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The Poetics of Bird Defense in America, 1860–1918

Angela Sorby

I.

IN JESSE ANDERSON CHASE'S 1896 COLLEGE STORY *Three Freshmen*—first serialized in the influential *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*—some young people organize a bird protection society. A student named Fran addresses the meeting:

Girls, you have doubtless seen in the papers of late, or have heard the upper-class girls talking about, the Audubon movement throughout the country. It has grown rapidly. Societies have already been formed in some of the woman's colleges, in sympathy with this movement, pledging their members not to wear the skins of wild birds as hat or dress trimming. I have prepared some statistics, showing the two great reasons for this crusade: one, a more purely ethical one, the cruelty of the methods by which the skins or feathers are obtained and prepared; the other, the scientific reason, that most beautiful and valuable species of wild birds are thus being exterminated.¹

Next a teacher, Miss Brownwell, reads from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Birds of Killingworth":

The thrush that carols from the dawn of day
From the green steeples of the piney wood;
The oriole in the elm; the noisy jay,
Jargoning like a foreigner at his food;
The bluebird balanced on some topmost spray,
Flooding with melody the neighborhood;
Linnet and meadow-lark, and all the throng
That dwell in nests, and have the gift of song.

You slay them all! . . .²

The girls agree—"The poets are with us!"—and sign a pledge to stop wearing feathers on their hats. Their resolution reflects a two-decade-long campaign—in *St. Nicholas* and in the culture at large—to promote bird conservation as a mass movement for young people, based on scientific discourses infused with emotional appeals. Poems, including "The Birds of Killingworth," were used to change how readers felt about birds. In the process, readers learned to see birds differently, but they also learned to read poems differently. Birds were read not as—or not just as—romantic symbols but also as scientific specimens, worthy of study and protection. And poems were read not as—or not just as—records of emotions recollected in tranquility, but also as frames for facts.

I explore this hybrid approach to reading through an analysis of two poems and one representative anthology: Longfellow's "The Birds of Killingworth," Celia Thaxter's "The Sandpiper," and the *Alabama Bird Day Book*, produced in 1915 by the Alabama Department of Game and Fish. These texts show that later nineteenth-century poetry was neither mired in romanticism nor "progressing" neatly toward realism.³ Rather, poems came to adjudicate between romanticism and realism, enabling readers to think about nature both metaphorically (as a reflection of the self or the divine) and scientifically (as a mutable and potentially endangered ecosystem). As they circulated, American bird poems became part of a cultural conversation about conserving the natural world, while also bridging the gap between metaphorical reading and concrete scientific—or even political—action.

At least three post-Civil War cultural discourses made poetry especially important to the bird-defense movement. First, poetry was understood as a way to reach children, and children were understood as a critical political constituency even though they could not vote. Charles Babcock, the superintendent of the Oil City (Pennsylvania) school system, argued in 1897 that celebrating "Bird Day" (using, *inter alia*, bird-watching manuals and "The Birds of Killingworth") was a way to create a "large and compact enthusiasm" for bird laws among young and old:

Laws for bird protection have been passed in many of our states; but these have been found effective only where they were not needed. They are, however, right and will help in the development of correct sentiment. What is most needed is knowledge of the birds themselves, their modes of life, their curious ways, and their relations to other forms of life. To know a bird is to love him. Birds are beautiful and interesting objects of study, and make appeals to children that are responded to with delight. The general observance of a "bird day" in our schools would probably do more to open thousands of young minds to the reception of bird lore than anything else that can be devised. The scattered interests of the children would thus be brought together, and fused into a large and compact enthusiasm, which would become the common property of all. Zeal in a genuine cause is more contagious than a bad habit.⁴

As Babcock suggests, compulsory public schooling created a captive audience where bird laws could be enforced through the dissemination of knowledge and sentiment. Once children were converted to the cause, boys would stop firing slingshots, girls would stop donning feathers, and parents would be persuaded by example. To underscore his point about the importance of sentiment, Babcock ends the essay by reprinting "The Birds of Killingworth," a text organized around heartfelt pleas for bird defense.

A second key discourse was the popularization of the natural sciences and the nature-study movement. During the late nineteenth century, lines between science and literature were still blurry. Birding and poetry were acceptable amateur pursuits, not yet hyperarticulated by professionals and not separated by rigid disciplinary boundaries. Most bird-watching

manuals from the period, like Mabel Osgood Wright's immensely popular *Birdcraft* (1897), are peppered with poetry that invites sentimental responses to living birds. Wright prefaces her book with a quote from Longfellow that unexpectedly politicizes *Hiawatha*:

And the birds sang round him, o'er him,
And the birds sang round him, o'er him,
"Do not shoot us, Hiawatha!"
Sang the Opechee, the Robin,
Sang the Bluebird, the Owaissa,
"Do not shoot us, Hiawatha!"⁵

Wright teaches her young readers to respond to birds not only as observers but also as empathetic readers and listeners, ending her first chapter with a quote from Chaucer:

As you listen to the song and look at the birds, many will disappear, and you will know that these are the migrants who have gone to their various breeding haunts; and that those who are busy choosing their building sites, and are carrying straw, clay and twigs, are the summer residents. Then you must glide quietly among the trees to watch the next scene of the bird year—the building of the nest—which is the motive of the Spring Song, and you will feel that in truth—"Hard is the heart that loveth nought / in May."⁶

Although Wright uses scientific names for specific birds, her aims are not just scientific. She wants her readers to understand birdlife, but also to feel the metaphorical power of poetry and to identify with birds as "summer residents" akin to human beings. Such hybrid texts—part metaphor, part ornithology—disseminated bird poetry in the later nineteenth century and also shaped the hybrid (part-romantic, part-realist) ways it was read.

