A Dictionary of LITERARY SYMBOLS

Third Edition

MICHAEL FERBER

A Dictionary of Literary Symbols

This is an expansion of the first dictionary of symbols to be based on literature rather than on "universal" psychological archetypes or myths. It explains and illustrates the literary symbols that we frequently encounter, such as swan, rose, moon, gold, and gives thousands of cross-references and quotations. The dictionary concentrates on English literature, but its entries range widely from the Bible and classical authors to the twentieth century, taking in American and European literatures. For this third edition, Michael Ferber has included some twenty completely new entries, such as birch, childbirth, grove, mill, and railroad, and has added to many of the existing entries. Its rich references make this book an essential tool not only for literary and classical scholars but for all students of literature.

MICHAEL FERBER is Professor of English and Humanities at the University of New Hampshire. His books include *The Poetry of William Blake* (1991), *The Poetry of Shelley* (1993), *A Companion to European Romanticism* (2005), and *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry* (2012).

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For Lucy

Contents

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Abbreviations

Bible

AV Authorized Version (King James Version) of the Bible (1611). All quotations are from this version unless otherwise stated.
NT New Testament. Quotations from the NT that are paralleled in more than one Gospel are cited from the first in which they appear (usually Matthew).
OT Old Testament
NEB New English Bible (1961)

Pindar

Olymp. *Olympian*
Pyth. *Pythian*
Isth. *Isthmian*
Nem. *Nemean*

Horace

Quotations from Horace are from the Quotations from Horace are from the *Odes* or *Carmina* unless otherwise stated.

Ovid

Met. *Metamorphoses*

Apuleius

Met. *Metamorphoses* (or *The Golden Ass*)

Chaucer

CT *Canterbury Tales* (Gen. Pro. = General Prologue, Pro. = Prologue)
PF *Parliament of Fowls*
TC *Troilus and Criseyde*

Spenser

FQ *Faerie Queene* (Pro. = Prologue)
SC *Shepheardes Calendar*

Shakespeare

1H4, 2H4 *King Henry the Fourth, Part One, Part Two*
1H6, 2H6, 3H6 *King Henry the Sixth, Part One, Part Two, Part Three*
2GV *Two Gentlemen of Verona*
12N *Twelfth Night*
AC *Antony and Cleopatra*
AWEW *All's Well that Ends Well*
AYLI *As You Like it*
CE *The Comedy of Errors*
Cor *Coriolanus*
Cym *Cymbeline*

H5	*King Henry the Fifth*
H8	*King Henry the Eighth*
JC	*Julius Caesar*
KJ	*King John*
Lear	*King Lear*
LLL	*Love's Labour's Lost*
MAAN	*Much Ado about Nothing*
MM	*Measure for Measure*
MND	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
MV	*The Merchant of Venice*
MWW	*The Merry Wives of Windsor*
Per	*Pericles*
R2	*King Richard the Second*
R3	*King Richard the Third*
RJ	*Romeo and Juliet*
TC	*Troilus and Cressida*
Timon	*Timon of Athens*
Titus	*Titus Andronicus*
TS	*The Taming of the Shrew* (Ind. = Induction)
WT	*The Winter's Tale*

Line numbers for Shakespeare are keyed to the Riverside edition; they will not vary by much from any modern edition.

Milton

PL	*Paradise Lost*

Shelley

PU	*Prometheus Unbound*

Throughout the text, an asterisk before a word indicates that it is an unattested or hypothetical form.

Introduction

The idea for this dictionary came to me while I was reading a student essay on Byron's "Stanzas Written on the Road between Florence and Pisa," which sets the true glory of youthful love against the false glory of an old man's literary renown. After a promising start the student came to a halt before these lines: "the myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and-twenty / Are worth all your laurels, though ever so plenty." His copy lacked footnotes, and he lacked experience of poetry before the Romantics. With disarming candor he confessed that he had no idea what these three plants were doing in the poem, and then desperately suggested that Byron might have seen them on the road somewhere between Florence and Pisa and been inspired to put them in his poem the way you might put plants in your office. I wrote in the margin that these were symbolic plants and he had to look them up. But where, exactly, do you send a student to find out the symbolic meaning of myrtle? The *Oxford English Dictionary* was all I could come up with, but I felt certain there must be a handier source, designed for readers of literature, with a good set of quotations from ancient times to modern. But there is no such book.

A dozen times since then I have asked colleagues and librarians if they knew of one. They were all sure they did, or thought "there must be one," but they could never find it. Several of them came up with Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, but that work, whatever its uses, is the last thing I would recommend to a student. It has no entry at all for myrtle. Under ivy it mentions the Phrygian god Attis and its eunuch-priests and then says, "It is a feminine symbol denoting a force in need of protection." One can hardly imagine the interpretations of Byron that would arise from those claims. Under laurel it names Apollo and mentions poets, but has nothing about fame, and it goes on about "inner victories over the negative and dissipative influence of the base forces."

Only slightly better are two recent ones: Hans Biedermann's *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them*, translated from the German, and Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant's *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, translated from the French. Both range widely but unsystematically over the cultures of the world, packing Mayan and Chinese meanings next to those from medieval alchemy. The latter book, much the larger, lacks an entry for myrtle; under ivy it discusses Dionysus, which is on the right track, but it says nothing about its uses in Roman poetry that lie behind Byron. Neither book quotes widely from poetry or prose fiction.

If no adequate dictionary exists, but everyone thinks it does (because it must), that seemed a good reason to write one. It was also a reason not to write one, for if even the Germans have not produced one, as it seemed, it might be beyond mortal powers. After all, anything can be a symbol, and a comprehensive dictionary might require thousands of entries. After some hesitation, however, I decided the thing can be done, and the present book is the result.

Its title is somewhat misleading. It would be more correct, if ungainly, to call it *A Selective Dictionary of Traditional Western Literary Symbols and Conventions, Mainly in*

Poetry, and I shall follow the terms in that hypothetical title as I describe the book's features.

It was only by drastically limiting the range of possible symbols, of course, that I could proceed with it. Yet it is more comprehensive than one might think. This dictionary covers only traditional symbols, those that have been used over many years by many authors. Most entries begin with the Bible or the classics and trace examples through to fairly recent writers, with an emphasis on British literature, and especially on Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantics; they also typically include a few examples from Italian, French, Spanish, German, or Russian literature (especially from Dante and Goethe). The tradition is more stable than I had first guessed, at least until the twentieth century; nightingales and cypresses carry with them their ancient associations, and even where they are invoked in new ways those connotations may still be in play. There is no need, moreover, to take up the significance of the lathe in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the pistols in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the mysterious sound in Act 2 of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, the madeleine in Proust, or the leaden circles of sound from Big Ben that permeate Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. These must be worked out by the reader in each case, and no dictionary on a reasonable scale could help much. What readers need to know, in any case, are the traditional symbols, the routine furniture of literature over thousands of years, which often appear without explanation, and which gradually gain in connotation as the tradition lengthens and alludes to itself. Whether it informs the meaning of an individual work is often a subtle question – does it matter that the bird that seeks "your cradle narrow / Near my Bosom'' in Blake's "The Blossom" is a sparrow, with its associations of lust? Or that the tree that Akhmatova especially liked but is now a stump was a willow, with its suggestion of maidenhood or fruitlessness? ("The Willow") – but the question cannot even be entertained without a knowledge of the tradition. I do not know how many of these traditional symbols there are, but the number cannot be very large, and I am hoping that a book with 175 of the most important ones, along with cross-references, will be complete enough to constitute a useful reference work.

