



Air songs

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Air Songs.

Up in Gausdal in Norway, not very far from where Björnson passed the greater part of his life's harvest and winter, there lived during the first three quarters of last century a brother-poet of his, a certain Knut, a peasant from "the Northern farm" — Nordgarden — who after this farm and as the son of a Rasmus was called Knut Rasmussön Nordgarden. He had lived the uneventful life of a poor husbandman for quite 26 years before anything happened that seemed to mark him out for the life of the seer that was to be his. But one day in 1808 when he was quietly sitting at home, reading in his mother's postil, feeling in great mental distress, he all of a sudden discovered that he possessed the power of "second-hearing", as we may call it, of hearing at a great distance.

"After a period of extreme weakness", as he speaks of this himself, "I heard of a night celestial melodies of harps, violins and clarinets which seemed to come towards the earth, as well as a chorus of celestial voices which went heavenwards". These voices sang spiritual songs and Knut was so struck with this that he fervently prayed they might come nearer so that he could learn them.

His prayer was heard and from that time he *did* hear these "air-songs", as he called them, quite regularly, one stanza or more, sometimes five or six at a time. Judging from the specimen given below, my readers will no doubt conclude that it would have been better for the literary reputation of the singer if this "poetry" had never seen the light:

"Cast away this medecin
which thou wear'st around thy neck.
It's the skeleton of a serpent
which thou wear'st around thy neck.
Nothing but God's aid will help thee
namely Jesus' flesh and blood.
Cleanse thyself from sin and evil
then thou shalt be from illness free".

At first, this gift of poetry seemed to have been given him for purely practical purposes, at least we read how it was again an "air-song" which gave him the required information when "Wise-Knut", as he soon began to be called, was asked where a vein of water was to be found, or what had become of lost cattle or even children that had gone astray.

But very soon the spiritual character of his mission came to the foreground. One day he says he heard "a sound in his ears" bidding him go to his neighbours' house and try to convert them. He did not feel inclined to obey this summons although he received it more than once. So his feet began to move of themselves and led the remainder of the unwilling Knut to a religious meeting, and even though he tried he could not move his feet in another direction. A curious mixture of spiritual and material control over his actions by the "Spirit of God" is found in the fact that, according to Knut himself, it "directed every one of the movements of his limbs", and allowed him, it is true, to touch e.g. the collection of Bishop King's psalms, but when he touched another he got spasms, just as when, instead

of using earthenware vessels, he drank of a porcelain cup, or went about in anything but homespun or tried to eat anything but the most homely of foodstuffs.

When finally we shall have mentioned the fact that a woman is reported to have seen angels whisper in his ears, thus prompting Knut whilst he was speaking, and that a man actually saw a white bird on either of Knut's shoulders, whilst some are even said to have observed a halo round his head, we have a picture sufficiently clear of this 19th century candidate for canonization to look around us in English literature and see which poet's life it is that receives some illustration from that of Wise Knut of Nordgarden.

If any of my readers should be inclined to attribute the art of *every* poet to the divine afflatus, our story would simply prove that, for once in a way, the Divinity has been badly inspired — as badly as poor Knut himself — for the above lines are, alas, nothing but a very characteristic specimen of the man's art.

But few are in any case the examples of English poets where the divine intervention is so clearly apparent and so admitted a source of the poetic output as with our Northern farmer. Where dreams are due to clear reminiscences of certain striking events or to physical circumstances such as difficult breathing, there is of course nothing remarkable about them from our point of view, but in many a case dreams may appear very clearly akin to inspiration. The present writer does not imagine he stands alone in his frequent experience of dreaming quite connected, sometimes very dramatic stories, series of incidents of which often on awaking nothing remained but the vaguest of reminiscences. But an extreme case in point belonging to the domain of English literature and which will have occurred to most of my readers is the one of that unfortunate knock at the door of a poet's cottage early in the preceding century which has bereft us for ever of all but the whole of the truly "inspired" story of Kubla Khan.