A third cultural discourse connected birdsong to the music of poetry, assuming that poets were uniquely qualified to speak for (and advocate for) birds. In his book of essays for children, *A Year with the Birds*, Wilson Flagg expressed a common sentiment when he declared, "The songs

of birds are as intimately allied with poetry as with music.”⁷ Of course, birdsong has been a feature of English-language poetry since the Middle Ages, but Flagg’s approach is self-consciously ornithological. Facts lend credibility to metaphors, but metaphors remain important because they put facts into an emotional context. He carefully notes the behaviors of bobolinks—why they nest in fields, how males differ from females—before launching into a poem:

A flock of merry singing-birds were sporting in the grove;
Some were warbling cheerily and some were making love.
There were Bobolincon, Wadolincon, Winterseeble, Conquedle.—
A livelier set were never led by tabor, pipe, or fiddle:
Crying “Phew, shew, Wadolincon; see, see Bobolincon
Down among the tickle-tops, hiding in the buttercups;
I know the saucy chap; I see his shining cap,
Bobbing in the clover there,—see, see, see!”⁸

Flagg encourages young people to listen with a poet’s ear even as they watch with an ornithologist’s eye. Having opened an imaginary line of sympathetic communication between birds and humans, he can then segue easily into a chapter on how to protect them. He seizes the opportunity to rail against lawns, which he describes as a luxury that is obtained at the expense of nesting birds. Readers who value the poetry of birdsong, he suggests, can surely dispense with “a smooth-shaven green.”⁹ In *A Year with the Birds*, as in many other texts, metaphorical birds are recruited to change how readers feel—and hence how they behave—toward real birds, although in Flagg’s case the message against lawns seems to have gone unheard.

These three assumptions—that children’s emotional responses can be shaped by poetry, that poetry can mix easily with science, and that birds and birdsong are like poetry—combined to make poems important to the bird-defense movement. The movement was quite successful; public outrage spurred a spate of bird-protection laws at the turn of the century, culminating in the Lacey Act of 1900 (to stop bounty hunting); the McLean-Weeks Act of 1913 (to stop the international millinery trade); and

finally the 1918 Migratory Birds Treaty Act (to protect hundreds of North American migratory birds and their habitats). Many scholars, including Oliver Orr, Mark Barrow, Felton Gibbons, and Deborah Strong, have described the history of the nature-study and bird-protection movements.¹⁰ However, literary ecocritics have been slow to embrace the poetry of bird defense, which falls outside the traditional canon.¹¹ In *Ecopoetry*, J. Scott Bryson declares,

What was considered an overly romantic nature poetry—steeped in pathetic fallacy—had lost credibility, largely as a result of 19th century science and the drastic changes in the way Westerners envisioned themselves and the world around them. . . . By the early 20th century, therefore, anything resembling romantic poetry was rarely written and, if it was, it was even more rarely taken seriously.¹²

While Bryson's view reflects his contemporary aesthetic, it does not capture the transitional sensibilities of the nature-study and bird-defense movements. Popular poems were steeped in romantic and sentimental rhetoric—but, far from being anachronistic, this rhetoric was actually deployed, by writers such as the naturalist John Burroughs, in support of later nineteenth-century science and the new “way Westerners envisioned themselves and the world around them.” Indeed, poems like “The Birds of Killingworth” and “The Sandpiper” not only reflected but actually helped to construct the emerging American environmental imagination.

II.

Is man's the only throbbing heart that hides
The silent spring that feeds its whispering tides?
—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES¹³

Rachel Carson's 1961 *Silent Spring* glances back, in its title, at the fireside poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, even as it looks anxiously forward, toward a bleak future void of birdsong. In her brief opening chapter, Carson recounts “A Fable for Tomorrow,” the story of a town “in the heart of America” where DDT and other pollutants have ruined the environment:

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyard were deserted. . . . It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.¹⁴

As an adolescent, Carson had read and contributed to *St. Nicholas*; among her pieces published in the magazine was “My Favorite Recreation,” a 1922 description of “bird-nesting” in the Pennsylvania countryside.¹⁵ Of course, *Silent Spring* outlines a disaster that is very modern in scope and that no bird-defender could have fully anticipated. However, the book’s horrific imagery also draws on an older tradition—namely, what Lawrence Buell calls the trope of an “environmental apocalypse” that threatens the pastoral order.¹⁶ According to Buell, authors such as Carson invite readers to imagine an apocalypse precisely so that they will be motivated to forestall it.

Almost exactly 100 years earlier, in the midst of the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow also pictured an avian apocalypse in “The Birds of Killingworth,” a poem that appeared as “The Poet’s Tale” in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863). The poem is fictional in the extreme; it is the only one of the *Tales* completely invented by Longfellow, who also buries it in multiple fictive frames: it is a tale set “in fabulous days / some hundred years ago,” told by a poet to a group of travelers.¹⁷ Moreover, within the poem, yet another voice dominates—that of a science teacher, known as “the Preceptor,” who tries to save the birds from destruction, in part by outlining the ecological interdependence of birds and insects. Thus, from the beginning, “The Birds of Killingworth” is structured as a hybrid of fiction and fact, or poetry and science—and this, as we shall see, is also how it was often read.