I have tried to be copious with quotations and citations in each entry, risking redundancy, in order to give a sense of the history of a symbol and the range of its contexts. Simply to give definitions of symbols would have made for a short book but a misleading one, for often only a listing of examples can convey what a symbol has meant. I have aimed, too, to interest the scholar or experienced reader as well as to help the beginning student. There are doubtless important omissions within many of the entries – indeed until the moment I yielded the manuscript to the typesetter I was continually turning up material that I wondered how I had missed – but I have done my best within strict word limits to include interesting variations as well as the most typical senses.

That all the references are to western literature, counting the Bible as one of its prime sources, would not seem to require a defense, but more than one colleague has questioned my "western-centric bias" and urged that I undertake a truly multi-cultural dictionary of the all the world's literary symbols. It sounded like a wonderful project, but not for me, or for any one mortal. Two days reading through Chinese and Japanese poetry in translation gave me a glimpse into what it might entail. The swallow, I learned, is seen as a harbinger of spring, just as it is in western poetry: the thirteenth-century poet Chiang K'uei ponders the time

"When swallows come to ask where spring is.'' But another common image for spring, plum blossoms, is not common in western poetry. Since plum blossoms often appear amid late-winter snow, they are tokens of hardiness and courage as well as forerunners of spring (somewhat, but not quite, like the almond blossom in the west); one commentator suggests that they represent the promise of the perfect beauty of the cherry blossoms that come later. In England, however, if we may trust Ben Jonson, it is "The early cherry, with the later plum," that mark the usual order ("To Penshurst" 41). The cuckoo, or rather the bird translated as "cuckoo" in English, seems not to be the same species as the European bird, which is known for laying its eggs in other birds' nests. The oriental "cuckoo" is known for its beautiful song and its straight flight. In the call of the cuckoo the Chinese heard *kui k'u*, "go home"; in Japanese, its charming name *hototogisu* may be written in characters that mean "bird of time"; in both cultures the bird suggests homesickness. It is also associated with the moon. All of this is quite the opposite of the harsh song of cuckoldry! And so it goes. There are close similarities to western usage, not surprising since we all live in the same world, and there are sharp differences, not surprising either since fauna and flora, not to mention human culture, vary from place to place. The task of working out the details in a comparison of just two traditions would be daunting. It would be difficult even to decide whether to enter the two "cuckoos" under one name or two. I hope nevertheless that scholars expert in other languages will undertake to produce dictionaries like this one for each tradition, if they do not exist already, so we might look forward to a systematic study of "comparative metaphorics."

This is a dictionary of symbols in literature, not myth, painting, folklore, dreams, alchemy, astrology, the Tarot pack, the Kabbalah, or the Jungian collective unconscious. Myths come into it, of course, insofar as they take literary form, but no proper names have entries. The reader who misses them can easily find several excellent dictionaries of classical mythology. That there are also excellent books about iconography in European painting allows me to omit citations from that tradition, both the Christian symbolism seen in countless paintings of the Annunciation, the Crucifixion, the martyrdom of saints, and the like, and the emblem books of the Renaissance. By "literature" I mean for the most part the "high" literature of the standard western canon. To modern eyes this tradition may seem an elite affair, in contrast not only to proverbs and ballads but to fairy tales, popular plays and songs, seasonal rituals, and other kinds of folklore, from all of which this dictionary might have drawn more than the few examples it has. The limits of space (and time) must be the main plea against having done so, but one should remember that a great deal of Greek literature was "popular" in its day, as were Shakespeare and many other writers, and many bits of folklore live on in them that have died out among the folk. I have also tried to include a few references to less well-known writers. Those with a particular interest in women, African-American, Latin-American, or "post-colonial" writers may find them underrepresented, but this dictionary does not seem the right place to argue for a new canon. It is my sense, too, that at least through the nineteenth century, women, blacks, and other "others" did not use symbols in ways notably different from the dominant tradition. As for alchemy and the other mystical traditions, they have certainly found a place here and there in literature, but except for a few references I have had to leave out the often difficult and lengthy explanations they would require.

This dictionary depends on no particular definition of "symbol." I have chosen to err on the side of generosity rather than exclude something one might want to know, and many instances come closer to metaphor, allusion, or even motif than to symbol strictly defined. I also include some conventions, commonplaces, or "topoi," the standard ways a thing has been represented. So I include dawn, death, dream, nature, and certain other subjects not so much for what they have stood for as for what other things have stood for them.

For several reasons the great majority of examples is taken from poetry. Nearly all the oldest western literature is in verse, and until the modern era the poetic genres were the most prestigious and most frequently published. Poetry tends, too, to be denser in symbolism than novels or stories, though there is plenty of symbolic prose fiction. It is much easier, too, to scan poetry for key words or ideas than to scan prose, as there are concordances for most poets (in book or electronic form) but very few for novelists. I have been able to find fifty occurrences of a symbol in a dozen poets in a few minutes, but for novelists I can mainly rack my memory or that of colleagues. I have nevertheless included quite a few prose examples, helped at times by scholarly studies of one symbol, yet in the end I don't think it would make much difference to the range of entries and meanings within entries if there were no prose examples at all.

Sometimes the entries are rather long. Readers may find more about the nightingale than they strictly need for understanding a passage by Shakespeare or Keats. Most annotated student editions of classic works, either from limits of space or the wish not to seem intimidating, give only minimal information in the notes, and so they fail to convey the richness of the tradition and suggest instead that there is a code or algebra of literature. I also think it is interesting in itself to see many threads of nightingale meanings woven together in a long entry, and it lets one take a bearing on the whole history of western poetry.

This is not to say that whenever a nightingale appears in a poem it must mean all the things it ever meant, or that it must allude to all the previous appearances of nightingales. What Freud said about cigars is sometimes true of literary symbols: sometimes a nightingale is just a nightingale, or little more than a way of saying that night has come. On the other hand, most poets have absorbed the traditional language of poetry and assume their readers or listeners have done so too. The implied reader of most poetry is an expert on nightingales, even if that reader has never heard or seen one. If it is possible for a nightingale to make an "innocent" appearance after 2,800 years in western literature it must be under special literary conditions that somehow both invoke and erase the associations the nightingale has acquired, as perhaps Coleridge does in "The Nightingale" as early as 1798, or Wallace Stevens much more recently in "The Man on the Dump," where the nightingale is included in the great garbage pile of worn-out poetic images. To repeat an earlier point, the ideal is to know the tradition and then decide in each case to what extent it is still in play.

