμφωνυξ [Greek: gampsônux], this fleshy ball is reduced to a boss or series of bosses, and the nails are elongated into sickles or horns; nor does the springing power seem to depend on the development of the bosses. They are far more developed in an eagle than a robin; but you know how unpardonably and preposterously awkward an eagle is when he hops. When they are most of all developed, the bird walks, runs, and digs well, but leaps badly.

27. I have no time to speak of the various forms of the ankle itself, or of the scales of armor, more apparent than real, by which the foot and ankle are protected. The use of this lecture is not either to describe or to exhibit these varieties to you, but so to awaken your attention to the real points of character, that, when

you have a bird's foot to draw, you may do so with intelligence and pleasure, knowing whether you want to express force, grasp, or firm ground pressure, or dexterity and tact in motion. And as the actions of the foot and the hand in man are made by every great painter perfectly expressive of the character of mind, so the expressions of rapacity, cruelty, or force of seizure, in the harpy, the gryphon, and the hooked and clawed evil spirits of early religious art, can only be felt by extreme attention to the original form.

28. And now I return to our main question, for the robin's breast to answer, "What is a feather?" You know something about it already; that it is composed of a quill, with its lateral filaments terminating generally, more or less, in a point; that these extremities of the quills, lying over each other like the tiles of a house, allow the wind and rain to pass over them with the least possible resistance, and form a protection alike from the heat and the cold; which, in structure much resembling the scale-armor assumed by man for very different objects, is, in fact, intermediate, exactly, between the fur of beasts and the scales of fishes; having the minute division of the one, and the armor-like symmetry and succession of the other.

29. Not merely symmetry, observe, but extreme flatness. Feathers are smoothed down, as a field of corn by wind with rain; only the swathes laid in beautiful order. They are fur, so structurally placed as to imply, and submit to, the perpetually swift forward motion. In fact, I have no doubt the Darwinian

theory on the subject is that the feathers of birds once stuck up all erect, like the bristles of a brush, and have only been blown flat by continual flying.

Nay, we might even sufficiently represent the general manner of conclusion in the Darwinian system by the statement that if you fasten a hair-brush to a mill-wheel, with the handle forward, so as to develop itself into a neck by moving always in the same direction, and within continual hearing of a steam-whistle, after a certain number of revolutions the hair-brush will fall in love with the whistle; they will marry, lay an egg, and the produce will be a nightingale.

30. Whether, however, a hog's bristle can turn into a feather or not, it is vital that you should know the present difference between them.

The scientific people will tell you that a feather is composed of three parts—the down, the laminæ, and the shaft.

But the common-sense method of stating the matter is that a feather is composed of two parts, a shaft with lateral filaments. For the greater part of the shaft's length, these filaments are strong and nearly straight, forming, by their attachment, a finely warped sail, like that of a wind-mill. But towards the root of the feather they suddenly become weak, and confusedly flexible, and form the close down which immediately protects the bird's body.

To show you the typical arrangement of these parts, I choose, as I have said, the robin; because, both in his power of flying, and in his color, he is a moderate and balanced bird;—not turned

into nothing but wings, like a swallow, or nothing but neck and tail, like a peacock. And first for his flying power. There is one of the long feathers of robin's wing, and here (Fig. 1) the analysis of its form.

31. First, in pure outline (A), seen from above, it is very nearly a long oval, but with this peculiarity, that it has, as it were, projecting shoulders at *a* 1 and *a* 2. I merely desire you to observe this, in passing, because one usually thinks of the contour as sweeping unbroken from the root to the point. I have not time to-day to enter on any discussion of the reason for it, which will appear when we examine the placing of the wing feathers for their stroke.

Now, I hope you are getting accustomed to the general method in which I give you the analysis of all forms—leaf, or feather, or shell, or limb. First, the plan; then the profile; then the cross-section.

I take next, the profile of my feather (B, Fig. 1), and find that it is twisted as the sail of a windmill is, but more distinctly, so that you can always see the upper surface of the feather at its root, and the under at its end. Every primary wing-feather, in the fine flyers, is thus twisted; and is best described as a sail striking with the power of a cimeter, but with the flat instead of the edge.