Of course, Longfellow’s assumptions about the natural world are radically different from Carson’s, but, like Carson, he imagines a town “in the heart of America” without birds:

The Summer came, and all the birds were dead;
The days were like hot coals; the very ground
Was burned to ashes; in the orchards fed
Myriads of caterpillars, and around
The cultivated fields and garden beds
Hosts of devouring insects crawled, and found
No foe to check their march, till they had made
The land a desert without leaf or shade.¹⁸

The town leaders wreak havoc when they decide to kill all of Killingworth's birds in a drive to increase crop production. Since they do not yet have access to pesticides, they resort to direct bird slaughter, which leads to the insect outbreak. The effects of this imbalance are described in shocking but also utilitarian terms: the *cultivated* fields and gardens are devoured, and this disruption of agriculture seems, at first, to be the central catastrophe. However, closer inspection suggests that Longfellow's poem is not merely a utilitarian celebration of birds as insectivorous helpers. Before the birds are killed, the Preceptor tries to convince the town leaders to spare the birds, making a hybrid argument that mixes aesthetics with applied science and sentimental pedagogy, and that ultimately asserts that the birds are valuable for other reasons.

The Preceptor's aesthetic argument cites Plato's famous expulsion of poets from his ideal polis:

Plato, anticipating the Reviewers,
From his Republic banished without pity
The Poets; in this little town of yours,
You put to death, by means of a Committee,
The ballad-singers and the Troubadours,
The street-musicians of the heavenly city,
The birds, who make sweet music for us all
In our dark hours, as David did for Saul.¹⁹

Here the Preceptor connects poems to birdsongs, using his melodious ottava rima to sing in chorus with the "sweet music" of the birds. But a

chorus is not a reproduction. After all, Plato banished the poets because he disapproved of their mimetic practices; he thought imitation shaded too dangerously into counterfeiting. This stanza depicts both birds and poets as natural singers; they are not imitators of one another, but originators of authentic aesthetic pleasures rooted in a divine order.

The Preceptor also makes a scientific case, stressing the important role that birds play in the ecosystem:

You call them thieves and pillagers; but know,
They are the wingéd wardens of your farms,
Who from the cornfields drive insidious foe,
And from your harvests keep a hundred harms;
Even the blackest of them all, the crow,
Renders good service as your man-at-arms,
Crushing the beetle in his coat of mail,
And crying havoc on the slug and snail.²⁰

This argument, in particular, was widely quoted in support of bird-defense legislation. For instance, in 1887 the naturalist Bela Hubbard wrote:

Let such as condemn the birds which they sometimes see eating their corn or fruits, read "The Birds of Killingworth." Longfellow's poem is no mere poetic fiction, but illustrates a truth which will soon come home to all who, in the spirit of the old Spaniards, cut down their trees, because they harbored the birds that consume their grain. Even in this country, and near home, we have had examples of this kind of wisdom. I trust to see Michigan—already in many things in the van of public opinion—so amend her law as to include under its protection all the birds that now suffer unjustly from its real or implied proscription. But still more, I trust to the advance of an enlightened public opinion, and therefore throw in my mite towards a just decision.²¹

Despite its fictive framing, Hubbard assumes that Longfellow's poem illustrates a truth that has measurable consequences in the natural world.

The Preceptor's third line of argument invokes sentimental pedagogy:

How can I teach your children gentleness,
And mercy to the weak, and reverence
For Life, which, in its weakness or excess,
Is still a gleam of God's omnipotence,
Or Death, which, seeming darkness, is no less
The selfsame light, although averted hence,
When by your laws, your actions, and your speech,
You contradict the very things I teach?²²

The Preceptor's argument is informed by an awareness of its (and his) limitations: the hierarchy of nature puts rich men near the top and God above all. But in a move that is characteristic of much sentimental rhetoric, the Preceptor also questions the hierarchy by reminding the powerful town leaders that "the weak" (poets, children, birds) still gleam with omnipotence. Thus "The Birds of Killingworth," a poem that was used in educational settings, essentially contains pedagogical instructions: to teach gentleness, mercy, and reverence, it is necessary to practice these qualities on living birds.

Not surprisingly, the Preceptor's words reach the town's women and children, including one of his upper-school students, Almira, who is destined to marry him:

There was another audience out of reach,
Who had no voice nor vote in making laws,
But in the papers read his little speech,
And crowned his modest temples with applause;
They made him conscious, each one more than each,
He still was victor, vanquished in their cause.
Sweetest of all the applause he won from thee,
O fair Almira at the Academy!²³

This stanza suggests that disenfranchised women and children are wiser than the politicians because they are naturally sympathetic to birds: the birds' cause is their own. Joanne Dobson has argued that in romantic texts, "the ultimate threat to individual existence is contamination of the

self by social bonds; in the sentimental version, the greatest threat is the tragedy of separation, of severed human ties."²⁴ For the Preceptor and his sympathizers, human ties take precedence over individual existence—but threats to the social fabric are intertwined with threats to the ecosystem.

The town leaders' failure is finally a failure of the sentimental imagination. Unlike the town's voiceless women and children, the leaders are not moved by birds or poetry.²⁵ Indeed, like Senator Bird in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they do not infuse their politics with feeling, even when faced with families being torn apart. As the bird slaughter proceeds, Longfellow's language turns sensational:

Dead fell the birds, with blood-stains on their breasts,
Or wounded crept away from sight of man,
While the young died of famine in their nests;²⁶

The poem, then, is not simply suggesting that birds are valuable because they are good for farmers; it is trying to demonstrate that birds also have a noninstrumental value *in themselves*, based on their ability to sing and suffer. This ineffable value can be transmitted by the best teachers, but it cannot be rationally described. It can only be experienced, like poetry—like David singing to Saul.

