

## **'With skirmish and capricious passagings': ornithological and poetic discourse in the nightingale poems of Coleridge and Clare**

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This paper is an exploration of the relationship between the poetic discourse of Romanticism, and the scientific discourse of ornithology, the emergence of which as a serious scientific discipline took place, according to Paul Lawrence Farber, between 1760 and 1850, thus spanning the lifetimes of High Romanticism's prophet-figure, William Blake, and its patriarch, William Wordsworth. It is intended as a contribution to the developing field of ecocriticism, which has in recent years offered a new and challenging perspective on the representation and function of the natural world in literary texts in general and Romantic ones in particular, through full length general studies such as Jonathan Bates's *Song of the Earth* (2000) and essays with a more specific focus, like John Rowlett's 'Ornithological Knowledge and Literary Understanding' (1999), both of which have contributed much to my own understanding of and approach to my chosen texts.

The end of the eighteenth century was the period of the great bird illustrators, Thomas Bewick, and later, Jean Jacques Aubeisson, who provided the first reasonably comprehensive and accurate guides to the detailed appearance of birds. Bewick's *History of British Birds* first appeared in 1797, the year before Coleridge and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, that manifesto of the Romantic concern with the "beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (245); however, while Bewick's intentions shared many of the values to be found in the *Ballads*, the limited technologies at his disposal for field observation led to some distinctly unWordsworthian practices. In his *Memoir* (1862), Bewick wrote of his hope that

my labours might have the effect of inveigling my youthfull Countrymen, as far as I could, to be smitten with the charms which this branch - & indeed every other department of natural History imparts, and these endless pleasures they afford to all who wish to trace nature up to Nature's God (*A Memoir* 125-6).

He embarked on his great work intending, in his own words, to 'stick to nature as closely as I could' (*A Memoir* 117), but sticking to nature as often meant working from the stuffed and mounted skins of birds as from life. Bewick acknowledged his debt to his neighbour Richard Routledge Wingate for

having in several cases greatly assisted me [...] to discriminate, by a comparative view, the difference between the doubtfull Genera, species and varieties of birds: - this he was enabled to do, from the long experience he attained in his pursuits of collecting their Eggs & their nests - and also from his having, in every doubtfull case, dissected his subjects, before he gave them the appearance of the living birds to their preserved skins... (*A Memoir* 162)

The demands of scientific accuracy seem irreconcilable with the spirit of Romantic natural history expressed by Wordsworth in one of the best-known poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, 'The Tables Turned' (1798). The speaker exhorts his friend to abandon the 'dull and endless strife' of books:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the forms of beauteous things:-  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives. (ll. 25-32)

However, Bewick's work required Science and Art and to supplement fieldwork. This is his account of how he worked:

As soon as each Bird was finished on the Wood, I set about describing it from my Specimen - and at the same time consulted every Authority I could meet with to know what had been said, & this together with what I knew from my own knowledge, were then compared, and in this way, I finished, as truly as I could, the second volume of the History of British Birds [...] Although all this of thus taking the whole upon me, could not be done, but by close & indeed severe confinement & application, yet I was supported under these by the extreme pleasure I felt in depicting these beautifull & very interesting aerial wanderers of the British Isles ( *A Memoir* 117).

Perhaps more in tune with Wordsworth's recipe was the developing interest in bird behaviour, exemplified by the work of Gilbert White, that role model for the great tradition of C19th natural historians (Barber 41). White, as Lynn Barber points out, described himself as an '*out-door naturalist*, one that takes his observations from the subject itself, and not from the writing of others' (White 136). His biographer, Richard Mabey, argues that his greatest legacy is the tempering of scientific rationalism and acute observation with a distinctly emotional response to natural phenomena:

Throughout his life he ignored orthodox demarcation lines, between art and science, fact and feeling.{...}. In fact, the more he reveals his sensuous enjoyment of the natural world and his sympathy with the joys and sufferings of its inhabitants, the more he begins to resemble an early nineteenth century romantic just as much as an eighteenth century rationalist (12).

This sympathy did not prevent White from shooting rare birds, dissecting them, and on occasion eating them himself, as he records in this letter to Thomas Pennant:

On the 13th of April, I went to the sheep-down, where the ring-ousels have been observed to make their appearance [...] We shot a cock and a hen; they were plump and in high condition. The hen had but very small eggs in her, which proves they are late breeders [...] In their crops was nothing very distinguishable [...] I dressed one of these birds, and found it juicy and well-flavoured (80-81).