Note on sources

There is one advantage, perhaps, in the incompleteness of this dictionary, and that is that readers, if they enjoy the existing entries but miss a particular symbol, can have the pleasure of researching it themselves. The best place to begin, in fact, is

the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which will at least give a few quotations. There are comparable dictionaries in French and Italian; the German one, begun by the Grimm Brothers, is wonderful but its citations are from editions now very old and rare. If you read a little German, you can make use of the great *Real-Encyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, edited by Pauly, Wissowa, and Kroll, in many volumes, which is an astounding work of scholarship, a kind of super-concordance to Greek and Latin literature. Even without Greek and Latin you can get something out of the two large Oxford dictionaries, which are generous with quotations; you will need to learn the Greek alphabet, but then you can track the citations in facing-page translations in the Loeb series published by Harvard University Press. A good university library will have concordances to the major poets; when you have found lines, say, from Shakespeare, go to one of the scholarly editions of the individual plays (Cambridge, Oxford, or Arden) and check the footnotes to the lines with your symbol: they may well give sources going back to the Romans. The great scholarly editions of Greek and Latin classics are usually bursting with references to sources and parallels. Also helpful are dictionaries of proverbs, especially Stevenson's *Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases*, and indexes to titles, first lines, and last lines of poetry. I have listed several more works in the "General" section of the bibliography.

After many quotations from languages other than English I have given the last name of the translator. Except for a few historically important translations (e.g., Chapman, Dryden, Pope), I have used readily available modern ones; classical texts other than Homer and Virgil are generally from the Loeb, Penguin, or Oxford World's Classics versions. The brief unattributed translations are "my own," that is, they are usually so simple and inevitable as to be common property.

An asterisk before a word indicates that it is a hypothetical or unattested form.

Introduction to the second edition

For the second edition I have written twenty new entries, expanded nearly thirty existing entries, and added a dozen works to the bibliography. I have also corrected a few errors, mostly citations, in the first edition. For pointing them out I am grateful to Yatsuo Uematsu, who translated the first edition into Japanese, and to Laimantas Jonušys, who translated it into Lithuanian. I also thank Laura Smith for some useful tips.

Introduction to the third edition

For this edition I have again added about twenty new entries as well as twenty substantial additions to existing entries. One or two of the new entries – railroad, perhaps mill or pen – might not be called "traditional," but the rest belong to long traditions, usually with ancient roots. I said in my first introduction that the number of such symbols is not very large and, while I could find a few dozen more since then, I still believe that is the case. It is difficult, of course, to draw a line between "symbol" and "theme," or between something used symbolically and something with a train of associations from earlier uses. Without being dogmatic

I have tried not to widen the meaning of "symbol" to encompass all significant instances of something.

On-line sources have greatly speeded the process of finding examples of symbols over what was possible when I began this project; at times, indeed, I have found so many that the main question has been what to leave out. Though most of its examples are from German literature, I was also helped by the *Metzler Lexikon literarischer Symbole*, edited by Günter Butzer and Joachim Jacob (2008), which was prompted, as its introduction states, by the first edition of this *Dictionary*. I am grateful to Caroline Howlett for her excellent copy-editing, which not only improved several of my own sentences but caught quite a few little mistakes that had escaped notice in the first or second editions.

Besides the new entries and expansions of entries, I have added an appendix on the Muses.

Of my first introduction I should make a correction concerning the European versus the Asian cuckoo. I implied (and believed) that the European cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) lays its eggs in another species' nests while the Asian cuckoo (*Cuculus poliocephalus*) does not; hence the absence of references to cuckoldry with the Asian bird, at least in the Chinese and Japanese literature I had read. I was mistaken – both birds are "brood parasitic" – but apparently the humans who live with the Asian cuckoo have taken little notice of this habit. It would be interesting to learn why.

A Dictionary of Literary Symbols

A

Absinthe *see* **Wormwood**

Adder *see* **Serpent**

Aeolian harp The aeolian harp (or lyre) or wind harp was invented by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and described by him in 1650. It is a long, narrow wooden box with a thin belly and with eight to twelve strings stretched over two bridges and tuned in unison; it is to be placed in a window (or a grotto) where the wind will draw out a harmonious sound. (Aeolus is the Greek king in charge of the winds; he first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* 10.) In the next century James Oswald, a Scots composer and cellist, made one, and it soon became well known.

It just as soon became an irresistible poetic symbol, first in English, then in French and German. James Thomson described the harp in *The Castle of Indolence*: "A certain Musick, never known before, / Here sooth'd the pensive melancholy Mind; / Full easily obtain'd. Behoves no more, / But sidelong, to the gently-waving Wind, / To lay the well-tun'd Instrument reclin'd; / From which, with airy flying Fingers light, / Beyond each mortal Touch the most refin'd, / The God of Winds drew Sounds of deep Delight: / Whence, with just Cause, *The Harp of Aeolus* it hight" (1.352–60). Thomson also wrote an "Ode on Aeolus's Harp." It was already so well known by the 1750s that the opening line of Gray's "Progress of Poetry" – "Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake" – was misconstrued; Gray added a note quoting Pindar's "Aeolian song" and "Aeolian strings" to make clear that he was referring to a mode of Greek music, not the wind harp. (To the ancients, however, "Aeolian lyre" might refer to Sappho and Alcaeus, whose lyrics were in the Aeolian dialect of Greek.)

In poetry any harp can become an aeolian harp if suspended in the open air. Alluding to Psalm 137, where the exiled Jews "hanged our harps upon the willows" by the rivers of Babylon, William Cowper ends his long poem "Expostulation" by calling on his muse to "hang this harp upon yon aged beech, / Still murm'ring with the solemn truths I teach" (718–19).

Among the English Romantics the wind harp became a favorite image, capable of many extensions. In "The Eolian Harp," perhaps the most extended poetic treatment of the subject, Coleridge is prompted by the harp's "soft floating witchery of sound" (20) to consider "the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul" (26–27), and then speculates: "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd, / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?" (44–48). Coleridge may have been influenced by the associationist psychology of David Hartley, according to whom sensation depends on "vibrations" carried by the nerves to the brain, where new but fainter

vibrations are created. Diderot, in *D'Alembert's Dream*, has a similar but more explicitly musical model of sensation and memory, as does Herder, in *Kalligone*.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge used the metaphor of the internal breeze or breath responding to the inspiration of a natural wind. So Wordsworth begins the 1805 *Prelude*, "Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze," where the breeze serves as a kind of epic muse; a little later he reflects, "For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven / Was blowing on my body, felt within / A corresponding mild creative breeze, / A vital breeze . . . " (41–44) and then likens himself to an aeolian harp (103–07). In "Dejection," Coleridge compares himself to an "Aeolian lute, / Which better far were mute" (7–8).