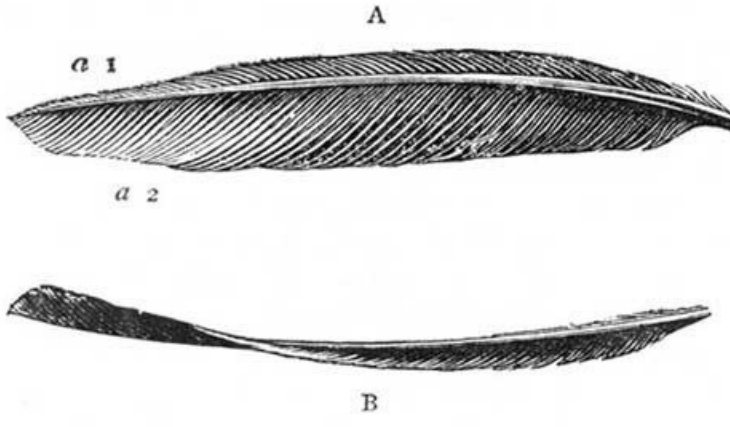

Fig. 1.
(Twice the size of reality.)

32. Further, you remember that on the edges of the broad side of feathers you find always a series of undulations, irregularly sequent, and lapping over each other like waves on sand. You might at first imagine that this appearance was owing to a slight ruffling or disorder of the filaments; but it is entirely normal, and, I doubt not, so constructed, in order to insure a redundance of material in the plume, so that no accident or pressure from wind may leave a gap anywhere. How this redundance is obtained you will see in a moment by bending any feather the wrong way. Bend, for instance, this plume, B, Fig. 2, into the reversed curve, A, Fig. 2; then all the filaments of the plume become perfectly even, and there are no waves at the edge. But let the plume return

into its proper form, B, and the tissue being now contracted into a smaller space, the edge waves are formed in it instantly.

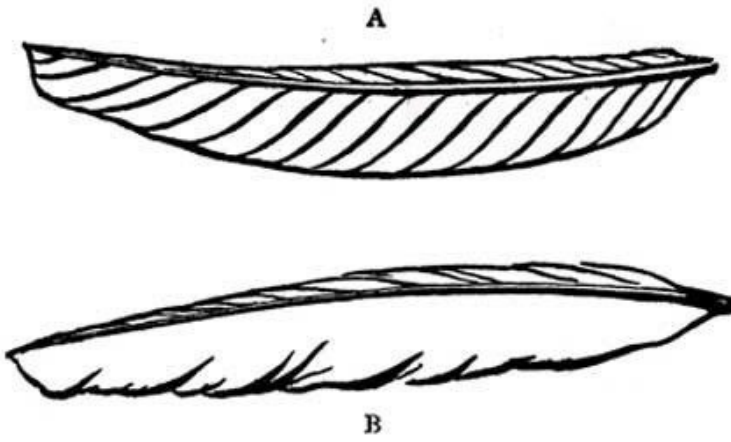

Fig. 2.

Hitherto, I have been speaking only of the filaments arranged for the strength and continuity of the energetic plume; they are entirely different when they are set together for decoration instead of force. After the feather of the robin's wing, let us examine one from his breast.

33. I said, just now, he might be at once outshone by a brickbat. Indeed, the day before yesterday, sleeping at Lichfield, and seeing, the first thing when I woke in the morning, (for I never put down the blinds of my bedroom windows,) the not uncommon sight in an English country town of an entire house-

front of very neat, and very flat, and very red bricks, with very exactly squared square windows in it; and not feeling myself in anywise gratified or improved by the spectacle, I was thinking how in this, as in all other good, the too much destroyed all. The breadth of a robin's breast in brick-red is delicious, but a whole house-front of brick-red as vivid, is alarming. And yet one cannot generalize even that trite moral with any safety—for infinite breadth of green is delightful, however green; and of sea or sky, however blue.

You must note, however, that the robin's charm is greatly helped by the pretty space of gray plumage which separates the red from the brown back, and sets it off to its best advantage. There is no great brilliancy in it, even so relieved; only the finish of it is exquisite.