It is important to acknowledge, as John Rowlett points out, that the more general vogue for natural history was influencing poetry well before the publication of either Bewick's or White's work:

In 1777, twelve years before Gilbert White published his *Natural History of Selborne*, John Aiken had argued, in *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, that the new knowledge emerging from the study of natural history could serve descriptive poets admirably in achieving novelty in imagery and language (625).

Indeed, Aiken's exhortation seems belated considering that the first version of one of the most influential poems of the eighteenth century, James Thomson's *The Seasons*, which contains descriptions of nest-building and mating behaviour that were especially prized by his readers (Sambrook x), appeared as early as 1728. In 1767 two writers began to keep the formatted *Naturalist's Journal* designed by Daines Barrington: one was White, the other the poet Thomas Gray (Mabey 109). White himself wrote verse - the best known being 'The Naturalist's Summer Evening Walk,' which he included in *The Natural History*. While the poem echoes the ecological sensibility which Mabey sees as one of the most important aspects of White's prose, it is also a very conventionally C18th one; the ornithology is dressed in the poetic diction of the age, including a sprinkling of appropriate epithets: the 'soft quail', the 'vagrant cuckoo', the 'clamorous curlew.' The swallows are apostrophized as 'Amusive birds!' while the phrase 'their infant train' is drawn from 'the writings of another' - Thomson's description of birds feeding their young in *The Seasons* (685) - a reminder that the literary text cannot represent experience in any straightforward way. Even when the observer is as accurate as White, and as determined to take his observations from 'the subject itself,' his writing is always in dialogue with its predecessors. The other side of the reciprocal relationship between poetry and natural history is illustrated by Thomas Bewick's use of quotations from both poems in the Introduction to Volume 1 of *British Birds* (xxii, xxiii).

In this paper, I am focusing on a single species: the nightingale, the most 'poetic' - or hackneyed - of birds. The poet and novelist Charlotte Smith remarked that 'it would be difficult to find anything new to say of that most charming of our feathered musicians' (200), having herself written three sonnets on the subject. The symbolism and myths associated with the nightingale epitomise the complex capacity of birds to represent not only an important part of the natural world, but also the poet's response to it, and the art through which s/he attempts to represent that relationship and/or communicate that response.

Birds occupy a richly paradoxical position in the physical world, seeming to belong equally to air and earth (and to some extent water): less bound than we are by the laws of gravity, they can symbolise the freedom of the human spirit, yet physically they share some of the otherness of reptiles. The small species with which most of us are most familiar seem so fragile and short-lived as to become the proverbial symbol of mortality which proves the omniscience of God: but precisely that mortality - which our perceptions are usually too limited to notice - allows them also to stand for immortality. Thus Keats writes of 'his' nightingale, 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!' (stanza 7, l.61), celebrating the unchanging nature of a voice that sings 'the self-same song' (7, 65) to himself and the Biblical Ruth.

Medieval literary representations of the nightingale illustrate this capacity to represent apparent opposites. The bird could stand for motherhood: Wendy Pfeffer quotes St Ambrose's *Hexameron*, in which 'she' hatches 'her' eggs by the warmth of her 'breast and bosom' and the sweetness of her song (20); it could both symbolise the meditative Christian soul (39), and also a rampant sexuality (3). Then, according to Richard Mabey's delightful study combining literary, natural and personal history, *The Book of Nightingales* (1997), 'the mood changed. Influenced by a group of maudlin classical myths which had only a tangential connection with the real bird, pastoral poets began representing the nightingale's song as an outpouring of grief (16). He is of course referring to the myth of Procne and Philomel, in which the nightingale's song becomes the wordless telling of a tale of rape, mutilation and infanticide. What binds these apparently disparate symbolic functions together is the gendering of the nightingale: in almost all its literary representations before the Romantic period it is *feminine*, despite the reality that only the male bird sings.

In order to explore the effects of the confluence of these discourses, the emergent one of ornithology, and the heavily weighted one of poetic tradition, I have chosen in this paper to focus on two works by poets with a demonstrable interest in natural history. Both Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Clare read White's *Natural History of Selborne*: Coleridge annotated his copy with marginal notes, and (rather unscientifically) referred to it as a 'sweet, delightful book' (Mabey 6); John Clare was given the book by his publisher (Fitter and Robinson xv), and wrote natural history letters on the same model. Their nightingale poems draw far more on the natural history of the bird than those written by Smith, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, who tend in their bird poems to be interested in the symbolic power of the unseen singer: 'No bird, but an invisible thing,/ A voice, a mystery' (Wordsworth, 'To the Cuckoo' 1802, l15-16).