Shelley has frequent recourse to the image (e.g., *Queen Mab* 1.52–53, *Alastor* 42–45, 667–68) and extends it in interesting ways. It is quietly implicit in *Queen Mab* 8.19–20: "The dulcet music swelled / Concordant with the life-strings of the soul." He develops an idea in Coleridge's "Dejection," where the raving wind is told that a crag or tree or grove would make fitter instruments than the lute, by imagining that the winds come to the pines to hear the harmony of their swinging ("Mont Blanc" 20–24); in his "Ode to the West Wind" he implores the wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is" (57). In his "Defence of Poetry," Shelley explicitly likens man to an aeolian lyre, but adds "there is a principle within the human being . . . which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them."

The aeolian harp enters French poetry with André Chénier's *Elégies* (no. 22): "I am the absolute owner of my memory; / I lend it a voice, powerful magician, / Like an aeolian harp in the evening breezes, / And each of my senses resounds to this voice." It appears as similes in the influential romantic novels *Les Natchez* by Chateaubriand and *Corinne* by Germaine de Staël.

In Germany, Hölderlin in "Die Wanderung" ("The Migration") makes the link Shelley makes: "and the forests / All rustled, every lyre / In unison / At heaven's gentle touch" (trans. Sieburth). Goethe stages a brief "Conversation" between two Aeolian harps, male and female, and Schiller alludes to the harp in "The Dignity of Women." The song of Ariel that opens Goethe's *Faust, Part II* is accompanied by aeolian harps. Half a century later Mörike writes "To an Aeolian Harp," where the wind blows from the green tomb of "the youth I loved so much": "As the wind gusts more briskly, / A lovely cry of the harp / Repeats, to my sweet dismay, / The sudden emotion of my soul." The Russian poet Tyutchev hears a harp at midnight grieving like a fallen angel; for a moment we feel faith and joy, "as if the sky flowed through our veins," but it cannot last, and we sink back into "wearisome dreams" ("The Gleam," trans. Bidney).

In America, Emerson praises the one sure musician whose wisdom will not fail, the aeolian harp, which "trembles to the cosmic breath" and which alone of all poets can utter "These syllables that Nature spoke" ("The Harp"). Thoreau wrote "Rumors from an Aeolian Harp," a song *from* a harp, not about one, and in *Walden* he employs the metaphor several times. As a theme or allusion, the harp seems to have lingered longer in America than elsewhere, appearing as late as 1888 in a poem by Melville, "The Aeolian Harp at the Surf Inn."

Kircher noted that several sounds may be produced by one string, suggesting that the string is to the wind as a prism to light, breaking up a unified motion or essence into its component parts. William Jones developed the theory that "the

Eolian harp may be considered as an air-prism." That idea may account for the connection between the aeolian harp and the "Harp of Memnon," which was thought to be concealed within a colossal statue of an Egyptian pharoah and would sound when the first ray of sunlight struck it each morning. "For as old Memnon's image," Akenside writes, "long renown'd / By fabling Nilus, to the quivering touch / Of Titan's ray, with each repulsive string / Consenting, sounded through the warbling air / Unbidden strains; even so did Nature's hand / To certain species of external things, / Attune the finer organs of the mind" (*Pleasures of Imagination* 109–15). Amelia Opie mentions Memnon's harp in her "Stanzas Written under Aeolus' Harp." Byron lightly alludes to Memnon, "the Ethiop king / Whose statue turns a harper once a day" (*Deformed Transformed* 1.531–32).

At least two composers have written music "for" an aeolian harp: the Romantics Berlioz, in his *Lélio* (opus 14b), and Chopin, in his Etude opus 25, no. 1.

Air *see* **Breath**, **Wind**

Albatross The albatross, of which there are several species, is a large web-footed bird with a hooked beak and narrow wings, found mainly in the southern oceans. The white Wandering Albatross, with a wing span of thirteen feet, is the best known; when it follows a ship it is a striking sight, and sailors have long considered it a bird of good omen.

The first half of the name seems to derive from Latin *albus*, "white," but the b was inserted into "alcatras," from Portuguese *alcatraz*, used of the albatross, cormorant, frigate bird, or pelican, from Arabic *al-ghattas*, the white-tailed sea-eagle.

As early as the sixth century there are records of the bird following ships. The most famous albatross in literature is the one in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; since then "albatross" has come to mean a burden of guilt or sin. Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, chapter 42, has a memorable description of an albatross. It was believed that albatrosses can sleep while in flight; so Hugo likens Chateaubriand to the bird, for he soars calmly above the turmoil of the earth ("Le Génie" 128–30). Baudelaire, in *L'Albatros*, likens a poet, "exiled on the ground," his wings clipped, to an albatross captured by sailors.

In somewhat enigmatic lines Ingeborg Bachmann, in "Days in White," writes, "These days I think of the albatross / with whom I swung / up and over / into an uncharted land." The uncharted land seems to be death, as she also hears a swan's song, but perhaps also the land of poetry, as swan also suggests.

Almond The almond tree blooms earlier than any other – as early as January in Palestine, March in England; it is *prima omnium*, "first of all," according to Pliny (*Natural History* 16.103). It can thus symbolize spring's arrival, or more precisely a prophecy of its arrival.

The Lord asks Jeremiah what he sees, and he replies, "I see a rod of an almond tree." The Lord says, "Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it" (Jer. 1.11–12). Rather mysterious in English, this passage depends on a Hebrew pun on "almond" (*shaqed*) and "hasten" (or "watch," "be diligent") (*shoqed*): almonds are watchful, hastening to blossom. "'Tis a fair tree, the almond-tree: there Spring / Shews the first promise of her rosy wreath," as Letitia Landon writes ("Death in the Flower" 1–2). Shelley makes a "lightning-blasted almond-tree" which nonetheless

scatters blossoms stand for the renewal of hope after the defeat of the prophetic French Revolution (*PU* 2.1.134–35).

Calderón brings out the notion of premature blossoming. Segismund wants no more false displays "that one gust / Can scatter like the almond tree in flower, / Whose rosy buds, without advice or warning, / Dawn in the air too soon" (*Life is a Dream* 3.3.2330–33; trans. Campbell).

The rod of Aaron is made from an almond tree; when it alone among all the other rods flowers and yields almonds, it is a sign of the Lord's favor: Aaron is chosen to be priest (Num. 17.1–10). This passage lies behind artists' use of an almond-shaped aureole, the mandorla (Italian for "almond"), behind representations of Christ and Mary, the chosen ones.

The white blossoms of the almond tree suggested hair to the author of Ecclesiastes: "the almond tree shall flourish" means "their hair shall turn white" as they grow old (12.5). In the last part of "Of the Four Ages of Man," Anne Bradstreet explains, "Mine Almond tree, grey hairs, doe flourish now" (417).

