

The Return of the Nightingale

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In *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994), Karl Kroeber advocated a bold new approach to the study of literature. More than just another routine method of textual analysis, ecological literary criticism seeks to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities. Such an approach incorporates theoretical advances in the science of environmental biology while it adapts to the changing social and political circumstances of contemporary criticism. In Karl Kroeber's view, an ecologically oriented literary criticism "seizes opportunities offered by recent biological research to make humanistic studies more socially responsible" (1). Kroeber's landmark book was the first of several important studies that gave rise to ecocriticism as a distinctive literary theory for the twenty-first century.

The most memorable chapters of Kroeber's book were concerned with the close reading of Romantic poems from an ecological point of view. His reading of Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" best exemplifies what this approach can accomplish. Often dismissed as a dogmatic display of ingenuous nature-worship, this poem nevertheless reveals an unsuspected thematic complexity in its portrayal of the relationship between nature and human society. According to Kroeber, the poem "challenges our learned cultural presupposition that human consciousness alienates us from physical nature" (45). Stressing the hypothetical, questioning tone of the poem, Kroeber scrutinizes its enigmatic last lines: "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" He suggests that these lines refer not only to the stubborn persistence of social injustice, but also to the way that our "self-injuries may be rooted in a miseducation of ourselves away from linkages through pleasure with beneficent natural processes" (45). In this way, the poem encourages readers to adopt an essentially ecological understanding of their relation to the natural world. Kroeber's ecological approach to the reading of poetry appears especially groundbreaking and visionary in light of the environmental concerns that have come to pose a distinct threat to the ultimate survival of humankind.

This essay will examine the perennial poetic theme of the nightingale from an ecocritical perspective, informed by Kroeber's insightful methods of ecological close reading. I am interested in the nightingale, not only as a literary *topos*, or commonplace, but also as a biological organism that thrives in a specific habitat. Ecological literary criticism devotes special attention to the relation of poetry to actual places, and to actual biotic communities – real birds singing in real trees. To what extent does the nightingale *topos* embody the lived experience of poets listening to the song of an actual bird?

The nightingale that often appears in Romantic poetry is more than a literary *motif*. It is, to begin with, a migratory Old World bird of the thrush family (*turdidae*), renowned throughout the world and literature, for its remarkable singing. The common nightingale of England and Western Europe, known in Linnaean terminology as *Luscinia megarhynchos*, is a small and inconspicuous bird, about 6½ inches long, with reddish-brown coloring on its upper body, and grayish-brown below. It migrates to Africa for the winter, returning to England in mid-April. Only the male sings, and only during the breeding season, at any time of day or night. The female bird is silent, but she plays an active role in the social realm of nightingales because she chooses a mate on the basis of his singing. Although the male is the singer, the female nightingale exerts the sexual power; the male proposes, and she disposes.

In ancient Greek and Roman poetry, however, the nightingale was virtually always personified as a female singer, and the identification of the nightingale with the female gender has been stable throughout literary history, stubbornly at variance with the facts. From Homer and Aeschylus through Sappho and Virgil, all the way to Milton and Keats, the nightingale has been personified as a beautiful, melancholy, and often seductive female presence. In the *Odyssey*, Homer compares Penelope to Philomela, an unfortunate woman who was transformed by Zeus into a nightingale out of pity for her sad plight. The same story is recounted by many Classical poets, memorably by Ovid, who relates a detailed version of the myth in *Metamorphoses*, Book 4. This version of the myth was the most influential upon later poets.

According to Ovid, Philomela, on the way to visit her sister Procne, was taken into a remote wood and raped by Tereus, King of Thrace and Procne's husband. The evil Tereus then cuts out Philomela's tongue to silence her, and confines her in a remote forest dwelling. While confined, Philomela weaves her story into a tapestry and sends it to her sister Procne, who sets her free. The two sisters return to Thrace, and take a terrible revenge on Tereus by killing his son, Itys, and serving him to his father in a cannibal stew. When he realizes what Procne and Philomela have done, Tereus attacks them with an axe; but Zeus chooses to intervene and turns them all into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, Philomela into a swallow, and Itys into a goldfinch.