It is its traditional symbolic associations that Coleridge explicitly discards in 'The Nightingale, a Conversation Poem,' one of his contributions to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem opens with an invitation to the reader to share the experience of hearing the nightingale's song:

No cloud, no relique of the sunken day  
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip

Of sullen Light, no obscure trembling hues.  
Come, we will rest on this old mossy Bridge!  
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,  
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently  
O'er its bed of soft verdure. (ll.1-7)

In preparation for the performance of the nightingale, all other effects are extinguished: day is banished, the stream silenced, the stars dimmed. Yet the annunciatory line, 'And hark! the nightingale begins its song,' (12) is followed by the bathetic intrusion of what is carefully signalled as quotation: "Most musical, most melancholy"\* bird - an intrusion intensified by the asterisk that sends the reader *out of the poem* to the foot of the page where 'the Author' offers a self-deprecating defence of his temerity in having apparently 'alluded with levity to a line by Milton: a charge than which none could be more painful to him, except perhaps of having ridiculed his Bible.' Nonetheless, the quotation, and Coleridge's critique of the projection that informs it - the tendency of the listener to the song to fill 'all things with himself/ And [make] all gentle sounds tell back the tale of his own sorrows' (19-21) - stand, to be followed by an injunction to the would-be poet to abandon the conventions of the past and even the conscious effort of art,

to the influxes  
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements  
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song  
And of his fame forgetful. (27-30)

Yet this is an impossible project: his own experience, shared with William and Dorothy Wordsworth is still a *mediated* one: 'My Friend and my Friend's sister! we have *learnt*/ A different lore' - both the Romantic lore that 'Nature's sweet voices' are 'always full of love/ And joyance' (40-43), rather than melancholy, and the natural history which teaches that the nightingale who sings is not, after all *she* but *he*, and that the song is part of the male's competitive display:

They answer and provoke each other's songs -  
With skirmish and capricious passagings  
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug  
And one low piping sound more sweet than all – (58-61)

The edition of *The Natural History of Selborne* owned by Coleridge was not published until 1802 (Martin 174-5), so the 'lore' that informs it was perhaps gained from Bewick's book - especially as Coleridge's bird is sharply visible:

On moonlit bushes ...  
You may perchance behold them on the twigs,  
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,  
Glistning, (64-68)

and Bewick quotes the same line from Milton in his description of the bird ( *A History of British Birds* I 233).

The ornithologically correct sexing of his nightingale allows Coleridge to produce a very different poetic association from the traditional one between the bird and a symbolic femininity. Here femininity is represented by the figure of the 'most gentle maid' who

at latest eve  
(Even like a Lady vow'd and dedicate  
To something more than nature in the grove)  
Glides thro' the pathways; she knows all their notes, (71-74)

Despite her nunlike dedication, the maid not only *knows* those songs of sexual display, she also *watches* (according to Freud a rather more sexual activity than listening) the performance, which is described in language that suggests its sexual function:

And she hath watch'd  
Many a Nightingale perch giddily  
On blosmy twig still swinging from the breeze,  
And to that motion tune his wanton song,  
Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head. (82-86)

If, as Richard Holmes suggests, the 'maid' is partly based on Dorothy Wordsworth (192), then the sexual rivalry through song of the nightingales (those skirmishes and capricious passagings) may allude to the relationship of Coleridge and William, whose notes she certainly knew, even if the journal entry in which she refers to the moment that inspired the poem does not suggest any particular expertise in ornithology: 'Met Coleridge as we were walking out. Went with him to Stowey; heard the nightingale; saw a glow-worm.' (14) The virtuoso song of the male nightingale to a silent invisible female listener validates the emotional outpourings of the poet as an acceptably – indeed essentially - masculine performance.