Amaranth The amaranth or amaranthus is an eternal flower. The word is a "correction" of the Greek participle *amarantos*, "unfading"; taken as a noun naming a flower the ending was respelled as if it were *anthos*, "flower." Lucian describes a fresco painting of a flowery meadow in spring which, as a painting, is thus "eternal spring and unfading (*amarantos*) meadow" ("The Hall" 9). Peter uses it twice in his first letter: through the resurrection we are begotten again to an inheritance "that fadeth not away" (1.4), and we shall receive "a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (5.4). Milton's angels wear crowns woven with amaranth, "Immortal Amarant, a Flow'r which once / In Paradise, fast by the tree of life / Began to bloom, but soon for man's offence / To heaven removed" (*PL* 3.353–56). Milton made it so distinctively the flower of Paradise (lost) that Tennyson has a painter describe a flower that "only blooms in heaven / With Milton's amaranth" ("Romney's Remorse" 106).

In English poetry, then, it became symbolic of Paradise or eternity and of the Christian hope of salvation. So Cowper writes "Hope . . . // On steady wings sails through th'immense abyss, / Plucks amaranthine joys from bow'rs of bliss" ("Hope" 161–64). Wordsworth claims that the imagination has the power "to pluck the amaranthine flower / Of Faith" (sonnet: "Weak is the will of Man"). The Prometheus of the non-Christian Shelley "waked the legioned hopes / Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers, / Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms" (*PU* 2.4.59–61). So when Coleridge, in his poignant "Work without Hope," writes, "Well I ken the banks where amaranths blow, / . . . / Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may, / For me ye bloom not," we know it is not an earthly meadow he has lost; he is in spiritual despair.

It is equally common in French poetry. In "A Vow to the Heavenly Venus," for instance, Du Bellay writes, "may Love, we pray, / Like amaranthine flowers, feel no decay" (5–6) (trans. Lang). Sainte-Beuve gives it a somewhat different meaning, as the "symbol of virtue that never fades" (*Causeries du lundi*, vol. 8 [1851–62], p. 142).

Amphisbaena *see* **Serpent**

Anchor Any use of a ship as a symbol or metaphor may include the anchor as the sign of safety. In a Christian context, the anchor has become a symbol of hope, especially

the hope of salvation. The source is a passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews concerning "the hope set before us" in the sworn promise of God: "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast" (6.18–19). The cruciform shape of many anchors seconded their connection with the Savior.

Spenser's character Speranza (Hope) has a silver anchor on her arm, upon which she teaches the Redcross Knight "to take assured hold" (*FQ* 1.10.14, 22). Cowper's poem "Hope" includes the anchor among many metaphors: "Hope, as an anchor firm and sure, holds fast / the Christian vessel, and defies the blast" (167–68). The Alpine peasant, according to Wordsworth, is unmoved by perils, "Fixed on the anchor left by Him who saves / Alike in whelming snows and roaring waves" (*Descriptive Sketches* 206–07). Tennyson's Enoch Arden, a sailor, tells his wife, as he departs, "Cast all your cares on God; that anchor holds" (222).

See **Ship**.

Animal *see* **Beast**

Anointing *see* **Oil**

Ant (or Emmet) The ant is known for its wisdom, prudence, or foresight. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard," the Book of Proverbs advises; "consider her ways, and be wise" (6.6). "The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer" (30.25).

Hesiod calls the ant the "wise one" for "gathering stores" (*Works and Days* 778). Virgil says the "ant fears a lean old age" (*Georgics* 1.186). Horace expands: "the tiny ant with immense industry . . . / hauls whatever he can with his mouth and adds it to the heap / he is building, thus making conscious and careful provision for the future" (*Satires* 1.1.33–35, trans. Rudd). In a double simile Ovid cites a column of ants carrying grain and a swarm of bees hovering over thyme (*Ars Amatoria* 1.93–96). Among the gifts each animal gave to man, according to Sidney, the ant gave "industrie" (*Third Eclogues* 66.93). Milton names "The parsimonious emmet, provident / Of future, . . . / . . . joined in her popular tribes / Of commonalty" (*PL* 7.485–89). Wild nature, says Wordsworth, "to the emmet gives / Her foresight, and intelligence that makes / The tiny creatures strong by social league" (*Excursion* 4.430–32). The fable of the industrious ant and the improvident grasshopper goes back to Aesop.

The social side of the ant noted by Milton and Wordsworth has a repellent side exploited by Wordsworth himself when he describes London as a "monstrous ant-hill on the plain / Of a too busy world!" (1850 *Prelude* 7.149–50). Baudelaire calls Paris *Fourmillante cité*, "swarming city" (from *fourmi*, "ant") ("Les Sept Vieillards"), in a line T. S. Eliot footnotes in *The Waste Land* (60).

The word "ant" comes from Old English *aemette*, akin to "emmet."

Ape The Greeks and the Romans considered apes ridiculous, strange, ugly, and somewhat dangerous, and "ape" was a common term of abuse. A passage from Heraclitus, who stressed the superiority of the gods, rests on this contemptuous view of apes: "The handsomest ape is ugly compared with humankind; the wisest man appears as an ape when compared with a god" (in Plato, *Hippias Major* 289a, trans. Wheelwright). In this may lie the germ of the notion that apes imitate people; in any case they resemble us. "The ape [Latin *simia*], that most repulsive

animal," said Ennius, "how much it is like [*similis*] ourselves!" (*Saturae*, quoted in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.35). Horace refers to "that ape of yours who knows nothing but how to imitate Calvus and Catullus" (*Sermones* 1.10.18–19). The word *simia* is not related to *similis* but the connection seemed natural: apes are simulators, imitators. In English and other languages "to ape" is to imitate: "monkey see, monkey do."

An alchemist in Dante's *Inferno*, that is, a counterfeiter, proudly calls himself "a fine ape of nature" (29.139). In Chaucer some musicians begin to watch others and "countrefete hem [them] as an ape" (*House of Fame* 1212). The painter Julio Romano is praised in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* as capable of depriving nature of her trade, "so perfectly he is her ape" (5.2.98). Cowper looks forward to a world where "smooth good-breeding" will no longer "With lean performance ape the work of love!" (*Task* 6.853–54).

Not all languages distinguish "ape" and "monkey," but in English literature monkeys as opposed to apes are often taken as lecherous. Shakespeare, for instance, has "lecherous as a monkey" and "hot as monkeys" (*2H4* 3.2.293, *Othello* 3.3.409).

