

A. D. HOPE'S "DEATH OF THE BIRD":

BETWEEN ROMANTIC SYMBOL AND MODERNIST ANTI-SYMBOL

A. D. Hope's poem "The Death of the Bird" seems to me one of the great lyric poems in English of the twentieth century. It is a recognized anthology piece in Australia, of course, but my impression is that outside the continent Hope's poetry is not very well known and that few even of the most serious readers of English poetry are acquainted with "The Death of the Bird." In contrast to so many lesser poets of the twentieth century, Hope's artistry is deeply hidden, and what makes this poem so powerful, moving, and original is not easy to explain. What follows is an essay in the original sense of the term – an attempt to make clear to myself my own reactions to a poem that I have grown to cherish.

In "The Death of the Bird," Hope writes as if he were simply imparting information to the reader, conveying a thought-process that has taken form in his mind and that has immediately engendered the language by which it can be made accessible:

For every bird there is this last migration:
Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
With a warm passage to the summer station
Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

The poet's thought-process finds its form in elegiac quatrains (i.e., quatrains of iambic pentameter with alternating rhyme), as Gray's does in the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, a poem from which the elegiac quatrain takes its name and which must have had an important influence on Hope. The movement of ideas in "The Death of the Bird" is clearly demarcated by sentences, and every quatrain, with only one exception, ends in a period, so that grammar and form are almost completely congruent (here too the resemblance to Gray's *Elegy* is

striking). Of course, the period around 1950 when “The Death of the Bird” was written saw a neo-classical revival, partly as a result of Eliot’s influence; but in contrast to so many poems written in quatrains in the middle of the century, “The Death of the Bird” has not the slightest trace of rigidity or archness or internal repression. Its tone is quiet and restrained, but at the same time it flows outward from thought to thought, line to line, and stanza to stanza with complete assurance until its resolution has been fully achieved. There is only one moment of rupture, and that moment is completely motivated and prepared by the theme. The poem has a classical finish, but at the same time it seems a spontaneous outgrowth of the poet’s imagination and the overflow of deep feeling.

Part of this is achieved by Hope’s remarkable use of feminine rhyme – that is, rhyme in which the last two syllables rhyme and the accent falls on the penultimate syllable (in iambic pentameter, this makes for an eleven-syllable line). “For every bird there is this last migration,” the poem begins, and from this opening Hope’s elegiac quatrains develop a distinctive pattern marked by feminine rhyme in the first and third lines. Feminine rhymes are extremely difficult to control in English, and Hope had the option of dispensing with them after the opening stanza; but having spontaneously begun with “migration,” he chose to continue the pattern because it gave the poem a musical quality that he would otherwise have been unable to achieve. The consistent use of feminine rhyme, partly disguised by slant rhyme in several of the feminine endings (*passion/possession; valleys/palace; dominions/companions; valleys/malice*), is a feat of considerable technical virtuosity; but, paradoxically, it is this that imparts the extraordinary quality of spontaneity and pathos, sadness and truth, that the poem has to convey.

The play of feminine on masculine rhymes in the poem mimes the dialectical balancing

of Romantic feeling and classical restraint that it manages – almost miraculously – to achieve: Hope’s bird is gendered feminine, but the poet himself is male, and, more importantly, the classical restraint or distance evinced by the poem’s tone is traditionally viewed as a “masculine” quality (however sexist these metaphors may be). But the play of feminine on masculine rhymes, carried over from stanza to stanza, is reminiscent of another great poem about a bird (though not really about a bird), Shelley’s ode, “To a Sky-Lark”:

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.

Despite the generic difference between the two poems, the fact that Hope’s is an elegy and Shelley’s an ode, the interplay of feminine on masculine rhymes and the shared subject announce a similarity, and perhaps even an influence, that then underlines an important difference. For whereas Shelley candidly tells us that his ode is not really about a bird, but rather about the movement of the spirit, to which both the flight of the bird and its song can be likened, Hope’s poem, by contrast, really *is* about a bird. And this difference, in turn, points us to a connection, and then to another difference, that Hope’s poem has with a second great Romantic ode, Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale.” For whereas Keats, at the climactic moment of the Nightingale ode, famously asserts, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird,” Hope’s poem really is about the *death* of a bird. Shelley’s Sky-Lark and Keats’ Nightingale are, in essence, symbols of immanence: the skylark and nightingale engender their respective odes not because of what they are as natural entities but because the qualities these natural entities possess allow them to serve as symbols and focal points for a spiritual allegory based on the desire for transcendence.