Ovid's ending of the tale moves outside the mainstream since he turns Philomela into a swallow. In most other versions of the myth, Philomela is turned into a nightingale; and throughout literary history, the song of the nightingale has been regarded as an expression of Philomela's sad

plight – her story of being raped, taken prisoner, having her tongue cut out by her captor; and her redemption through art, the weaving of a tapestry, the feature of the tale that most appealed to Homer.

Throughout Classical literary tradition, the nightingale is associated with Philomela, and the burden of her song is her loss of voice, and her cruel betrayal by a man whom she trusted. Geoffrey Hartman, in “Evening Star and Evening Land,” one of the best essays ever written on the nightingale, describes the “*philomel moment*” in English poetry as “the post-prophetic moment, when the theme of loss merges with that of voice – when, in fact, a ‘lost voice’ becomes the subject or moving force of poetic song” (164). Hartman’s essay is compelling, but one-sided in its emphasis upon “lost voice.” What’s missing in Hartman’s argument is the positive range of emotion the nightingale calls forth; throughout literary history, the nightingale always entailed both loss and recompense. Sappho, for example, in a poetic fragment, evokes the nightingale’s joyful aspect, calling it “the messenger of spring, the sweet voiced nightingale.” Especially in Romantic poetry, the nightingale connotes not only heartache and grief, but also renewed vitality; not only autumnal melancholy, but also springtime rejoicing.

Not only were the Classical poets fascinated by the nightingale; the natural historian Pliny the Elder was intrigued by it and describes its song in meticulous detail (*Historia Naturalis*, Book 10, chapter 43). He states that each individual nightingale can sing more than one song, and that they engage in singing contests. By implication, the bird’s song is not merely generic; it is highly individualized, and differs from day to day, or even from moment to moment. Here is another reason that the nightingale *motif* appeals strongly to Romantic poets: as a sentient creature, the nightingale is active in the moment of creation, and it manifests poetic imagination by varying its song to fit different moods and circumstances. Although he offers accurate information about the nightingale’s song, Pliny nevertheless assumes (erroneously) that the singer is a female bird.

During the medieval period, a counter-tradition emerged in Latin verse, in which the bird was described as masculine, a singer of beautiful songs that announce the arrival of the spring. By the Renaissance, the nightingale could be either masculine or feminine, depending on the preference of the poet and the occasion of the poem. Thus Spenser, in a sonnet to Sir Walter Raleigh, addressed him as a nightingale, without connoting any feminine qualities. The sonnet dates from Spenser’s early acquaintance with Raleigh in the 1580s, at the height of Raleigh’s success as a courtly poet. Entitled “To the right noble and valorous knight, Sir Walter Raleigh,” Spenser’s sonnet brings into view the nightingale as a figure of poetic relationship, and of poetic vocation. The poem is addressed “To thee that are the sommers Nightingale, / Thy souveraine Goddesses most deare delight” (1-2). The “souveraine Goddess” is Queen Elizabeth, whose

public preferment and rumored affection for Raleigh lends the poem a latent erotic theme. Although the nightingale in this poem is masculine, the bird is presented as a seducer, the Queen’s forbidden lover. The erotic dimension of the nightingale theme will persist through many Romantic retellings.

In ancient Greek, the word *aedon* means nightingale, poet, and poetry – these senses are completely interchangeable and can all be present at once (Williams 21). So too Spenser, by addressing Raleigh as a nightingale, also means that he is a poet. The final couplet expresses Spenser’s aspiration to follow in Raleigh’s footsteps, to become a talented singer of courtly songs: “Yet till that thou thy Poeme wilt make knowne, / Let thy faire Cinthias praises bee thus rudely showne” (13-14). The line represents the young Spenser as a “rude” singer, just setting out on his career, aspiring to become a poet with the talent, the *panache* of his precursor. The theme of poetic vocation is interwoven with the desire to write songs of praise for “Cynthia” (Elizabeth), figured here as a moon-goddess. Although conventional in its handling of the nightingale *motif*, the poem plays upon many of its thematic possibilities: poetic vocation, erotic desire, and melancholy moonlight.