"The Birds of Killingworth" has a fablelike quality, but like many sentimental texts it is an essentially political story about a town meeting and a group of local legislators who cannot see the value of anything that is not directly profitable. Its reception history underscores its political dimensions while also reinforcing an idea that remained central (albeit in different forms) to environmental arguments in the twentieth century; namely, that value is not always synonymous with profit. For instance, an 1876 program celebrating the work of the Boston Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals featured a performance of "The Birds of Killingworth" by a quartette, immediately followed by an address by Boston's mayor, Frederick Prince, who declared:

I have said it is for our *interest* to treat our beasts well. Kind treatment makes them obedient and docile; harsh treatment, vicious and unmanageable. It is certainly then for our advantage to treat them

well, since the tractable is more valuable than the untractable animal. Furthermore, beasts who are well cared for will be longer-lived, and retain their capacity for usefulness for a longer period.

But this is basing our obligation to treat our dumb animals properly on a sordid and ignoble reason. We should do right to man and beast because duty enjoins it, and because it is wrong to do otherwise.²⁷
[Applause.]

The mayor's reasoning on this last and most crucial point is circular: it is our duty to treat animals kindly because it is our duty. But Longfellow's poem addresses the issue that the mayor evades, offering a performance that demonstrates what logic cannot prove: to wit, the value of birds and, not incidentally, of poetry.

In 1881 Longfellow wrote a letter to William E. A. Axon of the Manchester Literary Society, confirming that "The Birds of Killingworth" was inspired by a political debate over whether the state of Connecticut should pay a bounty for blackbird corpses. Longfellow assures Axon, "I sincerely sympathize with your exertions on behalf of the birds."²⁸ But by 1881 Longfellow's personal support for bird defense was hardly needed; his famous name and accessible style were already prompting the wide circulation of "The Birds of Killingworth" in hybrid bird-watching and bird-defense texts, especially for young people. Moreover, the poem's specific ecological vision changed with the changing ways it was read. For instance, in 1920 the Audubon Society released a film version of the poem:

Birds on the screen, singing and nesting, the thrush pouring out his soul in careless rapture, robins carolling and feeding their nestlings, the crow sitting on the scarecrow and laughing at the farmer. All these and many more are seen in "The Birds of Killingworth," Longfellow's classic poem, which has just been filmed as a two-reel feature for the Massachusetts Audubon Society by the Educational Motion Picture Bureau. The bird pictures on this film are by William and Irene Finley, famous the world over for their motion pictures of birdlife. . . . Here is a worth-while story of interwoven birdlife and human life, teaching the lesson of bird protection and of kindness for all.²⁹

As Gregg Mitman has described it, the Finleys promoted their political agenda by depicting close connections and similarities between bird and humans.³⁰ By stressing the anthropomorphic entertainment value of birdlife, the Finleys hoped—in this film and others—to arouse viewer sympathy and, from there, to promote “wildlife conservation through a wide angle.”³¹ The name “Longfellow” added cultural credibility to their project; as the publicity material put it, “[the] ‘Birds of Killingworth’ is a classic; everywhere school children have read it and declaimed it; old and young alike will want to see it on the screen. It will be released early in January. Ask your favorite motion-picture house about it.”³²

But perhaps the most telling use of “The Birds of Killingworth” is revealed by the ways it was excerpted. The thirty-stanza poem is too long to be reproduced in educational or political contexts. As a result, many versions of the poem are edited down. The love story subplot between the Preceptor and Almira tends to be cut, but, more significant, the happy ending is also typically left off. In the end of Longfellow’s original poem, new birds are trucked in by a stranger, who drives a cart full of wicker cages. When the ending is omitted, the poem retains its force as an environmental apocalypse. For instance, *Living Language Lessons*, a 1917 textbook by Howard Driggs, excerpts the poem but includes neither the love plot nor the stranger with his wicker cages. Instead, it reproduces a few stanzas from the middle of the poem, reprints a photograph of migrating birds, and ends with questions that students are supposed to answer: “1. Suppose you had been at the meeting, what would you have said in favor of the birds? 2. Write a paragraph expressing your reasons why the birds should not be killed.”³³ The birds are no longer past-tense birds, living 100 years ago, as they are described in the complete text of Longfellow’s poem; instead, in *Living Language Lessons*, as in the Finleys’ film, the text is assumed to describe birds of the present day that might still be photographed—and saved. Or at least they might be saved if environmental catastrophes can be imagined and averted—but this requires a sentimental education.

III.

In the inaugural issue of *Audubon Magazine*, Celia Thaxter attacked the practice of wearing bird feathers on hats:

Does any woman imagine these withered corpses (cured with arsenic) which she loves to carry about, are *beautiful*? Not so; the birds lost their beauty with their lives. To-day I saw a mat woven of warblers' heads, spiked all over its surface with sharp beaks, set up on a bonnet and borne aloft by its possessor in pride! Twenty murders in one! and the face beneath bland and satisfied, for are not "Birds to be worn more than ever?" Flit, sandpiper, from the sea's margin to some loneliness remote and safe from the noble race of man!³⁴

Thaxter is angry about the decimation of bird populations, but her ethical argument is bound up with an aesthetic concern: birds on hats are ugly because they are out of place. A warbler on a bonnet is the worst kind of mimesis: an imitation of life, torn from its natural habitat and turned into a commodity for human use. Thaxter sought to restore the sandpiper to its habitat, not through direct activism (when asked, she declined to chair the Audubon Society) but through literature. Her most widely circulated poem, a children's poem titled "The Sandpiper," sends the bird flitting through a rhymed, metrical environment that is, in its way, as carefully constructed as a hat. However, the ways that Thaxter framed the poem when she published it, and the ways that it circulated in anthologies and birding manuals, finesse the problem of artifice by repeatedly linking "The Sandpiper" to its counterparts in the wild.