The bird of Hope's elegy is not a Romantic symbol, but neither is it a Modernist anti-symbol, which is more or less what the Imagist movement and its various off-shoots in the twentieth century strive to attain. Imagism rejects the Romantic quest for transcendence and seeks in nature not the adequate symbols of a spiritual allegory but only "things as they are." In this quest for objective reality, Imagism is deluded, however, because "things as they are" (or at least *only* as they are) have no poetic value; they have to be "changed upon the blue guitar," as Wallace Stevens acknowledges. Insofar as images are merely objective, they are images (or perhaps symbols) of our alienation; and thus the Modernist quest for "things as they are" turns out, ironically, to be a futile quest for negative transcendence. We see this vividly in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (among other poems by Stevens):

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Stevens' rejection of the "pathetic fallacy," the projection of human emotions on nature, leads him to an infatuation with nothingness; his landscape in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is tantamount to Hegel's "night in which all cows are black." But in Hope's "Death of the Bird" there is neither the Romantic nor the Modernist form of alienation. Hope is able to chart a middle course between the Romantic symbol and the Modernist image or anti-symbol through the sheer force of his intelligence and through his empathy for a form of life that he is capable of understanding, at least in some measure, because it *is* a form of life, however different from his own, and because he understands that he himself is a form of life and that, therefore, nothing living is alien to him. Hope is a superb metrist, and the underlying meaning of "meter"

and “measure” is ultimately the same. In “The Death of the Bird,” he is able to take the measure of what he can understand and what he is unable to understand – about the bird, about himself, and therefore about *life*. Although to an unskilled reader it may seem as though Hope is resorting to the pathetic fallacy, this is not the case. On the contrary, in “The Death of the Bird” Hope takes his measure from a number of simple but undeniable facts of life – for instance, that birds migrate in the winter, drawn by the “invisible thread” of nature and their own nature, or that all forms of life are connected and that inferences about them are possible on that basis.

Hope’s bird is entirely generic – not a skylark, nightingale, or blackbird; not a distinct species at all, and therefore completely anonymous. The pathos of anonymity and insignificance is joined to the pathos of death in Hope’s poem, as it also is in Gray’s *Elegy*. Yet life is lived by individuals, not by species or genera, and although the bird is only a bird, Hope renders it as a distinct being, capturing its experience as it goes on its last migration and eventually falls to its death. “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow,” says Hamlet. To use the word “providence” in this connection would be saying too much, but certainly there is a sense in which the bird’s tiny being is being registered in terms of its specific (or special) existence – if not by providence, then at least by nature (whatever that might be), and if not by nature, then at least by the poet. The poem registers, in any event, both the specificity of the individual bird’s existence and the fact that it is a bird like every other bird and a form of life like every other form of life.

In his brilliant study of A. D. Hope, which has served me as a point of departure, my colleague Kevin Hart writes of the “[dark] sense of utter abandonment in an alien universe [that]

is given in ‘The Death of the Bird.’” “The natural order,” he adds, “is chillingly impersonal.”¹ It seems to me, however, that if the universe is chillingly impersonal in the poem, this happens only with the intervention of death; it does not correspond to the way in which the bird’s experience of *life* is represented. If we examine the poem closely, we see that it is structured as a kind of fluid triptych, with discernible sections comprised of three stanzas each. In the first section the words “love” and “home” are repeated:

For every bird there is this last migration:
Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
With a warm passage to the summer station
Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

Year after year a speck on the map, divided
By a whole hemisphere summons her to come;
Season after season, sure and safely guided,
Going away she is also coming home.

And being home, memory becomes a passion
With which she feeds her brood and straws her nest,
Aware of ghosts that haunt the heart’s possession
And exiled love mourning within the breast.

The bird is impelled by some kind of life force, or *élan vital*, an eros that one might as well call “love” because it is what connects all beings, each nature to nature as a whole. “Heart” is a metonymy for the feelings, but that the cooling year should kindle the bird’s heart is not, again, a pathetic fallacy: Hope is not suggesting that the bird feels in the way we do, but simply inferring from the facts that the bird, being sentient, feels, and that there is a continuity among all sentient things. What Hope opens up for us, with a beautiful simplicity, is simply the mystery of life. Nature in these stanzas is not “chillingly impersonal”; indeed, it is conveyed with a warmth that is very rare in twentieth-century poetry. In the second stanza, note the subtle rhythm and the

¹Kevin Hart, *A. D. Hope* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1992), 29.

play of sound in “summons her to come,” the slant rhyme on “come” and “home,” and finally the way the rhymes are brought together to produce the beautiful cadence of “Going away she is also coming home.” The third stanza is conceptually more difficult and ambiguous. Something like memory, personal and collective, drives the bird: the ghosts are either its own parents or the imprint of its collective forebears; “exiled love” could again refer to parents or perhaps to a lost mate – the precise reference isn’t given and doesn’t matter. The bird obviously has no cognition, but on some level it must be aware – because *we* are aware – and this awareness without cognition is poignant because the same is so often true for us.