John Clare's poem, 'The Nightingale's Nest' belongs to a group of bird poems written between 1825-30. It opens, like Coleridge's, in conversational style with an invitation to join the speaker in listening to the nightingale:

Up this green woodland ride let's softly rove,  
And list the nightingale - she dwells just here.  
Hush! let the woodgate softly clap for fear  
The noise might drive her from her home of love; (ll. 1-4)

However, Clare takes a more indirect route to an experience that is in itself problematic: the reader is not just being invited to 'list' the nightingale; s/he is being also taken to view 'her' nest. But not yet - as with Coleridge's poem, the experience is delayed: the next 36 lines establish Clare's credentials as an ornithologist. They describe his success in the first aim (hearing the bird)- but his failure in the second: 'To find her nest and see her feed her young.'(14) Indeed, the vivid description in the poem of the singing nightingale,

Her wings would tremble in her ecstasy,  
And feathers stand on end, as 'twere with joy,  
And mouth wide open to release her heart

Of its out-sobbing songs. (22-25)

belongs to a fleeting moment from the past experience of the poet. What the reader really experiences is not so much the bird or the song - 'our presence doth retard her joys' - but the nest, described in exquisite and accurate detail:

dead oaken leaves  
Are placed without and velvet moss within,  
And little scraps of grass, and - scant and spare,  
Of what seem scarce materials - down and hair;  
For from men's haunts she nothing seems to win.

(For a fascinating discussion of the significance of nests in Clare's poetry, the reader is recommended to Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* pp.153-175.)

When I first read this poem, I was deeply disconcerted by its combination of authoritative knowledge of the bird's nesting habits (far more detailed than that offered by White or Bewick), the immediacy of the evocation of the experience of bird-watching ('stoop right cautious 'neath the rustling boughs' (46)), the rejection of even Coleridgean Romantic 'lore' (it is merely 'happy fancies' that 'shapen her employ' as joyful (26-7)) with the traditional misapprehension about the sex of the singing bird. I even wondered if conventional ornithology had got it wrong, and Clare really had seen a hen bird singing by her nest, until I found in his prose writing on the subject that he was 'almost certain that the female is silent and never sings' (Robinson and Fitter 45).

Why then, in a poem otherwise so accurate (it is an implicit correction of another misapprehension, that nightingales only sing at night) does Clare include what he suspected to be a fundamental error? The most obvious explanation is that his poetic technique was developed as much from C18th, as from Romantic models; conscious of the potential tension between writing verse and natural history, he retains this one, fundamental, element of the nightingale tradition. There are other reminders of the literary nature of this text - possible echoes of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) in the association between the nightingale and summer rather than spring, the reference to flowers, the moment in which the nightingale moves away, and some of the vocabulary (although I rather cherish the idea, suggested by Clare's description of Londoners 'listening very attentive by the side of a shrubbery' to what they thought was a nightingale, but he recognised as a thrush (Robinson and Fitter 42), that Keats's great ode is based on a misapprehension).

Because its descriptive passages are so vivid, the poem at first reading might seem to bear out the criticism that Clare's nature poetry is nothing more than descriptive; however it is also arguably Romantic in the empathy between poet and bird: this nightingale - like Coleridge's - reflects Clare's own poetic subjectivity. Clare's bird is, like him, a recluse, a shy singer in the russet brown of the rural working class (Lucas 44); the intrusion of *the reader* (not the poet who has known her of old) poses a risk described most graphically as the 'choking fear' (60) that silences the nightingale. The poet draws the reader back from the nest:

So even now  
We'll leave it as we found it: safety's guard  
Of pathless solitudes shall keep it still. (61-63)

But the harm may be done: the poet has already instructed the reader to 'put that bramble by/ Nay, trample on its branches' (55-56) to see the nest, to violate the singer's desire to spend her life 'unseen.' In a similar way, Clare's own songs invited intrusion into his own life by 'inquisitive London visitors wanting to interview the "peasant poet"' (Lucas 3). And here the sexing of the nightingale may, after all, be more than a matter of tradition: in his powerlessness, especially to defend himself from such intrusive eyes, Clare may well have felt an empathy with femininity - an empathy so potentially threatening that in the poems he wrote during his periods of mental illness, he borrowed such notably masculine personae as Byron and Tom Spring the boxer (Storey 152). And the anomalous song of the hen nightingale, defending not a territory but only a nest, might well represent the unlikely poetry of a farm labourer - who in the end did not even have a nest.

To sum up: both Coleridge and Clare centre their poems on what might be termed an ornithological experience: both invite the reader to accompany the speaker in search of the nightingale; unlike their contemporaries, both describe its habitat and represent the nightingale in strongly visual, rather than merely aural terms; both are unusually accurate in their knowledge of the bird's habits. However the reader is constantly reminded that these are literary texts, through their direct or indirect reference to other poems, through their rejection or use of poetic convention, and that they are the product of their literary moment by the subjectivity which competes with objective description, and by the complexity and ambiguity of the projections and symbolizations which intervene in and enrich the experience they represent.

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