After the Renaissance, with the return of Classical learning, and in defiance of natural history, the nightingale reverted to being a female presence in poetry. Why is the nightingale so persistently gendered as female? I believe this bird embodies an archetype that is transhistorical and largely unconscious, and consequently more powerful than mere empirical precision. The perennial voice of the nightingale is intensely fascinating, even hypnotic in its power to evoke profound feelings in the listener, the poet, and the reader, and to suggest the possibility of transcendence or escape from the earthly realm. The nightingale invites the beholder to explore something beyond the merely human. But at the same time, as Keats suggests in “Ode to a Nightingale,” the bird can be dangerous in its allurements. Like other seductive females in Keats’s poetry, such as Lamia or *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the nightingale can enchant men, lure them away from daytime responsibilities, drain them of masculine potency or power to act, and finally leave them helpless in a deathlike state. In this respect the nightingale resembles the Sirens in Homer’s *Odyssey*, or the *Lorelei* of German folk-tales, who sing with such unspeakable beauty that they lure sailors to their death by shipwreck on the rocks. Like other seductresses in Keats, the nightingale bears a family resemblance to Spenser’s Duessa, an enchantress who is finally revealed to be half woman, half snake. Coleridge’s Geraldine belongs to the same family; as she seduces the helpless, innocent Christabel, Geraldine lets fall her garments, only to reveal an unspeakable hybrid body, “a sight to dream of, not to tell”: part woman, part snake.

Milton plays an important transitional role in the development of this archetype. His sonnet, “O Nightingale,

that on yon bloomy spray” (1645), offers a playful contrast between the nightingale, whose voice portends success in love, and the “shallow Cuckoo,” a “rude Bird of Hate” whose name suggests cuckoldry, surely the last thing that a lover wants. The ribald pun on cuckoo/cuckold harks back to Shakespeare’s comedies, but the tone becomes elevated in the last two lines, where Milton boldly declares his own poetic calling:

Whether the Muse, or Love call thee his mate,
Both them I serve, and of their train am I.
(13-14)

Milton returns to the theme of the nightingale in “Il Penseroso” (1645), where he refers explicitly to the myth of Philomel:

’Less *Philomel* will deign a Song,
In her sweetest, saddest plight,
Smoothing the rugged brow of night,
While *Cynthia* checks her Dragon yoke
Gently o’er th’ accustom’d Oak;
Sweet Bird that shunn’st the noise of folly
Most musical, most melancholy! (56-62)

The rich rhyme of “folly” and “melancholy,” which might appear comic, imparts a robust cadence and exquisite depth to the bird’s melancholy aspect. Milton goes on to address the bird as a “Chauntress,” literally a singer, and implicitly an enchantress: “Thee Chauntress oft the Woods among, / I woo to hear thy Even-Song” (63-64). The nightingale is a seductive female figure who lures the poet ever deeper into the oak woods. Yet only by passing through those dark woods can the poet discover his poetic vocation.