In the three opening stanzas, Hope describes how the bird is impelled on its migration year after year and season after season, but in the second triad he begins to chart the actual journey that will culminate in its death. Something beyond its immediate location and reality is somehow vivid to the bird:

The sands are green with a mirage of valleys;
The palm-tree casts a shadow not its own;
Down the long architrave of temple or palace
Blows a cool air from moorland scarps of stone.

Hope lavishes attention on this idea, embroidering it with beautiful images and with rare, almost recondite words and phrases (“moorland scarps” and “architrave”), as if to point to the world’s plenitude – even if that plenitude is shadowed by distance and otherness. In the next stanza, love is again emphasized, as the bird is summoned by the “whisper of love”:

And day by day the whisper of love grows stronger;
That delicate voice, more urgent with despair,
Custom and fear constraining her no longer,
Drives her at last on the waste leagues of air.

But it is at this mid-point in the poem, when the bird takes flight, driven “on the waste

leagues of air,” that the poem’s tone changes. The language of plenitude now gives way to that of emptiness. In the second stanza the bird was impelled by “a speck on the map,” and now, in the sixth, she is herself “a vanishing speck”:

A vanishing speck in those inane dominions,
Single and frail, uncertain of her place,
Alone in the bright host of her companions,
Lost in the blue unfriendliness of space.

That so tiny a creature should be drawn year after year by a tiny point on the map was part of the wonder and mystery of life, but though the adjective “vanishing” can indicate merely that the bird disappears from sight it clearly has the implication of death and nothingness here.

Interestingly, both “vanishing” and “inane” derive from different Latin words that both mean “empty” (“inane” from “inanis”; “vanishing” from *evanescere*, “to disappear like vapor,” which in turn is derived from *vanus*, “empty”). “Inane,” moreover, has the effect of undercutting the vaguely religious tonality of “dominions,” and “the blue unfriendliness of space” has a Mallarméan or Pascalian ring to it that makes us question the harmony that had previously been established between the bird’s nature and nature as a whole. I doubt that Hope was directly influenced by Stevens, but “the blue unfriendliness of space” seems to turn the famous lines from “Sunday Morning” (1914) on their head:

And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Granted that the connotations and echoes in the sixth stanza of “The Death of the Bird” raise questions about the poem’s ultimate meaning; nevertheless, I would still want to emphasize

that if the natural order becomes “chillingly impersonal” in the poem, this happens only with the bird’s impending death; the rift between the bird’s nature and nature as a whole is not intrinsic to life but something that happens in the course of life, as a result of death. The death of the bird is in the nature of things; it does not render nature as a whole meaningless.

In any event, as I noted, the sixth stanza is the only one that does not end in a period but flows over into the next line and the next quatrain: “Lost in the blue unfriendliness of space, // She feels it close now, the appointed season.” The “appointed season” is ambiguous, just as “vanishing speck” was in the previous stanza: it could simply refer to the time of the next migration, but it could also refer to death. Does the bird instinctively feel the approach of death? Whether or not it does, the onset of death is experienced, in the seventh stanza, not as death itself – for death is too abstract to be experienced – but as an abrupt intrusion: metaphorically, as a breaking of the “invisible thread” and a *dying* – i.e., extinguishing – of the “guiding spark” of instinct. This is rendered not only conceptually but musically, on the level of the stanza itself, through the extremely dissonant movement between the first and second lines (not a transition but a rupture), which has the effect of disrupting the established balance of the elegiac quatrain:

She feels it close now, the appointed season:
The invisible thread is broken as she flies;
Suddenly, without warning, without reason,
The guiding spark of instinct winks and dies.

Because our expectation makes “the appointed season” refer primarily to the next migration, the expected cadence in the following line is sundered; the line comes “suddenly, without warning,” as if to mime the rupture that comes with death, and as if the poet had lost the “invisible thread” of thought binding up his stanza. It is difficult even to read these lines; one is unsure what intonation to give them.

