

## ON THE AUTUMNAL SONGSEASON.\*

J. R. TAYLOR.

What I have to say is so patently unscientific that my first word must be a disclaimer of any such intention. Subjective method like mine is, I know, anathema in science. From an objective standpoint there is no music in the Brown Creeper's note; it is a creaking, a filing, an old chair is as musical; yet I have followed it as Ferdinand followed Ariel. It is courage come to share our winter, a conclusion not necessarily unscientific. Imagination, witness the discovery of Neptune or the setting up of the mastodon from fragments of bones, is as great a force in science as in the arts; and there is no great gulf fixed between science and art, the mind working not differently in the two fields. We of the opposite camp follow beauty, you truth; the Cardinal in the snow means as much by one method as by the other. Therefore if we learn gladly of the scientists, the reverse is true also; and because I have learned birds chiefly by their songs, I find I have to ornithologists, and however small it may be, interesting and supplementary information.

Even scientists know that there is a definite songseason, in a way synchronous with the breeding season, from March to June. It is also well known that birds sing beyond this period, the only absolute lulls seeming to fall in August and in December. I have heard the Bluebirds singing in the snow at Christmas, the Robin on New Year's Day; and the Carolina Wren, in the words of Mr. Riley, sings when he durn pleases. But the spring songseason remains fixed and unapproachable for its continuity and multitude of song. What has been more neglected is the autumnal songseason, which seems to me also a definite period, more or less immediately preceding the departure of the birds for the south. At the end of August, this summer, the Orioles and the Warbling Vireos, after many weeks of silence, were all singing again on the campus, and soon after, of course, were gone. This, I think, is a habit which may be found to be universal. I cannot be sure of certain birds. The Whippoorwills sing on into September apparently without a break. In the Adirondacks a few years ago the Barred and the Great Horned Owls were silent in July and August, and hallooted over the lakes all night long in September; but in their case this could hardly precede a migration. I have heard the Bobolinks sing for a few moments in the dawn, at the end of August, after they must have changed plumage, and after more than a month of silence; I have heard the Red-winged Blackbirds in October in a chorus unheard since early July; and the list might be made a long one, in each case preceded by a

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long interval of silence, and heard at a certain date year after year. Not to mention the singing migrants, varying widely from the Upland Plover to the Whitethroats, Solitary Vireos, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, the following will serve as examples. Both the Orioles sing in late August and early September; Field Sparrows in September, Vesper Sparrows into October, Fox Sparrows into November; the Warbling and the Red-eyed Vireos in September; the Maryland Yellowthroat in September, and in the same month the Catbird and the Brown Thrasher; and more rarely I have heard the Woodthrush also, though he sang only the preludes without the flute-notes. I have never heard the Flycatchers sing again after their summer silence, nor the Tanagers, nor the Martins, nor many of the Warblers and Thrushes.

In each case, the song seems an accompaniment or precursor of migration. The Junco's addition to his song, in April just before he departs for the north, is parallel. I cannot presume to offer an explanation. To me it seems several possible things; memory of the spring's journey bringing a repetition of the song; or rehearsal and education of the young birds, although it seems to me difficult to prove that only the young birds sing; or, as it has been called, "false dawn" of sex, a mating without the nesting, which I have seen the Mourning Doves do; or, perhaps fantastically, farewell to the land of the nests of northern summer. If it is true that the Grouse will drum on the old courting log even in October, a recognizably sentimental operation, none of the suggestions is preposterous. Why birds sing is hardly to be explained by anatomy. The general opinion of ornithologists seems to be that song is an expression of pleasure, and that birds do not sing in fear or sorrow. I have known a particularly gorgeous sunset to waken the Woodthrushes in midsummer, and it seemed to me not unlikely that the pleasure of the rich color sensation might partly account for it. It is probable that the autumnal songseason is a time of gayety and novelty, a recognition of old places, an anticipation of new, together with some associated memory of the choosing of the mates. The impression may be further explained by the character of the song in autumn.

It is always difficult to hear and know the autumnal songseason, both because it is so much less in volume and continuity than in spring, and because it is not like that of April full-throated. The quality is changed,—if I were before a less formidable audience, I should say sea-changed. For it is as if the birds were singing under water, underground. It is as if they sing without opening their beaks; which indeed they seem sometimes to do even in spring, for I have heard both the male and the female Thrasher sing so in the nesting, each with the twig or straw in mouth; and I have never heard the Hermit Thrush in spring migration sing in any other way. This last instance may

illustrate my meaning. I have verified the experience through several Aprils. The first hearing was in this manner. For a long time I had been sitting still to watch the Hermit flitting and returning among the naked copses by the old river-bed; and what with his nearness and the fresh April song about me, the memory of his song came to me clear and clearer. Let not Science reproach me for this!—I was fancying what old law, what jealous traveler's silence on the way to the happier north his home, kept unuttered in the bird's white breast that high romance, the voice of our best dreamer, even the memory of which made sunset flash across the mountain lakes to me. The memory, the fancy, grew so vividly upon me that I smiled to find myself placing actually somewhere, across the Olentangy, upstream, downstream, the phantom singing of my own creation. Then I woke to the realization that it was an actual song, a Hermit Thrush really singing, but very far away. And last of all, I saw the dappled throat of my Thrush, which was always here and there about the leafless thickets, near me in the sun, saw his throat ruffling, and knew that he was the singer of the song that seemed, across the river or across the years, so far away.

I ask pardon for such unedifying rhapsody, but the quality thus suggested is characteristic of the autumnal songseason. Some birds apparently change the form as well as the quality of their song, making of it an entirely new composition; the Bobwhite, for instance, and (I think) the Chickadee; and the Carolina Wren in September has often set me hunting down a new song, surprising me at length to find him, that piper of indomitable and far-ringing cheerfulness, now singing a secret bubbling continuous Goldfinch-like song. But most of our birds, without changing the form of their song, change the tone-color as I have described. So the Catbird sings, so the Brown Thrush; at your shoulder, may be, but seeming a half mile away; so sing our most frequent autumnal vocalists, the Meadowlarks, Cardinals, Song-sparrows, Robins; half-song, a whisper-song, an echo, a ventriloquism. It is, I suppose, simply that they sing with half-voice, as we might hum to ourselves a melody that haunts us through the day's work.

But it is easier for me to deal with effects than with causes, and I shall not this time apologize, for these are my last words. The autumnal song seems to me not less beautiful than that of April; not the same triumphant, but memorial, charged with emotion, an art wrecked by its own beautiful joy; autumn's fit utterance, when even Anosia, the red monarch of all the butterflies, migrates among the departing birds and the unreturning leaves; and when always across the sky, in October, in November, as long as the Witch-Hazel is in flower, the Bluebirds play their pipes of passage.