The same complex theme of danger and desire returns in *Paradise Lost* (second edition, 1674), where the bird becomes firmly an emblem of Milton’s poetic vocation. The word “nightingale” never appears in this passage, but this “wakeful Bird” closely resembles the bird described in “Il Penseroso”:

Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful Bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal Note. Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev’n or Morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summer’s Rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me . . .
(Book 3, 37-46)

Milton refers here to his blindness, which is also (paradoxically) the mark of his poetic insight. Blindness and insight are correlative for Milton, as they were for Homer, the blind

poet, and for Oedipus at Colonus. The word “darkling,” which evokes the nightingale in its nocturnal habitat, will recur in later poetic representations of the bird, always bearing some trace of its Miltonic origin. (To be sure, Shakespeare uses the word “darkling” in *King Lear* I.iv.217, but not with reference to the nightingale.) Perhaps the most important epithet ever attached to the nightingale in its entire literary history, “darkling” means both “in the dark” and “of the dark.” In some magical and mysterious fashion, the bird’s very presence takes on the power of darkness. Later, the epithet “darkling” will gradually be transferred from the bird to the poet, so that Keats will finally declare, “Darkling I listen” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” 51). Indeed, such a process of transference is already underway in this passage from *Paradise Lost*, since it is not only the bird that sings “darkling,” but also the poet, who sings out of his blindness – he is in the dark, and of the dark.

Milton’s poetic representation of the nightingale had a profound, but delayed impact on British literary tradition. Charlotte Smith’s first book of poetry, *Elegaic Sonnets* (1784), was remarkable both for its revival of the Petrarchan sonnet form (virtually extinct in English poetry since the time of Milton) and for the precision and intensity of its nature imagery. Born into wealth, Smith attended the best schools available to young women. Her education included the natural history, which grew into a lifelong avocation. Her extensive knowledge of botany, taxonomy, and ornithology exemplifies the convergence between science and poetry in the Romantic era. In her affection for all of nature’s creatures, even the lowly green-chafar and the humble hedgehog, Smith evokes the possibility of a new kind of nature writing, intimate in tone and deeply personal in expression.

In three sonnets addressed to the nightingale, Smith draws upon her knowledge of natural history by evoking the actual presence of the bird: she describes the plaintive sound of its voice at nightfall as it seeks its missing mate. The nightingale is represented not merely as a traditional emblem for poetic inspiration, but also as an analogue for Smith’s own forlorn circumstances: following an unfortunate marriage to a dissolute and improvident husband, she had fallen into poverty, misery, and heartache. The pervasive theme of yearning for lost love, and the intensely personal, introspective quality of her lyric poetry, mark a significant departure from the prevailing norms of late eighteenth-century verse. In the first of these three poems, “To the Nightingale,” she writes:

Poor melancholy bird – that all night long
Tell’st to the Moon thy tale of tender woe;
From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,
And whence this mournful melody of song? (1-4)

The epithet “melancholy” comes directly from Milton, and the imagery of the moon has been associated with the nightingale since Spenser, and so the poem is, in a certain sense,

quite conventional. But it is beautifully written, with exquisitely crafted rhythm, alliteration, and assonance in such lines as “From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow.” Moreover, as in the second quatrain, this poem is about poetic vocation:

Thy poet’s musing fancy would translate
 What mean the sounds that swell thy little breast,
 When still at dewy eve thou leavest thy nest,
 Thus to the listening night to sing thy fate?
 (5-8)

The entire sonnet is composed as a series of rhetorical questions. The nightingale inspires wonder in the poet, and the entire poem comprises a meditation, a broadening series of inquiries, rather than a series of affirmations about the nightingale.

Smith’s second poem in the nightingale series, “On the Departure of the Nightingale,” is even more remarkable for its engagement with the theme of poetic vocation, as well as its deployment of natural history. She addresses the nightingale in the sonnet’s opening lines:

Sweet poet of the woods—a long adieu!
 Farewel, soft minstrel of the early year!
 Ah! ’twill be long ere thou shalt sing anew,
 And pour thy music on ‘the night’s dull ear.’
 Whether on Spring thy wandering flights await,
 Or whether silent in our groves you dwell . . . (1-6)

Although the sonnet invokes a distinctly literary nightingale, it is also very much engaged with the actual facts of natural history. In the late eighteenth century, no one knew where birds go when they disappear in winter. There were two competing hypotheses: do they migrate south, or do they hibernate, either in hollow trees, or perhaps underwater? Gilbert White, the author of *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789), was known to stir his stick in a pond to see if any birds could be awakened! So in these lines Smith is posing an open scientific question: will the birds return north to England in springtime, or are they perhaps hiding in our very midst, sleeping in hollow trees? Wherever they might have gone, the nightingales have certainly departed, and their departure bears the pathos of the loss of poetic inspiration. Without the companionship of the nightingale, which is her muse, Smith can no longer sing. Lost in the solitude of winter, Smith abandons herself to melancholy, which pervades the entire collection of *Elegiac Sonnets*.