34. If you separate a single feather, you will find it more like a transparent hollow shell than a feather (so delicately rounded the surface of it),—gray at the root, where the down is,—tinged, and only tinged, with red at the part that overlaps and is visible; so that, when three or four more feathers have overlapped it again, all together, with their joined red, are just enough to give the color determined upon, each of them contributing a tinge. There are about thirty of these glowing filaments on each side, (the whole being no larger across than a well-grown currant,) and each of these is itself another exquisite feather, with central quill and lateral webs, whose filaments are not to be counted.

The extremity of these breast plumes parts slightly into two,

as you see in the peacock's, and many other such decorative ones. The transition from the entirely leaf-like shape of the active plume, with its oblique point, to the more or less symmetrical dualism of the decorative plume, corresponds with the change from the pointed green leaf to the dual, or heart-shaped, petal of many flowers. I shall return to this part of our subject, having given you, I believe, enough of detail for the present.

35. I have said nothing to-day of the mythology of the bird, though I told you that would always be, for us, the most important part of its natural history. But I am obliged, sometimes, to take what we immediately want, rather than what, ultimately, we shall need chiefly. In the second place, you probably, most of you, know more of the mythology of the robin than I do, for the stories about it are all northern, and I know scarcely any myths but the Italian and Greek. You will find under the name "Robin," in Miss Yonge's exhaustive and admirable "History of Christian Names," the various titles of honor and endearment connected with him, and with the general idea of redness,—from the bishop called "Bright Red Fame," who founded the first great Christian church on the Rhine, (I am afraid of your thinking I mean a pun, in connection with robins, if I tell you the locality of it,) down through the Hoods, and Roys, and Grays, to Robin Goodfellow, and Spenser's "Hobbinol," and our modern "Hob,"—joining on to the "goblin," which comes from the old Greek Κοβαλος [Greek: Kobalos]. But I cannot let you go without asking you to compare the English and French feeling about small birds, in

Chaucer's time, with our own on the same subject. I say English and French, because the original French of the Romance of the Rose shows more affection for birds than even Chaucer's translation, passionate as he is, always, in love for any one of his little winged brothers or sisters. Look, however, either in the French or English at the description of the coming of the God of Love, leading his carol-dance, in the garden of the Rose.

His dress is embroidered with figures of flowers and of beasts; but about him fly the *living* birds. The French is:

> Il etoit tout convert d'oisiaulx
> De rossignols et de papegaux
> De calendre, et de mesangel.
> Il semblait que ce fut une angle
> Qui fuz tout droit venuz du ciel.

36. There are several points of philology in this transitional French, and in Chaucer's translation, which it is well worth your patience to observe. The monkish Latin "angelus," you see, is passing through the very unpoetical form "angle," into "ange;" but, in order to get a rhyme with it in that angular form, the French troubadour expands the bird's name, "mesange," quite arbitrarily, into "mesangel." Then Chaucer, not liking the "mes" at the beginning of the word, changes that unscrupulously into "arch;" and gathers in, though too shortly, a lovely bit from another place about the nightingales flying so close round Love's head that they strike some of the leaves off his crown of roses;

so that the English runs thus:

> But nightingales, a full great rout
> That flien over his head about,
> The leaves felden as they flien
> And he was all with birds wrien,
> With popinjay, with nightingale,
> With chelaundre, and with wodewale,
> With finch, with lark, and with archangel.
> He seemed as he were an angell,
> That down were comen from Heaven clear.

Now, when I first read this bit of Chaucer, without referring to the original, I was greatly delighted to find that there was a bird in his time called an archangel, and set to work, with brightly hopeful industry, to find out what it was. I was a little discomfited by finding that in old botany the word only meant "dead-nettle," but was still sanguine about my bird, till I found the French form descend, as you have seen, into a mesangel, and finally into mesange, which is a provincialism from μειον [Greek: meion], and means, the smallest of birds—or, specially here,—a titmouse. I have seldom had a less expected or more ignominious fall from the clouds.