Much more of a parallel is however the genesis of a poem or more likely a series of poems, dating from the oldest periods of English literature.

For who that reads of Knut's unwillingness to attend the meetings can help thinking of a poor lay brother in a 7th century convent on the east coast of England, who in his old age received the gift of poetry in a way which clearly points to its being attributed to divine inspiration, — as a matter of fact the Venerable Bede says so expressly: "for þon he nalæs from monnum ne þurh monn gelæred wæs þæt he þone leodcræft geleornade, ac he wæs *godcundlice gefultumod*, and *þurh Godes gyfe þone songcræft onfeng*". (Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader, p. 46). Cædmon, so Bede tells us, whenever in their convivial meetings (*gebeorscipe*, *convivium*) he saw the harp approach him, so that his turn threatened to come to sing a song, had always been in the habit of leaving, as he did not know any. One time he had gone to the cowhouse which he was to watch that night and when he had fallen asleep, a man came to him in his slumber and calling him by his name, said: "Cædmon, sing me something". Cædmon refused on the plea that he could not sing, but the "man", "sum monn", insisted and on Cædmon's question what he was to sing of, said point-blank: "Sing me the Creation". And when Cædmon "had received this answer, he began at once to sing, in the praise of God the Creator, those lines and those words that he had never heard before, whose order (the Latin text: whose sense) is:

"Nu we sculan herian heofonrices Weard", etc.

Of course the two cases do not run exactly parallel, the most important point of difference being that Knut, although not over-anxious to go to the religious meetings, yet prays to learn the heavenly songs he has heard, whereas Cædmon, illiterate as he is, does not feel any the slightest enthusiasm for these meetings from which he escapes when he sees his way. In the case of Knut again, the celestial nature of the voices is clear from the very beginning, — Cædmon, on the other hand, is expressly said to have received the first intimation of his gift from *some man*, although it should be admitted that Beda himself with his vaguer “quidam” leaves the door open for the interpretation that here too divine intercession is thought of.

However this be, the story of Wise Knut seems to bear directly on that of the old singer of Air Songs. I confess even to feeling a more human interest in old Cædmon and his fate when making the acquaintance of his 19th century colleague, and if this impression should chance to be shared by my readers, they will see why in these *English Studies*, it was thought worth while to recapitulate the story of this *Norwegian* visionary¹⁾.

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¹⁾ The story of Knut Nordgarden is given here after Johannes Skar's book, 1898. — That of Cædmon after the extract from the Old English text (formerly attributed to King Alfred) in Sweet's *Reader*, and the Latin extract in Wülcker's *Grundriss zur Geschichte der Angelsächsischen Literatur*, 1885. Cædmon is in this paper spoken of as the real personage described in Beda's work. We need not enter here into the controverted question of the interpretation of his name, nor even of his real or fictitious existence. Those of my readers who should desire to work up this question may be referred to A. S. Cook: *The name Cædmon*, Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, VI; Wülcker, *Mittheilungen*, Beiblatt zur Anglia, 1891, p. 225; Wülcker, *Grundriss*, 1.c.; Cook, *Modern Language Notes*, 1891, col. 135, 142, 503. —

A History of. English Lawcourts.

II.

The Local Administration of Justice.

The gradual destruction of the local courts, or the absorption of all their important business by the central royal courts, had the advantage of preventing the rise of a feudal jurisdiction. But it was manifestly impossible for the central courts to treat of all the thousands of cases that arose, even with the help of the circuit system. From very early times we hear therefore of a local administration of justice chiefly criminal. Immediately after the accession of Edward III a statute was passed (1 Ed. III, stat. 2, c. 16, 1327) to the effect that in every shire, there should be *custodes pacis*, conservators (not yet justices) of the peace. They could commit persons to prison on the indictment of a jury, but the trial had to take place before a royal judge on his circuit. In 1360 it was enacted that there should be in every county one lord and “three or four of the most worthy of the county, with some learned in the law” to have power not only to arrest malefactors and receiving indictments against them, but also to hear and determine the cases. The conservators of the peace had thus become justices of the peace, and