However, an exception to the melancholy tone occurs in the best of her three sonnets on the nightingale, “The Return of the Nightingale.” Written in May, 1791, published in a later edition of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, in form and theme, this poem shows a greater sophistication than the first two sonnets on nightingales, published in 1784. The poem describes

the nightingale’s return home to England’s forest groves, where once again it can engage in musical colloquy with Charlotte:

Borne on the warm wing of the western gale,
 How tremulously low is heard to float
 Thro’ the green budding thorns that fringe the vale,
 The early Nightingale’s prelusive note.
 ’Tis Hope’s instinctive power that thro’ the grove
 Tells how benignant Heaven revives the earth;
 ’Tis the soft voice of young and timid Love
 That calls these melting sounds of sweetness forth.

With transport, once, sweet bird! I hail’d thy lay,
 And bade thee welcome to our shades again,
 To charm the wandering poet’s pensive way
 And soothe the solitary lover’s pain;
 But now! – such evils in my lot combine,
 As shut my languid sense – to Hope’s dear voice and thine!
 (1-14)

This poem is unusual for Smith because it exudes such a warm and hopeful tone. The bird brings the rebirth of springtime and a renewal of inspiration for poetry; it gives Smith the hope she needs to go forward. The poem turns against Milton, who called the bird “melancholy.” Thematically the poem is unconventional, or returning to an older convention: the nightingale poetry of the medieval period, and of Sappho, who saw the nightingale as a messenger of springtime, of hope, of good cheer, and renewal of life. Here the bird is identified with an “instinctive power” that revives the Earth in springtime, and addressed as a singer whose “melting sounds of sweetness” charm the wandering poet. Rescued from its melancholy Miltonic associations, the nightingale returns to English poetry as a redemptive female figure that embodies the seasonal cycles of nature and the healing powers of the Earth. To a female poet like Smith, the bird serves as a professional role model in the craft of poetry, a mentor who offers hope and companionship in a time of desperate pain and solitude. To be sure, Smith returns to her characteristic themes of depression and melancholy in the final couplet, and yet hope remains present in the poem’s closing words: “to Hope’s dear voice and thine!” Struggling to resist the tug of dejection, the poem still offers hope, borne on the warm winds of spring by the nightingale.

Smith’s revival of the sonnet form, and her dramatic reshaping of the nightingale *topos*, directly influenced the work of several later poets in the Romantic tradition. Indeed, there was a boom in the production of nightingale sonnets immediately following the first publication of her *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784. No poet could write a sonnet after 1784 without referencing or somehow being influenced by Charlotte Smith. In a very literal sense, *Elegiac Sonnets* witnessed not only the return of the nightingale, but also the return of the sonnet form, to English poetry.

Robert Southey, for example, penned a “Sonnet: to the Nightingale” in the early 1790s. It is a dreadful sonnet, but instructive in its dreadfulness. It gets the theme entirely wrong! The nightingale is an archetype, a deeply interwoven complex of themes, and a poet cannot simply ignore those themes and write about something else without having the entire poem fall dead, like a cracked bell. Here are the poem’s opening lines:

Sad songstress of the night, no more I hear
 Thy soften’d warblings meet my pensive ear,
 As by thy wonted haunts again I rove;
 Why art thou silent? wherefore sleeps thy lay?
 For faintly fades the sinking orb of day,
 And yet thy music charms no more the grove.
 The shrill bat flutters by; from yon dark tower
 The shrieking owlet hails the shadowy hour . . . (1-8)

After using the absurdly incongruous term “warblings” to evoke the song of the nightingale, the sonnet takes a wrong turn into Gothic romance. It’s a work of amazing incompetence.