In "The Sandpiper," a child (or at least childlike) speaker gathers driftwood along the shoreline, competing with "wild waves" that reach out to reclaim it. The sandpiper, too, "flits" with its long legs:

Above our heads the sullen clouds
Scud black and swift across the sky;
Like silent ghosts in misty shrouds
Stand out the white lighthouses high.
Almost as far as eye can reach

I see the close-reefed vessels fly,
As fast we flit along the beach,
One little sandpiper and I.³⁵

Unlike, say, William Cullen Bryant's bird in his well-known poem "To a Waterfowl," this sandpiper is not a text inscribed with messages from the divine. But neither is it merely a scientific specimen; at the end of the poem, the speaker addresses the bird directly, as a comrade and spiritual compatriot:

Comrade, where wilt thou be tonight
When the loosed storm breaks furiously?
My driftwood fire would burn so bright!
To what warm shelter canst thou fly?
I do not fear for thee, though wroth
The tempest rushes through the sky;
For are we not God's children both,
Thou, little sandpiper and I?³⁶

The sandpiper is neither just a reflection of the speaker's soul in the romantic mode nor a bundle of nerves and instinct in the realist mode. Instead, it teeters uncomfortably on the border between mimesis and metaphor, both representing the human speaker to herself and also flying far beyond the speaker's ken, such that the final stanza is nothing but unanswered questions.

"The Sandpiper" takes place within a complete ecosystem that extends beyond the boundaries of the poem and (the poem implies) perhaps even beyond the reach of God. In "The Sandpiper," as in many later nineteenth-century bird poems, birds are both ideas and things; the poem invites readers to identify birds as aspects of the self and also to seek them out in the natural landscape. In 1884, when Thaxter published "The Sandpiper" in her *Poems for Children*, she placed it together with a nonfictional piece about bird-watching also titled "The Sandpiper," in which the speaker finds a nest:

Then I cautiously looked for the nest, and found it quite close to my feet, near the stem of a stunted bayberry-bush. Mrs. Sandpiper had only drawn together a few bayberry-leaves, brown and glossy, a little pale green lichen, and a twig or two, and that was a pretty enough house for her. Four eggs, about as large as robins', were within, all laid evenly with the small ends together, as is the tidy fashion of the Sandpiper family. No wonder I did not see them; for they were pale green like the lichen, with brown spots the color of the leaves and twigs, and they seemed a part of the ground, with its confusion of soft neutral tints.³⁷

The origin of the poem is thus implicitly merged with the origin of the bird: both begin with pale green spotted eggs. Any impulse to read Thaxter's poem romantically—as *just* a poem about the self—is blocked by these fragile eggs, which insist on the bird's independent origins and its original otherness. At the same time, though, the eggs are figured as “part of the ground”—part of the habitat surrounding all living creatures.

“The Sandpiper” is infused with perils that hover over the common ground that the bird and the speaker share. The lighthouses in the poem are “like silent ghosts in misty shrouds,” but they are also a real threat to real birds, as Thaxter understood when she wrote to the naturalist Bradford Torrey: “Poor birds! Did you notice that six per cent of the myriads of birds killed by the Statue of Liberty lighthouse were Maryland yellowthroats? By and by there will be no more birds at all. But I hope I shall be dead before that happens.”³⁸ Thaxter's death wish, that she might expire before the birds disappear, highlights the darker undercurrents in her poetry. “The Sandpiper” ends by reasserting a divine order in which all creatures are children of God. But—like “The Birds of Killingworth”—the rest of the poem undermines this stable perspective by showing that large, indifferent forces (Darwinian if not apocalyptic) buffet life on Earth; indeed, the speaker's kinship with the sandpiper is predicated on their mutual vulnerability.

As the poem became popular, it sometimes appeared in contexts—like the *McGuffey's Reader* series—that utterly divorced it from its flesh-and-feather counterparts in nature. However, the nature-study and bird-defense movements used “The Sandpiper” in deliberately interdisciplinary educa-

tional programs, sending readers out into the field to find (but not disturb) real nests and eggs. Thaxter's friend Mabel Osgood Wright uses "The Sandpiper" in *Birdcraft*; she gives technical information about sandpipers ("*Tringa minutilla*. Length: 5.50 inches") before quoting the third stanza:

I watch him as he skims along
Uttering his sweet and mournful cry.
He starts not at my fitful song,
Or flash of fluttering drapery.
He has no thought of any wrong;
He scans me with a fearless eye.
Staunch friends are we, well tried and strong,
The little sandpiper and I.³⁹