The remaining stanzas, however, constitute a denouement; difficult as they are to decipher, they let us down gently, with a “dying fall”:

Try as she will, the trackless world delivers
No way, the wilderness of light no sign,
The immense and complex map of hills and rivers
Mocks her small wisdom with its vast design,

And darkness rises from the eastern valleys,
And the winds buffet her with their hungry breath,
And the great earth, with neither grief nor malice,
Receives the tiny burden of her death.

These lines are again remarkable for their balance, and also for the way in which, without doing so explicitly, Hope frames the series of questions that underlie the poem. Hart points to the “relentless biblical rhythms” of the concluding stanza,² and indeed there is a hint of Job’s confrontation with the Almighty in the way the bird’s “small wisdom” is mocked by the universe’s “vast design.” But it is not at all clear that the world’s “vast design” is a transcendent one; and if there are gods, the question remains as to who and what they are. The traces of personification (or at least of some kind of agency) in the fact that the bird is *mocked*, that the winds “*buffet* her with their *hungry* breath,” and in the characterization of “the great earth,” which, though not capitalized, is made ever so slightly by the epithet to resemble and evoke the Gaia of Greek mythology, suggest that these may be pagan gods. The world of the concluding stanzas seems partly malevolent and partly indifferent – but insofar as it is indifferent, even that comes in a questionable shape. The “great earth” has “neither grief nor malice”: is this the indifference of Epicurean gods who are unconcerned with us, or is it the indifference of a nature that has no transcendent being? – in which case, even indifference would be a catachresis, a way

²Hart, 30.

of coming to terms with what has no attitude whatsoever. When the bird falls to earth, “the great earth / *Receives* the tiny burden of her death.” Does the verb “receives” imply some sort of acceptance, perhaps even the acceptance of a sacrifice, or merely that the bird falls to earth? Is the great earth, even if essentially indifferent, *burdened* or weighed down by the fact of death, and by the accretion of so many deaths, or is this again a catachresis, a way of pointing to the fact that the bird’s body is virtually weightless (literally and metaphorically), therefore essentially negligible in its significance, and hence no “burden” whatsoever? On the larger plane, is life negated by the fact of death, or does an individual merely come to an end?

In the penultimate stanza, the world is “trackless” and the lights in the sky appear as a “wilderness” to the bird. Her “small wisdom” (another lovely catachresis) is not equal to the “vast design” of the universe. But this happens only with the intervention of death, and though the *burden* of the poem (a word that can mean “theme” and “song” as well as “weight”) is certainly the unknown significance (if any) that death has to life, I think it would be a mistake to draw a nihilistic interpretation from the poem’s conclusion. As the opening stanzas indicate – without the slightest degree of sentimentality – there is, in fact, love in the world. Whatever the truth of the world may be (and of course we don’t know any more than the bird does – or Job did), we are entitled to call it love because that is our way of making sense of things. In any event, Hope’s ability to evoke love and tenderness – not only as a theme but through his language and the movement of his quatrains – is what makes the poem as extraordinary as it is. The artistic values manifested by “The Death of the Bird” are now thoroughly out of fashion, and I imagine that it would be difficult for most contemporary readers to recognize just how original it is. Nevertheless, this is one of those poems that is going to remain with us for a long time – as

long as English poetry is read.

Postscript

After writing this essay, and after reading it aloud at the A. D. Hope Centenary Conference at the Australian National University in Canberra in July 2007, I returned home and had an epiphany that made me realize I had left out something very important with regard both to the inter-textual dimension of “The Death of the Bird” and to the poem’s relation to the feminine. (Hope’s relation to the feminine in general had been an important topic of conversation at the conference.) Hope’s bird is summoned by desire, but the desire is distanced, not immediately sexual, with only a hint of an erotic element (“Year after year a speck on the map, divided / By a whole hemisphere, summons her to come . . .”). For reasons having nothing to do with Hope’s poem, and through a quite private process of association, I was reminded of the Paolo and Francesca episode in the *Inferno*. “Quali colombe dal disio chiamate / con l’ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido . . .,” writes Dante, and in Allen Mandelbaum’s translation this becomes, “Even as doves when summoned by desire, / borne forward by their will move through the air / with wings uplifted, still, to their sweet nest.”³ Dante’s doves (the dove is Venus’s bird) must have been somewhere in Hope’s mind, at some point of origin when he came to write “The Death of the Bird.” Hope bird, as I said, is a bird, not a simile for a woman, but something of the human perhaps remains in the complex feeling-tone of the poem. Hope’s bird is guided by love, as I said, the same love that in Dante “can quickly seize the gentle heart” and that “releases no

³*Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 5.82-84.

beloved from loving.”⁴

⁴Ibid., 5.100, 103.