Apple The most famous apple in western culture, the one from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, has a slender basis in the Bible. In Genesis 3.3 it is simply "the fruit"; perhaps it is a fig, for right after Adam and Eve eat it they stitch together fig leaves for clothing (3.7). It is not certain, in any case, that apples were known in ancient Israel. How the fateful fruit got to be an apple is a long story, complicated by the fact that the Greek word for it (*melon*, or *malon*) meant any sort of tree-fruit; thus the "Armenian *melon*" was an apricot, the "Cydonian *melon*" was a quince, the "Median *melon*" was a citron, and the "Persian *melon*" was a peach; in modern Cyprus a "golden apple" is an apricot; and in English a "melon" is not much like an apple. Latin *pomum* had a similar range, as we see in its daughter languages: French *pomme de terre* ("apple of earth") is a potato, *pomme d'amour* ("apple of love") is a tomato, Italian *pomodoro* ("apple of gold") is a tomato; "pomegranate" comes from Old French *pome grenate*, "seedy apple." When Latin borrowed the Greek word (becoming *malum*), a pun on the common word for "evil" may have influenced Christian speculation. In Milton's influential version of the Fall it is an "apple" (*PL* 9.585, 10.487), though we cannot be sure if he means the common crab-apple or the generic tree-fruit.

It would be enough to suit the biblical story that the "apple" is alluring and tasty, but in both Hebrew and classical tradition the fruit is associated with sexual love, which Adam and Eve discover, in some interpretations, after eating it. Apples are mentioned three times with erotic senses in the Song of Solomon; e.g., "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons [young men]" (2.3; cf. 7.8, 8.5) (the Hebrew word *tappuah* also has a broad sense). This passage resembles one in Sappho – "As the sweet-apple reddens on the top of the bough, the top of the topmost; the apple-gatherers have forgotten it – no, not forgotten it but were unable to reach it" – which we are told by Himerius is a simile for a girl (frag. 105 Campbell). Throwing an apple or similar tree-fruit was a signal of readiness to be seduced (e.g., Aristophanes, *Clouds* 997; Virgil, *Eclogues* 3.64). Echoing Sappho, Yeats imagines that Dante became a great poet out of "A hunger for the apple on the bough, / Most out of reach," which must mean his Beatrice ("Ego Dominus Tuus" 24–25). Frost's "After Apple-Picking," with its ladder

"Toward heaven," the worthlessness of apples that have fallen, and the coming of winter and sleep, stirs echoes of biblical meanings.

In classical myth another famous apple is the Apple of Discord (or Eris), which she tosses among the three goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; it is labeled "For the fairest," and each goddess claims it. The ultimate result is the Trojan War. There are also the golden apples of the Hesperides, guarded by a dragon, whom Heracles slays.

One of the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* recalls that Menelaus, bent on killing Helen, took one look at her "apples" and threw away his sword (155). A girl in Theocritus asks her wooer why he has put his hand on her breasts; he replies, "I will give your downy apples their first lesson" (27.49–50). The breasts of Ariosto's Alcina are "unripe apples" (*Orlando Furioso* 7.14). According to Tasso, in the Golden Age before shame took effect a virgin would reveal "the apples of her breast" ("O bella eta de l'oro"). Spenser compares his beloved's breasts to two golden apples, which surpass those that Hercules found (in the Hesperides) and those that enticed Atalanta (*Amoretti* 77). These latter, Ovid tells us, were picked by Venus herself (*Met.* 10.647–52). In the Walpurgisnight, Faust tells a young witch he had a dream that he climbed a tree to reach two fine apples; she answers that men have wanted apples ever since Paradise, and happily she has some in her garden (*Faust I* 4128–35).

Josephus describes a fruit near the Dead Sea that looks like an apple but is filled with dry, hairy seeds; later it was called a Sodom apple and thought to be filled with the ashes of that sinful city. As fit punishment for leading Eve to eat the forbidden apple, Milton has Satan's legions climb trees to eat fruit "like that which grew / Near that bituminous lake where Sodom flamed," but they "instead of fruit / Chewed bitter ashes" (*PL* 10.561–66). The chorus of women accompanying Helen to Faust's castle finds the boys there attractive, with cheeks like peaches: "I would gladly have a bite, but I shudder before it; / for in a similar case, the mouth was filled, / horrible to say, with ashes!" (*Faust II* 9162–64).

The "apple of the eye" is the pupil, and by extension any intimate or cherished object. The Lord guarded Jacob "as the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32.10). Shakespeare's Oberon, squeezing the love-juice on Demetrius' eyelids, asks it to "Sink in apple of his eye. / When his love he doth espy, / Let her shine as gloriously / As the Venus of the sky" (*MND* 3.2.104–07).

In some accounts of the Crucifixion, Christ, as the antitype of Adam (1 Cor. 15.22), restores the apple Eve plucked. In a witty variant Byron claims that Isaac Newton was "the sole mortal who could grapple, / Since Adam, with a fall, or with an apple." Since Newton's theories, he predicts, will some day show us how to fly to the moon, it can be said that "Man fell with apples, and with apples rose" (*Don Juan* 10.1–16).

April April is the quintessential month of spring – "Aperil . . . of lusty Veer [Spring] the pryme," according to Chaucer (*TC* 1.156–57) – and most of the traditional imagery of the season has been given to the month.

Ovid gives two etymologies of the month's name. (1) From Latin *aperio* "open": "They say that April was named from the open season, because spring then opens (*aperit*) all things, and the sharp frost-bound cold departs, and earth unlocks her teeming soil" (*Fasti* 4.87–89, trans. Frazer). (2) From Greek *aphros*, the foam of the sea from which Aphrodite was born (*Fasti* 4.61–62). The latter may well be on the

right track, for April is the month of Venus (*Fasti* 4.85ff., Horace 4.11.15–16), and the name may derive from Etruscan *apru*, a shortening of *Aphrodite* (as March comes from *Mars* and May from *Maia*, mother of Mercury, god of spring).

The most famous description of April in English literature is the opening of the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour . . . " (1–4). The month's "sweet showers" are a commonplace. The proverb "April showers bring May flowers" has been current at least since 1560; Shakespeare's Iris sings of "spongy April" (*Tempest* 4.1.65); Wordsworth has a character invoke "Ye rains of April" (*Excursion* 7.701).

As the month of Venus it is the month of love. Spenser begins a stanza on the month by calling it "fresh Aprill, full of lustyhed" (*FQ* 7.7.33). Of Octavia weeping at her parting from Caesar, Shakespeare's Antony says, "The April's in her eyes: it is love's spring, / And these the showers to bring it on" (*Antony* 3.2.43–44). Shelley describes a beautiful woman as "A vision like incarnate April, warning, / With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy [skeleton] / Into his summer grave" (*Epipsychidion* 121–23). The spring or prime of one's life might be called one's April: "I lived free in the April of my life, / Exempt from care" (Scève, *Délie*, "Dizains" 1).

The other famous description of April begins T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (1–4). It is a measure of how far modern life has lost its traditional foundation, in Eliot's view, that we now shrink from the renewal of life and love that April once brought.

See **Spring**.