37. The other birds, named here and in the previous description of the garden, are introduced, as far as I can judge, nearly at random, and with no precision of imagination like that of Aristophanes; but with a sweet childish delight in crowding

as many birds as possible into the smallest space. The popinjay is always prominent; and I want some of you to help me (for I have not time at present for the chase) in hunting the parrot down on his first appearance in Europe. Just at this particular time he contested favor even with the falcon; and I think it a piece of good fortune that I chanced to draw for you, thinking only of its brilliant color, the popinjay, which Carpaccio allows to be present on the grave occasion of St. George's baptizing the princess and her father.

38. And, indeed, as soon as the Christian poets begin to speak of the singing of the birds, they show themselves in quite a different mood from any that ever occurs to a Greek. Aristophanes, with infinitely more skill, describes, and partly imitates, the singing of the nightingale; but simply as beautiful sound. It "fills the thickets with honey;" and if in the often-quoted—just because it is *not* characteristic of Greek literature—passage of the Coloneus, a deeper sentiment is shown, that feeling is dependent on association of the bird-voices with deeply pathetic circumstances. But this troubadour finds his heart in heaven by the power of the singing only:—

> Trop parfoisaient beau servise
> Ciz oiselles que je vous devise.
> Il chantaient un chant ytel
> Com fussent angle esperitel.

We want a moment more of word-chasing to enjoy this.

"Oiseau," as you know, comes from "avis;" but it had at this time got "oisel" for its singular number, of which the terminating "sel" confused itself with the "selle," from "ancilla" in domisella and demoiselle; and the feminine form "oiselle" thus snatched for itself some of the delightfulness belonging to the title of a young lady. Then note that "esperitel" does not here mean merely spiritual, (because all angels are spiritual) but an "angle esperitel" is an angel of the air. So that, in English, we could only express the meaning in some such fashion as this:—

> They perfected all their service of love,
> These maiden birds that I tell you of.
> They sang such a song, so finished-fair,
> As if they were angels, born of the air.

39. Such were the fancies, then, and the scenes, in which Englishmen took delight in Chaucer's time. England was then a simple country; we boasted, for the best kind of riches, our birds and trees, and our wives and children. We had now grown to be a rich one; and our first pleasure is in shooting our birds; but it has become too expensive for us to keep our trees. Lord Derby, whose crest is the eagle and child—you will find the northern name for it, the bird and bantling, made classical by Scott—is the first to propose that wood-birds should have no more nests. We must cut down all our trees, he says, that we may effectively use the steam-plow; and the effect of the steam-plow, I find by a recent article in the *Cornhill Magazine*, is that an English

laborer must not any more have a nest, nor bantlings, neither; but may only expect to get on prosperously in life, if he be perfectly skillful, sober, and honest, and dispenses, at least until he is forty-five, with the "luxury of marriage."

40. Gentlemen, you may perhaps have heard me blamed for making no effort here to teach in the artisans' schools. But I can only say that, since the future life of the English laborer or artisan (summing the benefits to him of recent philosophy and economy) is to be passed in a country without angels and without birds, without prayers and without songs, without trees and without flowers, in a state of exemplary sobriety, and (extending the Catholic celibacy of the clergy into celibacy of the laity) in a state of dispensation with the luxury of marriage, I do not believe he will derive either profit or entertainment from lectures on the Fine Arts.

LECTURE II.[8]
THE SWALLOW

41. We are to-day to take note of the form of a creature which gives us a singular example of the unity of what artists call beauty, with the fineness of mechanical structure, often mistaken for it. You cannot but have noticed how little, during the years of my past professorship, I have introduced any questions as to the nature of beauty. I avoided them, partly because they are treated of at length in my books; and partly because they are, in the last degree, unpractical. We are born to like or dislike certain aspects of things; nor could I, by any arguments, alter the defined tastes which you received at your birth, and which the surrounding circumstances of life have enforced, without any possibility of your voluntary resistance to them. And the result of those surrounding circumstances, to-day, is that most English youths would have more pleasure in looking at a locomotive than at a swallow; and that many English philosophers would suppose the pleasure so received to be through a new sense of beauty. But the meaning of the word "beauty" in the fine arts, and in classical literature, is properly restricted to those very qualities in which the locomotion of a swallow differs from that of an engine.

