The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses, by Søren Kierkegaard, Translated and with an Introduction by Bruce B. Kirmmse, Princeton University Press, (2016)

I. Part I. "Look at the birds of the air; consider the lily of the field." (From the Gospel of Matthew 6:24-34)

a. For Kierkegaard, Nature in all its wondrous splendour carries secrets that God reveals to us – we humans – who have come to believe we have the burden, responsibility, and gift of stewardship over it.
b. From a Christian existentialist point of view, we are *not* the masters of Nature… we are to first learn holy silence from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, as they are God's "master teachers". They ARE holy silence.
c. Kierkegaard opens up the darkest parts of our souls, and we are humble and willing to look into that dark soul with the help of the silence of the lily and the bird.
d. Kierkegaard recognized that silence was something missing from the lively chatter of the streets of Copenhagen, the solitary and independent soul that he was.

II. Silence and the Despair of the Poet

a. The Poet: One of Kierkegaard's most well-known archetypes – we are all "poets" living in the aesthetic stage of life at some point
b. The archetypical poet despairs at NOT WILLING TO BE ONESELF (I want to free myself of the *burden of gravity* and fly like the bird) and WILLING TO BE ONESELF IN A SELF-MADE WAY (I create "little worlds" that can never equal the World created by God)

c. We ignore the bird singing "proudly or humbly", and in our Selfhood, we WORRY about the next moment and tomorrow's next moment… We do not know the future.
d. **Kierkegaard is setting up the reader for the "leap of faith" which humans must take as they stand at the abyss of despair in order to draw a bit CLOSER to the simplicity of the lily and the bird, the Beings that feel deeply and yet are without worry, without despair.**
e. They know there is nowhere to hide from the Truth, and this is not a problem for them. They live *in the Truth of holy silence*. In earnest, we must follow the instruction of the lily and the bird in a serious, sincere, and determined manner.

III. "Seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness"

a. "From the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn **silence**, or learn to keep **silent."** (16)
b. Certainly, Kierkegaard asserts that the ability to speak places humans at an advantage, yet it does not follow that there is no art to keeping silent. Humans can learn from these "silent teachers", the lily and the bird, and he brings in the Gospel to explain his reasoning.
c. **We move *backwards* to silence. When we lose our complicated, chattering Selves, we *gain* silence.**
d. This "becoming silent", the existential being to becoming, silent before God that is required by the teachers, is indeed the beginning of the fear of God, which scripture confirms to be wisdom, so moving backwards and finding silence = fearing God = finding wisdom.
e. In idle chatter, there is nothing I can "say" to find the wisdom that the lily and the bird ARE. They ARE that wisdom in their very being, making them excellent intermediaries and master teachers.
f. Further, in relation to God, "language" falls short of this antiquated idea of human superiority over the lily and the bird. Silence is to **listen**.

IV. The Great Paradox

a. Silence means to *listen for God* in prayer instead of talking about what he wants and needs in life
b. **We come to understand the Great Paradox: SILENCE IS NOT QUIETUDE. It is ACTIVE LISTENING.**
c. The lily and the bird do not need to understand God, for God is within them, and their life in this silence that is not quietude but prayer in their BEING, and here is the existential paradox. Silence IS wisdom IN God.
d. The poet misunderstands the question, believing that he can perceive the voice of God in the silence of nature. This is the false wish of the poet, who wishes to create little worlds out of nature without relying on the Creator and His helpers, the lily and the bird.
e. The sounds of Nature have a secret: They are *part of the silent understanding*… of HOLY SILENCE.

V. The Moment

a. **"*The bird keeps silent and waits*; it knows, or rather believes, that everything takes place at its appointed time."** (23).
b. Kierkegaard is relating the bird's knowing to the Gospel of Matthew 24:26 and Mark 13:32, which allude to the fact that none of us know the time or the day when Jesus the Messiah will return, and we are commanded to wait.
c. **"The silent bird understands that this is the moment, and it makes use of it and is never put to shame."** (23).
d. The silent lily understands what the bird understands: *Now* is the Moment, and I will make use of this God-given gift in time. It is **"never deceived, something that of course can only happen to shrewdness, not to simplicity…"** (24)
e. If we keep silent and wait, the worry slips away. The anxiety leaves our shoulders and our minds, and tomorrow does not exist. We encounter the moment, but if one speaks, the moment slips away unnoticed. The moment "comes softly, on lighter feet than the lightest

tread of any creature, for it comes with the light step of the sudden; it comes stealthily." (25)