Armor In medieval chivalric romances, the armor of the hero, and especially his shield or "escutcheon," is often lovingly described and invested with great significance. The elaborate language of heraldry or armorial bearings – the points, tinctures, bends, chevrons, fesses, pales, piles, and lions couchant, rampant, regardant, or salient – enters the literature, too, but it is beyond the scope of this dictionary. Less technical symbolic meanings of armor, or changes of armor, are usually unique to each work. It is of great significance, for instance, that Achilles' first set of armor belonged to his father Peleus, is then lent to his friend Patroclus, who is killed in it by Hector, and is then worn by Hector, who is killed in it by Achilles, who now wears a new set made by the god Hephaestus. Achilles' shield, extensively described in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, carries a complex set of typical scenes (such as wedding, legal dispute, and siege) in a cosmic setting. The parallel description of Aeneas' shield in book 8 of the *Aeneid* is not typical and cosmic but historical, as if Aeneas shoulders the future history of Rome. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Arthur's "glitterand armour" was made by Merlin (1.7.29–36), while Britomart's once belonged to Angela, the Saxon Queen (3.3.58); both express the virtues of their bearers.

Central to the language of Christianity is the metaphor of "spiritual warfare" and its accompanying armor. It is fully expressed in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Since Christians do not fight against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness, "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. / Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; / And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; /

Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. / And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6.13–17; cf. 2 Cor. 10.3–4). Clement of Alexandria wrote, "If the loud trumpet summons soldiers to war, shall not Christ with a strain of peace to the ends of the earth gather up his soldiers of peace? A bloodless army he has assembled by blood and by the word, to give to them the Kingdom of Heaven. The trumpet of Christ is his Gospel. He has sounded, we have heard. Let us then put on the armor of peace" (*Protrepticus* 11.116). Erasmus continues the tradition: "If we wish to conquer for Christ, let us gird on the sword of the word of the Gospel, let us put on the helmet of salvation and take the shield of faith, and the rest of the truly Apostolic panoply. Then it will come about that, when we are conquered, we are conquerors all the more" (*Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*, in *Adagia*).

Beatrice tells Dante that, "to battle to enkindle faith, / the Gospels served them [the Apostles] as both shield and lance" (*Paradiso* 29.113–14). Milton's Michael tells Adam that God will send a Comforter to the people, "To guide them in all truth, and also arm / With spiritual armour, able to resist / Satan's assaults" (*PL* 12.490–92). Even the atheist Shelley uses these terms: "And from that hour did I with earnest thought / Heap knowledge from forbidden mines of lore, / Yet nothing that my tyrant knew or taught / I cared to learn, but from that secret store / Wrought linked armour for my soul, before / It might walk forth to war among mankind" ("Dedication" of *Laon and Cythna*, 37–42).

Arrow *see* **Bow and arrow**

Ash In Greece, where they are plentiful, ash trees were known for their strength and for their excellence as firewood. The centaur Chiron gave Achilles' father Peleus a great spear made of Pelian ash (Homer, *Iliad* 16.143); in his catalogue of trees Ovid calls the ash "useful for spear-shafts" (*Met.* 10.93), and Chaucer perhaps follows him in listing "the hardy asshe" (*PF* 176). Angry over a trick by Prometheus, Zeus denied the power of fire to ash trees (Hesiod, *Theogony* 563), implying they were the preferred firewood. There were Meliae or ash-nymphs (e.g. *Theogony* 187), but they are not clearly distinguished from the generic Dryads or tree-nymphs.

Hesiod says that the bronze race was made of ash trees (*Works and Days* 145), and a similar tale is found in Norse mythology, where the first man is named Ash (Askr) ("Voluspa" 17 in *The Poetic Edda*). The world tree Yggdrasill, where the fates deal out justice, is an ash ("Voluspa" 19).

In his catalogue of trees Spenser mysteriously names "the Ash for nothing ill" (*FQ* 1.1.9).

Asp *see* **Serpent**

Asphodel The asphodel is the flower of Hades. After speaking with Odysseus, the shade of Achilles "stalked away in long strides across the meadow of asphodel" (*Odyssey* 11.539, trans. Lattimore, cf. 11.573). It is a lean, spiky plant with small, pale flowers and gray leaves; it blooms throughout the winter in Mediterranean regions. Pliny says it is planted on graves (*Natural History* 21.68).

Milton names asphodel beside nectar and ambrosia as having the power to confer immortality ("Comus" 838). Pope invokes "those happy souls who dwell / In

yellow meads of Asphodel" ("Ode for Music" 74–75). Tennyson more or less translates Homer in his "Demeter and Persephone": "the shadowy warrior glide / Along the silent field of Asphodel" (150–51); in "The Lotos-Eaters" he imagines "others in Elysian valleys dwell, / Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel" (169–70). W. C. Williams takes "asphodel, that greeny flower," as a symbol, or recurring occasion, of memory, poetry, and love in a bleak world. "I was cheered," he says near the opening, "when I came first to know / that there were flowers also / in hell"; he ends: "Asphodel / has no odor / save to the imagination / but it too / celebrates the light. / It is late / but an odor / as from our wedding / has revived for me / and begun again to penetrate / into all crevices / of my world" ("Asphodel, that greeny flower").

Ass As the preeminent beast of burden and the poor man's horse, the ass deserves a better literary reputation, but since the Greeks at least it has stood for stupidity. A string of insults in Terence gives a handy list of synonyms: *stulto, caudex, stipes, asinus, plumbeus* ("fool, blockhead, stumpwit, ass, leadbrain") (*Self-Tormentor* 877). A shorter list is Shakespeare's "Asses, fools, dolts" (*TC* 1.2.241). "What a thrice-double ass / Was I," says Caliban, after his foolish rebellion against Prospero (*Tempest* 5.1.295). When thick-witted King Midas judges Pan's pipes superior to Apollo's lyre, Apollo gives him ass's ears (Ovid, *Met*. 11.144–93); asses are proverbially deaf to music, as to all intellectual things.

As the horse could represent the willful or irrational part of the soul, so the ass, in a humbler way, could stand for the merely physical or bodily side of life. The allegorical dimension of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (or *Metamorphoses*), in which Lucius is punished for his foolish curiosity and sexual indulgence by being transformed into an ass and made to suffer enormous torments, comes to a climax in his transformation back into the human as he becomes a chaste initiate into the religion of Isis. St. Francis famously calls the body "Brother Ass." Shakespeare reweaves motifs from Apuleius in his "translation" of Bottom into an ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Bottom is the "shallowest thickskin" of the workers (3.2.13), but like Lucius, to whom Isis comes in a dream, he alone meets the queen of the fairies. So it was that Balaam's ass saw the angel that Balaam himself was blind to (Num. 22.22–35). The satirical side of Apuleius's novel inspired Renaissance satire on the theme of asininity, such as Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, but something of the emblematic character of the ass as the redeemable lower dimension of life may be found in the braying of the ass that reconciles Prince Myshkin to life in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Lawrence hears in the braying an agonized cry of love: "He fell into the rut of love, / Poor ass, like man, always in rut" ("The Ass").

See **Horse**.