Just as Thaxter depicts the literal nest of her metaphorical sandpiper, Wright gives her factual sandpiper metaphorical weight by quoting Thaxter's poem. In this, Wright tips her political hand: the purpose of *Birdcraft* is to teach children to watch birds—but to watch them in a particular way, through a lens of sympathy. The first step in bird identification is to identify the bird, but the second step is to identify *with* the bird. Thus the bird will be seen scientifically but also appreciated as a "staunch friend" worthy of protection on its own merits. As Thaxter's speaker watches the sandpiper, the sandpiper in turn "scans" her "with a fearless eye." There are two sets of eyes—and two distinct I's—in the poem. This delicate balance between interdependence and otherness also informs Wright's philosophy of nature. As she put it in 1903, there are two ways to see nature: one that "we may call economic humanity, the preservation of nature, that we may still have it to enjoy and no type may prematurely perish; and the more ethical one of viewing the wild from its own point of view."⁴⁰

In an 1884 anthology of bird poems, John Burroughs also prefaces Thaxter's poem with information about seabirds:

Of the sandpipers there are many varieties, found upon the coast and penetrating inland along the rivers and watercourses, one of the most interesting of the family, commonly called the "tip-up," going up all the

mountain brooks and breeding in the sand along their banks; but the characteristics are the same in all, and the eye detects little difference except in size. The walker on the beach sees him running or flitting before him, following up the breakers and picking up the aquatic insects left on the sands; and the trout-fisher along the farthest inland stream likewise intrudes upon its privacy. Flitting along from stone to stone seeking its food, the hind part of its body “teetering” up and down, its soft gray color blending it with the pebbles and the rocks, or else skimming up or down the stream on its long convex wings, uttering its shrill cry, the sandpiper is not a bird of the sea merely; and Mrs. Thaxter’s poem is as much for the dweller inland as the dweller upon the coast.⁴¹

Oddly, Burroughs implies that to read the poem, one must have access to the bird; hence, “the dweller inland” can enjoy the poem, not because the poem can stand alone without the bird, but because sandpipers live inland also. The natural world and the poetic artifact are mutually dependent, like the human “I” and the avian “thou” in “The Sandpiper.” This relationship is very different from the commodity fetishism of birds attached to hats because it recognizes the living, coevolving nature of both the bird and the poem: if one is dead, the other cannot live.

What, then, is the exact relationship between the bird and the poem? Can it be described, or is it ineffable, like David’s songs to Saul? Lawrence Buell discusses the problem of real versus literary nature extensively in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*:

The majority of ecocritics, whether or not they theorize their positions, look upon their texts of reference as refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other sociological facets. . . . Many environmental critics, both first-wave and revisionist, seek to break down the formal division of labor between creative writing, criticism, field-based environmental studies, and environmental activism. As we saw in chapter 1, ecocritics who teach for a living often combine classroom instruction with some sort of field experience. Motivating this is a conviction that contact (or

lack of contact) with actual environments is intimately linked, even if not on a one-on-one basis, with the work of environmental imagination, for both writer and critic.⁴²

Although Buell attributes these problems and strategies to twentieth-century environmental critics, his account applies equally well to turn-of-the-century teachers, writers, and readers. Birding manuals, anthologies, and textbooks ignored “the formal division of labor between creative writing, criticism, field-based environmental studies, and environmental activism,” and naturalist teachers sought to “combine classroom instruction with some sort of field experience.” Thus, rather than developing a fixed definition of the relationship between poetry and nature, birders and bird defenders produced pragmatic plans of action that would bring poems into contact with nature. The Bird Day movement became a vehicle for readers to interact with the environment while remaining readers. At the turn of the twentieth century, as federal bird-protection legislation was slowly taking hold, Lawrence Babcock proposed that American students celebrate Bird Day to raise awareness about the threats to birds. State game wardens warmed to the idea, which could be used to promote existing bird-protection measures and to agitate for new ones. By 1918—the year that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act finally passed—most school systems were celebrating some version of Bird Day, and a number of game departments, including those in Oklahoma, Iowa, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and Alabama, were issuing Bird Day books. These publications achieved wide circulation because they were distributed free to public school teachers. The Bird Day books were hybrid anthologies that presented information about birds together with photographs, games, instructions for birdhouse construction, birding guides, and selections from literature. They tended to make extensive use of poetry, representing poems as instrumentally valuable (in advocating for birds) but also as valuable in themselves, as works of art akin to birds.

To choose one among many examples, in 1915 the Alabama Department of Game and Fish released the *Alabama Bird Day Book*, asserting in its introduction, “This pamphlet, which is a work of art, is eagerly sought and used in every county and most of the schools of the State. No

other agency is doing so much to conserve our birds and to preserve in our children the sympathetic instinct which statutes and constitutions are powerless to inculcate."⁴³ Again, as in "The Birds of Killingworth," children are accorded a power that "statutes and constitutions" cannot grant: to wit, the power of sympathy. This sympathy is incited by poems, which occupy over half of the book's ninety-seven pages, interspersed with scientific information and instructions for field study. For example, the red-tailed hawk is first described by a biological survey bulletin excerpt; it is then shown in a watercolor portrait; and it is finally given voice in a poem by Dora Reade Goodale:

Over the broad champaign I float,
And over the sparkling sea;
I mount at will to the peak of heaven,
And rejoice that I am free:
Ko, keeo, killio, keeo,
I exult that I am free!⁴⁴

Rather than ending the poetry selections with study questions or information about the author, the *Alabama Bird Day Book* jumps right into practical instructions on "How to Go A-Birding":

You must have a bird in the heart if you would see and appreciate the bird in the bush. It is the heart, too, that sharpens the eyes. Not all persons can become bird students because not all have the requisite enthusiasm; not all are *en rapport*. . . . Odd as it may appear, I would say, do not be too scientific. Not one word would I utter in disparagement of the specialist and the technical student, providing he feels certain that he can add something new and valuable to science; but for popular amateur bird study I should protest against the slaughter of feathered innocents either for identification or structural research. Do not look upon birds as mere anatomical specimens.⁴⁵

The *Bird Day Book* clearly uses poems to instill "a bird in the heart" of the reader, to prepare that reader for field study in the service of conservation, not just science.