An even more dreadful sonnet was composed by John Thelwall in 1788, “Sonnet to the Nightingale,” possibly the worst poem ever written on the nightingale theme. What’s wrong with this poem? Thelwall uses (or misuses) the nightingale *motif* to represent the loss of male friendship. To his credit, Thelwall does accurately reference the Miltonic epithet “darkling,” and his poem does enact the word’s historic transference from bird to poet, which suggests that the archetype has its own strength – there are certain things you just can’t get wrong about it. But it’s downhill all the way from there:

Sweet Bird of Sympathy! whose voice alone
 Soothes the attentive ear of darkling Woe,
 Whose strains, responsive to the Wretch’s moan,
 With softly melancholy influence flow,
 As thy sweet note thus melts upon my ear,
 I heave the sigh – I shed the starting tear.
 For oh! of Lucio – dear, departed friend! –
 The fond memorial in that note I find.
 When Joy forbore her cheerful smile to lend,
 When Fortune lour’d on my benighted mind,
 Alone, with Friendship’s sympathizing strain,
 He sooth’d my soul, and lull’d my bosom’s pain.
 Sweet Bird of Sympathy! for this the tear
 Still shall Remembrance shed on Friendship’s early bier! (1-14)

For some readers, “Friendship’s early bier” could suggest a mid-afternoon trip to the pub! This is in fact the poem’s central theme: the speaker misses his convivial friend, Lucio. But the nightingale imagery simply does not work in this context; the topic is entirely incongruous.

I have cited these poems to show the enduring strength of the nightingale archetype. Even when the poet gets it desperately wrong, the poem still inevitably references many of the right elements: “darkling Woe,” “melancholy influence,” and many more. The archetype is stronger than the individual author. Neither sonnet contributes memorably to the art of poetry, but they do show the pervasive influence of Charlotte Smith, both in her revival of the sonnet form and in her plangent use of the nightingale as a full-blooded living creature, a real bird singing in a real forest.

Charlotte Smith also had a direct impact upon the early development of Coleridge’s poetry. Coleridge’s first collection of poems, *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), includes two sonnets by Charlotte Smith, which he copied faithfully from the seventh edition of her *Elegiac Stanzas* (1795), which contains all three of Smith’s nightingale poems. In the preface to his 1796 volume, Coleridge offers a concise definition of the sonnet: “A sonnet then is a short poem in which some lonely feeling is developed” (Coleridge, vol. 2, 1139). This purely expressive definition of the sonnet is notable for ignoring all the formal features. Coleridge later grudgingly admits that a sonnet should perhaps have fourteen lines, since “it may as well be fourteen as any other number.” He goes on to articulate a new and distinctively Romantic approach to the representation of nature in poetry. Like Charlotte Smith, Coleridge finds that the sonnet need not be an artificial, purely literary form of expression:

Those Sonnets appear to me the most exquisite, in which moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature. Such compositions generate a habit of thought highly favorable to delicacy of character. They create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world. (Coleridge, vol. 2, 1139)

The final sentence of this passage embodies the very essence of Coleridge’s conception of poetry at this early moment in his poetic career, a conception more fully embodied in “The Eolian Harp.” According to this view, which is Neoplatonic in flavor, nature and the intellectual world are essentially the same. By implication, nature embodies the divine ideas, and these divine ideas are also intrinsic to human consciousness; and so whatever one may conceive or imagine is precisely what one will encounter in the real world. For Coleridge, then, it is not enough for the poet to be a detached observer of picturesque scenery; rather, the poet must seek a “sweet and indissoluble union” with nature. But how can such union be accomplished?