42. Not only from that of an engine; but also from that of

[8] Delivered at Oxford, May 2d, 1873.

animals in whose members the mechanism is so complex as to give them a resemblance to engines. The dart of the common house-fly, for instance, in full strength, is a more wonderful movement than that of a swallow. The mechanism of it is not only more minute, but the swiftness of the action so much greater, that the vibration of the wing is invisible. But though a school-boy might prefer the locomotive to the swallow, he would not carry his admiration of finely mechanical velocity into unqualified sympathy with the workmanship of the God of Ekron; and would generally suppose that flies were made only to be food for the more graceful fly-catcher,—whose finer grace you will discover, upon reflection, to be owing to the very moderation and simplicity of its structure, and to the subduing of that infinitude of joints, claws, tissues, veins, and fibers which inconceivably vibrate in the microscopic[9] creature's motion, to a quite intelligible and simple balance of rounded body upon edged plume, maintained not without visible, and sometimes fatigued, exertion, and raising the lower creature into fellowship with the volition and the virtue of humanity.

43. With the virtue, I say, in an exceedingly qualified sense; meaning rather the strength and art displayed in overcoming difficulties, than any distinct morality of disposition. The bird has kindly and homely qualities; but its principal "virtue" for *us*, is its being an incarnate voracity, and that it moves as a

[9] I call it so because the members and action of it cannot be seen with the unaided eye.

consuming and cleansing power. You sometimes hear it said of a humane person that they would not kill a fly: from 700 to 1,000 flies a day are a moderate allowance for a baby swallow.

44. Perhaps, as I say this, it may occur to some of you to think, for the first time, of the reason of the bird's name. For it is very interesting, as a piece of language study, to consider the different power on our minds,—nay, the different sweetness to the ear,—which, from association, these same two syllables receive, when we read them as a noun, or as a verb. Also, the word is a curious instance of the traps which are continually open for rash etymologists. At first, nothing would appear more natural than that the name should have been given to the bird from its reckless function of devouring. But if you look to your Johnson, you will find, to your better satisfaction, that the name means "bird of porticos," or porches, from the Gothic "swale;" "subdivale,"—so that he goes back in thought as far as Virgil's, "Et nunc porticibus vacuis, nunc humida circum, stagna sonat." Notice, in passing, how a simile of Virgil's, or any other great master's, will probably tell in two or more ways at once. Juturna is compared to the swallow, not merely as winding and turning swiftly in her chariot, but as being a water-nymph by birth, —"Stagnis quae, fluminibusque sonoris, praesidet." How many different creatures in one the swallow is by birth, as a Virgilian simile is many thoughts in one, it would take many more lectures than one to show you clearly; but I will indicate them with such rough sketch as is possible.

45. It belongs, as most of you know, to a family of birds called Fissirostres, or, literally, split-beaks. Split heads would be a better term, for it is the enormous width of mouth and power of gaping which the epithet is meant to express. A dull sermon, for instance, makes half the congregation "fissirostres." The bird, however, is most vigilant when its mouth is widest, for it opens as a net to catch whatever comes in its way,—hence the French, giving the whole family the more literal name, "Gobble-fly"—Gobe-mouche, extend the term to the open-mouthed and too acceptant appearance of a simpleton.

46. Partly in order to provide for this width of mouth, but more for the advantage in flight, the head of the swallow is rounded into a bullet shape, and sunk down on the shoulders, with no neck whatever between, so as to give nearly the aspect of a conical rifle bullet to the entire front of the body; and, indeed, the bird moves more like a bullet than an arrow—dependent on a certain impetus of weight rather than on sharp penetration of the air. I say dependent on, but I have not yet been able to trace distinct relation between the shapes of birds and their powers of flight. I suppose the form of the body is first determined by the general habits and food, and that nature can make any form she chooses volatile; only one point I think is always notable, that a complete master of the art of flight must be short-necked, so that he turns altogether, if he turns at all. You don't expect a swallow to look round a corner before he goes round it; he must take his chance. The main point is that he may be able to stop himself, and turn,

in a moment.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.