Indeed, the book quickly cuts to images of apocalyptic extinction, describing the death of Martha, the last passenger pigeon, as “a calamity of as great importance in the eyes of naturalists as the death of a Kaiser to Germans throughout the world.”⁴⁶ It then offers an essay by Dr. William T. Hornaday, “written expressly for the *Alabama Bird Day Book*”:

We received from the hand of Nature a marvelous continent, overflowing with an abundance of wild life. But we do not own it all; it is not all ours to destroy if we choose. . . . The young Americans of the year 2015 will read of these wonderful creatures, and if they find none of them alive how will they characterize the men of 1915? I, for one, do not wish in 2015 to be classed with the swine of Mauritius that exterminated the dodo.⁴⁷

And finally, the *Alabama Bird Day Book* urges direct political action, disparaging the motives of those who profit from birds’ feathers and skins:

As business men, they know how to appeal to the business men in any legislature and their opposition is a very serious matter. The way to counteract it is to *overwhelm* it, in the Legislature and before the Governor, with appeals and demands from the press and from men and women who have no selfish interests to serve and no axes to grind, in behalf of imperiled nature. Men who are moved to leave their mirth and their employment, and journey to their State capitol to appear at hearings before committees in behalf of the wildlife of the people at large, always command very respectful attention, and in about nineteen cases out of every twenty, if the cause of the people is *adequately represented*, the friends of wild life do not appeal in vain.⁴⁸

This explicitly political plea—the final entry in the book—is directly preceded by Helen Richardson’s poem, “Trimming the Clothes-Line”:

I’m happy when the birds come back,
I’ve something then to do;
If you don’t mind a little work
Perhaps you’d like it, too.

I get a lot of pretty strings,
Some red, some white, some blue,
And on a line out in the yard
I hang them up in view.⁴⁹

“Trimming the Clothes-Line” is one of the few bird-protection poems to strike a nationalist note, and it is an odd one: the speaker helps birds make red, white, and blue nests. While this might be explained in part by World War I, it also sets up the *Bird Day Book*’s call to activism. Like a child reader, the (presumably female) speaker cannot vote, but she can intervene directly on behalf of birds and weave them into the social fabric. Her commerce with the birds allows them to practice moral suasion; the colored threads give the birds a way to express (or seem to express) human interests—like translating birdsong into human poetry. The move is anthropomorphic, but also pragmatic: like the flag, Richardson’s patriotic nests are meant to inspire an “overwhelming” mass mobilization on behalf of birds.

The *Alabama Bird Day Book* represents birds through an eclectic editorial approach that blends science, politics, art, and poetry without regard to disciplinary boundaries or literary periodization. Poems in the *Alabama Bird Day Book* are not isolated lyrics; they work as part of a broader context of action, observation, and advocacy, and they emerge as ecologically pragmatic and political without losing their genre-specific power to evoke sympathy. The *Alabama Bird Day Book*—like other hybrid anthologies that included poems such as “The Birds of Killingworth” and “The Sandpiper”—can thus be read as both a field guide and as a guide to the evolving American environmental imagination. Such texts are not simply what Buell calls “refractions of physical environments”; by mixing poetry with scientific facts and documentary media, they posit poems as neither mirrors (reflecting nature) nor lamps (illuminating nature).⁵⁰ Instead, poems and birds are assumed to share a habitat where the lines between nature and culture break down—and where it is possible to find imaginary nests with real eggs in them.

Notes

1. Jesse Anderson Chase, *Three Freshmen: Ruth, Fran, and Nathalie* (New York: A. C. McClurg, 1896), 130. For more on bird defense in *St. Nicholas Magazine*, see Kaye Adkins, "Foundation-Stones: Natural History for Children in *St. Nicholas Magazine*," in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, ed. Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd, 31–47 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

2. Chase, *Three Freshmen*, 132.

3. The term "realism" has been used in many ways; here I use it as a practice that assumes, in Joseph Carroll's words, "the idea that scientific knowledge corresponds to a reality that extends independently of our conceptions." See Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 101. This independent reality is primarily secular and materialist, rather than divine and ideal; the extent to which it can be represented textually remains open to debate.

4. Charles A. Babcock, "A Bird Day in the Schools of Pennsylvania," *School Journal* 46, no. 12 (May 1897): 572.

5. Mabel Osgood Wright, *Birdcraft: A Field Book of 200 Song, Game, and Water Birds* (New York: MacMillan, 1897), front matter.