VI. The Sigh and Suffering in Silence

a. Kierkegaard always keeps his reader in the understanding that we must confront these negatively perceived states of being and accept them; that indeed, the solemnity of silence is worship.
b. A sigh represents an alternative to human complaint and accusation, and the sigh is a way for *us* to keep silent when we want to utter words, according to circumstances that leave us in suffering and despair.
c. It is not the fact that we can speak that causes us to "sin in sorrow", but the fact that we CANNOT KEEP SILENT. We become impatient with silence, unlike the bird, who lives silence, who IS holy silence.
d. The innocent child cannot participate in "the art of dissembling", which for Kierkegaard means making suffering indefinite. **To talk about suffering, in the adult sense, is to compare it, narrate it, conceal it or exaggerate it, and to project it forward and backward, which makes the suffering infinitely WORSE. Humans use language to stand at a distance from themselves.**
e. How is it, Kierkegaard asks, that human suffering, especially that of a child, compared with that of the lily, seems so frightful? **It is because the lily keeps silent. If it did not keep silent, which would be quite unexpected, then the suffering would most definitely become equally frightful.**
f. "When the suffering is only the definite thing that it is, even if it were the greatest suffering, it is the least it can be." (29)
g. This respect for silence in suffering is actually worship.
h. As the silence in Nature is solemn, Kierkegaard will not allow the poet to interfere in these matters! **As the poet only lets nature dream of him, or dreams of nature, this is inconsequential to your learning from the master teachers, the lily and the bird, in the midst of their solemn worship of God in Nature.**

i. The poet seeks silence in order to speak; the hero seeks silence in order to exploit it! The archetypical poet is the unhappy lover of the exploit; the archetypical hero is the happy lover of the exploit.

j. In order to solve this crisis of the despairing poet, Kierkegaard always turns to scripture, back to the Gospel. Seeking *first* God's kingdom is precisely silence, the silence of the lily and the bird. "The lily and the bird seek God's kingdom and absolutely nothing else; all the rest will be added unto them." (35)

VII. The Lily and the Bird in Unconditional Silence

a. Part II: "No One Can Serve Two Masters, For He Must Either Hate the One and Love the Other, Or Hold Fast to One and Despise the Other" (from the Gospel of Matthew 6:24-34)

    i. The beginning of Part II reiterates the Gospel of Matthew from the beginning of this book concerning ONLY loving and choosing God over mammon (the evil in the world; Mammon in the New Testament is commonly thought to mean money, material wealth, or any entity that promises wealth, and is associated with the greedy pursuit of gain).

b. So, we return to the idea of the "either/or" in the book as a bridge to obedience from holy silence that we have learned from the lily and the bird.

c. **One must either love God or hate him. God has become the Object of Choice.**

d. The move to essential inwardness, moving away from the crowd and social talkativeness, is predicated on what we learn from the lily and the bird about unconditional silence in this either/or situation. To truly find God, the teachers reiterate, one must become the individual seeker, one of the hallmarks of existentialism

e. For the lily and the bird, God simply and definitively IS, where no one else is present. They have the gift of unconditional silence, depending

on nothing and no one to come between their "either/or" in their grand simplicity. They do not have to work to be silent before God; they simply ARE, even when they are at their noisiest (Think: Grackles!).

f. For the lily and the bird, GOD IS, and that is what makes their silence unconditional.

VIII. The Human in Unconditional Silence

a. Kierkegaard asserts that you *shall* learn from the lily and the bird!
b. You, like them, will either love God or despise Him. There is nothing other than either/or in this example. Otherwise, would that not make the silence of the lily and the bird conditional?
c. How do we come to understand, then, the difference between conditional and unconditional silence?
d. Conditional silence is unknown to the lily and the bird, but they will not reprimand you. They are the master teachers, and you, human, are meant to emulate them.
e. **So, in unconditional silence, we find that we become unconditionally obedient to God.**
f. Our relationship with our Creator is the same for the lily and the bird; this is a Creator-Creature relationship. He is going to require unconditional obedience arising from this unconditional silence.
g. The lily and the bird are absolutely "the obedient teachers". We Must *Always Return to the Lily and the Bird* for Guidance…