

Birdsong

April 11, 2009

One thing I got right in the return from Argentina to England, and that is the timing: after enjoying the warm summer in the South, I arrived in balmy days of late February in the North, where an early spring was already under way. Now the trees are flowering, one after another, and the birds are singing. And how they do sing, in solo or in concert, forming a barely interrupted stream of cheer, chirping, trilling, piping, whistling!

To let loose their song they seem to choose a perch in a tree where they can hardly be seen, but how they can be heard! One wonders, how can such little flight-weight creatures let out so much sound? And who for? Just to find a mate? But I am told they sing here all year round. "Be quiet," said St. Ignatius of Loyola to a little wayside flower – "I know Who you are talking about."

The sweetheart of a Roman poet had a sparrow for a pet, and through her Catullus felt all its charm. Here in free translation is the poem he wrote when it died:

All hearts that love a lover, grieve!

My girl-friend's lost her bird.

Her darling birdie is dead. To lose

Her eyes she'd have preferred.

As sweet child clings to mother, from

My girl it would not stray,

But hopping round her lap, would chirp.

To her alone all day.

But now it's in death's dark, from where

None to return has power.

O cursed dark of Hell, whatever

Is pretty, you devour!

So pretty a bird you've taken now!

Poor little birdie – dead.

'Tis all your fault, my girl so wept,

Her eyes are swollen red.

Catullus was a contemporary of Julius Caesar, whom he knew. It is not without its charm to realize how Ancient Rome was human as well as heroic.

Kyrie eleison.