6. Wright, *Birdcraft*, 10.

7. Wilson Flagg, *A Year with the Birds* (Boston: Educational Publishing, 1881), 9.

8. Flagg, *Year with the Birds*, 43.

9. Flagg, *Year with the Birds*, 133.

10. See Oliver Orr, *Saving American Birds: T. Gilbert Pearson and the Founding of the Audubon Movement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992); Mark Barrow, *A Passion for Birds: American Ornithology After Audubon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Felton Gibbons and Deborah Strong, *Neighbors to the Birds: A History of Bird Watching in America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

11. By way of establishing a basic canon or subcanon of popular bird-defense poems beyond the few I discuss, it is helpful to consult a list assembled by Charles Babcock in *Bird-Day: How to Prepare for It* (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1901) 54–55. Babcock recommends: "The Birds' Orchestra," Celia Thaxter; "The Robin," Celia Thaxter; "The Song Sparrow," Celia Thaxter; "The Blackbird," Alice Cary; "The Raven's Shadow," William Watson; "On Seeing a Wild Bird," Alice Cary; "What Sees the Owl?" Elizabeth S. Bates; "Lament of a Mocking Bird," Frances Anne Kemble; "The Snowbird," Dora Read Goodale; "To a Seabird," Bret Harte; "The Rain Song of the Robin," Kate Upson Clark; "The Swallow," Owen Meredith; "A Bird at Sunset," Owen Meredith; "The Titlark's Nest," Owen Meredith; "The Dead Eagle," Thomas Campbell; "Ode to a Nightingale," John Keats; "What the Birds Said," John Greenleaf Whittier; "The Sandpiper," Celia Thaxter; "The Blackbird and the Rooks," Dinah Mulock Craik; "The Canary in His Cage," Dinah Mulock Craik; "The Falcon," James Russell Lowell; "The Titmouse," Ralph Waldo Emerson; "The Stormy Petrel," Barry Cornwall; "To the Skylark," Percy Bysshe Shelley; "The O'Lincoln Family," Wilson Flagg; "To a Waterfowl," William Cullen

Bryant; "Robert of Lincoln," William Cullen Bryant; "The Return of the Birds," William Cullen Bryant; "The Eagle," Alfred Tennyson; "To the Eagle," James G. Percival; "The Forerunner," Harriet Prescott Spofford; "The Skylark," James Hogg; "To the Skylark," William Wordsworth; "Sir Robin," Lucy Larcom; "The Pewee," J. T. Trowbridge; "The Yellowbird," Celia Thaxter; "The Dying Swan," Alfred Tennyson; "Story of a Blackbird," Alice Cary; "The Blue Jay," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "The Song Sparrow," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "The Catbird," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "Sparrows," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "The Ovenbird," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "The Vireos," Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney; "The Ovenbird," Frank Bolles; "Whip-poor-will," Frank Bolles; "The Veery," Henry Van Dyke; "The Song Sparrow," Henry Van Dyke; "The Wings of a Dove," Henry Van Dyke; "The Whip-poor-will," Henry Van Dyke; "To the Cuckoo," William Wordsworth; "Secrets," Susan Coolidge; "The Falcon," James Russell Lowell; "The Mocking Bird," Sidney Lanier; "Forbearance," Ralph Waldo Emerson; "The Mocking Bird," Clinton Scollard; "The Mocking Bird," Maurice Thompson; "The Mocking Bird," R. H. Wilde; "The Mocking Bird," A. B. Meek; "The Mocking Bird," Albert Pike; "The Song of the Thrush," Edward Markham. Some of Babcock's titles, such as Tennyson's "To the Eagle" (instead of "The Eagle: A Fragment"), reflect textbook adaptations—a common practice at the time.

12. J. Scott Bryson, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 2.

13. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Secret of the Stars," in *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 121.

14. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 2.

15. Mark H. Lytle describes Carson's relationship with *St. Nicholas*, and with the turn-of-the-century nature-study movement, in *Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23–24.

16. Lawrence Buell, "Environmental Apocalypticism," in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 280–308.

17. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Poet's Tale," in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 121.

18. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 128.

19. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 124–125.

20. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 126.

21. Bela Hubbard, *Memorials of Half a Century* (New York: Putnam's, 1887), 315.

22. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 127.

23. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 127.

24. Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (1997): 263–288, 267.

25. My brief discussion of sentimentalism assumes that Jane Tompkins's much-debated views concerning Stowe's politics of affect are essentially viable, at least in the

context of Longfellow's poetry; in *Sensational Designs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), she argues that sentimental texts attempt to move readers emotionally so that they will act in the world.

26. Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 128.

27. "Twelfth Anniversary of the Massachusetts Society for the Preservation of Cruelty to Animals," in *Our Dumb Animals* 12, no. 12 (May 1880), 94.

28. William E. A. Axon, "On Longfellow's Birds of Killingworth," in *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club* 33 (1907): 226.

29. "Motion Pictures: 'The Birds of Killingworth,'" *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society* 1, no. 7 (November 1920): 5.

30. Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 96–99.

31. Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 85.

32. "Motion Pictures," 17.

33. Howard Roscoe Driggs, *Living Language Lessons* (New York: University Publishing, 1917), 105.

34. Celia Thaxter, "Woman's Heartlessness," reprinted in *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*, ed. Karen Kilcup, 281 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

35. Celia Thaxter, *Poems for Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 5.

36. Thaxter, *Poems for Children*, 6.

37. Thaxter, *Poems for Children*, 3.

38. Celia Thaxter to Bradford Torrey, January 5, 1890, in *Letters of Celia Thaxter*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1896), 171.

39. Wright, *Birdcraft*, 241.

40. Mabel Osgood Wright, "Life Outdoors and Its Effect Upon Literature," in *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, ed. David Mazel, 156 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

41. John Burroughs, *Birds and Poets* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1884), 53.

42. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 30–31.

43. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book* (1915), front matter.

44. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 15.

45. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 18.

46. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 55.

47. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 90.

48. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 91.

49. Alabama Department of Game and Fish, *Alabama Bird Day Book*, 89.

50. I allude here to M. H. Abram's famous distinction, first described in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).