Attic bird *see* **Nightingale**

Autumn Though not as popular as spring, autumn has been a frequent subject of poetry since the classical Roman era, when certain conventions were established. Autumn, of course, has two aspects: it completes summer and it anticipates winter, it celebrates the harvest of the summer's crops and it mourns the death of the year; it is, in Dickinson's words, "A little this side of the snow / And that side of the Haze" (no. 131). Latin poetry usually dwells on its summery side, associating it

with harvest and vintage, wealth and cornucopias. So Virgil calls autumn "vine-leafed" (*Georgics* 2.5), Horace imagines his head decked with ripe fruit (*Epodes* 2.17–18), Lucretius has Bacchus arrive with him (5.743), Ovid describes a nymph bearing "The horn with all its wealth" (*Met*. 9.88, trans. Melville). Descriptions of "perpetual spring" equally describe perpetual autumn, for as Homer puts it in his account of the garden of Alcinous, "Pear matures on pear in that place, apple upon apple, / grape cluster on grape cluster, fig upon fig" (*Odyssey* 7.120–21, trans. Lattimore). In Eden, according to Milton, "spring and autumn here / Danced hand in hand" (*PL* 5.394–95). (For more examples *see under* **Spring**.)

Spenser describes Autumn as "Laden with fruits that made him laugh," while he bore "Upon his head a wreath, that was enrold / With ears of corne of every sort" and carried a sickle in his hand (*FQ* 7.7.30). Shakespeare calls it "childing autumn" (*MND* 2.1.112) and "teeming autumn, big with rich increase" (*Sonnets* 97). In his long section on "Autumn" in *The Seasons*, Thomson describes the joyous harvest at length.

Lamartine, on the other hand, in despair over his health and prospects, finds the very sadness of autumn pleases him ("Autumn"), while Lenau, in "Autumn Lament," seems shocked that spring is gone, another year vanished. Baudelaire begins his "Autumn song" as if the season meant the end of everything: "Now will we plunge into the frigid dark, / The living light of summer gone too soon!" (trans. McGowan). Some of the most delicate and convincing of modern descriptions of the season hold both facets of autumn in balance, the fullness and satisfaction of the harvest with the coming on of winter and death. So Goethe calls on the vine and berries to turn greener and swell plumper, as the sun and the moon bring them to fulfillment – and his own tears of love bedew them ("Herbstgefühl"). Keats ("To Autumn") serenely describes autumn's moment of "mellow fruitfulness" when all seems ready and ripe; he ends with an evening scene where the day is "soft-dying," the "small gnats mourn," and "gathering swallows twitter in the skies" as if preparing to fly south. Pushkin welcomes autumn alone of all the seasons: "How can I explain this? She pleases me / As sometimes, perhaps, you have been drawn to / A consumptive girl . . . / She is alive today – tomorrow, not" ("Autumn" 41–48, trans. Thomas). After a brief tableau of November, Pascoli writes, "in the distance you hear / a fragile falling of leaves. It is the summer, / Cold, of the dead" ("Novembre"). After asking God to "Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine," Rilke concludes, "Whoever is alone will long remain so, / will stay awake, read, write long letters / and in the streets up and down / will wander restlessly while leaves are blowing" ("Herbsttag"). Hopkins asks, "Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" and answers for her, "It is Margaret you mourn for." The title of that poem, "Spring and Fall," reminds us that when the English largely replaced "fall" with the latinate "autumn" they broke up a poetically perfect pair; the original sense of "spring" is now less evident.

Autumn, of course, is a metaphor for the phase of maturity or middle age in a human life. "Then autumn follows," says Ovid, "youth's fine fervour spent, / Mellow and ripe, a temperate time between / Youth and old age, his temples flecked with grey" (*Met*. 15.209–11, trans. Melville). "Nor spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace," Donne writes, "As I have seen in one autumnal face" (*Elegies* 9.1–2). After several stanzas of scenic description, Baratynsky stops to ask, "And you, when in the autumn of your days, / O plowman of the fields of living, / And your own harvest lies before your gaze, / . . . / Can you, then, like the farmer,

count your hoard?" ("Autumn" 60–71, trans. Myers). Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is an ode to autumn; he implores the wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / What if my leaves are falling like its own!" (57–58).

See **Leaf**, **Seasons**, **Spring**, **Summer**, **Winter**.

Azure *see* **Blue**

B

Basilisk The basilisk is a mythical reptile whose stare is lethal. It is described by Pliny as native to Cyrenaica (Libya), about a foot long, and adorned with a bright mark on its head like a diadem – whence the name *basiliscus*, from Greek *basiliskos*, "little king." It routs all serpents with its hiss; its touch or breath is fatal to all creatures but the weasel, which kills it with the weasel's stench (8.78). In his catalog of snakes Lucan describes "the basilisk which pours forth hisses terrifying all / the beasts, which harms before its poison and orders the entire crowd / far out of its way and on the empty sand is king" (9.724–26, trans. Braund); later he tells how the poison of a dead basilisk traveled up the spear of a soldier and penetrated his hand, which had to be cut off (9.828–33).

The Septuagint (Greek OT) used *basiliskos* for several snakes in the Hebrew, including the well-known messianic passage of Isaiah 11, where the wolf shall live with the sheep, etc., and "the infant shall play over the hole of the asp, and the young child dance over the nest of the *basiliskos*" (11.8). Jerome translated *basiliskos* here and in most other passages into the Vulgate as *regulus*, "little king," but Wyclif and his followers translated it into English as "cockatrice." Blendings of various fabulous reptiles and birds make the history of the cockatrice extremely complex. The word seems to derive from Latin **calcatrix*, from *calcare*, "tread" or "track," translating another Greek lizard, the *ichneumon*, meaning "tracker" or "hunter." The French version of "basilisk" was *basilicoc*, the form also used by Chaucer – "the basilicok sleeth folk by the venym of his sighte" (*Parson's Tale* 853) – and so the idea got round that the reptile was generated from an egg laid by a cock but hatched by a toad or snake.

Spenser uses both names to make the same point. A terrible man on a dromedary "secretly his enemies did slay: / Like as the Basiliske, of serpents seede, / From powerfull eyes close venim doth convay / Into the lookers hart, and killeth farre away" (*FQ* 4.8.39); while in a sonnet Spenser begs his mistress to turn elsewhere her cruel eyes "and kill with looks, as Cockatrices doo" (*Amoretti* 49). Shakespeare also uses both. Polixenes demands, "Make me not sighted like the basilisk. / I have look'd on thousands, who have sped the better / By my regard, but kill'd none so" (*WT* 1.2.388–90; see also *Cymbeline* 3.4.107); Juliet fears the possible news of Romeo's death "shall poison more / Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice" (*RJ* 3.2.46–47; see also *12N* 3.4.196–98). Maurice Scève, in the first of his dizains in *Délie*, tells that "my Basilisk, with her pointed look / Piercing body, heart, and distraught reason, / Penetrated into the Soul of my Soul."

The Isaiah passage in the AV reads: "And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den." In his