There is one easy answer to this question: marriage! Marriage is the natural fulfillment of erotic love, and in his first poem to the nightingale, Coleridge attempts to create this kind of union between the intellectual and material world, using the figure of marriage, but also bringing in the *motif* of the nightingale. In “To the Nightingale,” Coleridge

might possibly have a real bird in mind, but he addresses it in utterly traditional Miltonic terms, calling it “Philomel,” and declaring, “Oft will I tell thee, Minstrel of the Moon! / ‘Most musical, most melancholy’ Bird!” – a direct quotation from Milton’s “Il Penseroso.” The poem offers a tediously conventional expression of the nightingale’s Miltonic associations. He addresses the bird as “sister,” so it is evidently a (conventional) female bird; and in the poem’s final lines, Coleridge addresses his fiancée, Sara, in saccharine verses that seem deeply inauthentic:

That all thy soft diversities of tone,
Tho’ sweeter far than the delicious airs
That vibrate from a white-arm’d Lady’s harp,
What time the languishment of lonely love
Melts in her eye, and heaves her breast of snow,
Are not so sweet as is the voice of her,
My Sara – best beloved of human kind!
When breathing the pure soul of tenderness,
She thrills me with the Husband’s promis’d name! (18-26)

The “thrill” mentioned in the last line is the throb of delayed eroticism, the sexual “thrill” of Coleridge’s future marriage bed – not a scene that any reader wishes to envision.

Coleridge did a better job the next time he tackled the theme of the nightingale. In “The Nightingale” (1798), he memorably addresses the correlation between human consciousness and the natural world. The poem is also an explicit reshaping of the Miltonic tradition; citing “Il Penseroso,” where Milton had addressed the nightingale as a “most musical, most melancholy” bird, Coleridge retorts: “A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought! / In Nature there is nothing melancholy” (14-15). Like Charlotte Smith, Coleridge invites the return of the nightingale to English poetry, rescued from its mythic associations of mindless melancholy, and presented instead as a flock of real birds that inhabit a real English grove in early springtime:

But never elsewhere in one place I knew
So many nightingales; and far and near,
In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
They answer and provoke each other’s song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,
And one low piping sound more sweet than all
Stirring the air with such a harmony,
That should you close your eyes, you might almost
Forget it was not day! (55-64)

The concreteness of the description is captured in the onomatopoeic language, the “swift jug jug” of the birds’ harmonious voices. Yet Coleridge’s nightingale is also a singer or fellow-poet (evidently male) whose voice embodies the powerful, transformative emotions of joy and love. Coleridge follows Smith in regarding the nightingale as an embodiment of nature, possessed of mysterious powers.

The most crucial Romantic reappearance of the nightingale is the poetry of Keats, whose “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), while responding most directly to Milton and Coleridge, further elaborates upon Smith’s evocation of the bird in “The Return of the Nightingale.” Like Smith, Keats personifies the nightingale as a female singer – specifically as a dryad, or wood nymph – and he invests the bird with an inscrutable sort of happiness that is immune to mortal woe. The “Ode to a Nightingale” is rightly regarded as one of the most elusive and ambiguous poems in British Romanticism, and in light of its convoluted literary heritage – from Classical mythology and the poetry of John Milton down through the nightingale poems of Coleridge and Smith – it is best regarded as a representing of all the complexity that had come to inhabit the idea of nature during the period. Keats’s nightingale embodies a host of contradictions: it is immortal, yet it is also associated with “easeful Death” (line 52); it pours forth its soul in ecstasy, yet it inspires thoughts of “faery lands forlorn” (line 70). Every reader of the Ode must wrestle with these contradictions, and an ecocritical reader is unlikely to seek resolution in any version of the taut, skeptical irony that was identified with the New Criticism. Ecocritical readers are more likely to linger in that dark, odorous, enchanted forest where “soft incense hangs upon the boughs” (line 42). Such a forest is not merely a poetic reverie; rather, it harks back to a specific moment in the historical evolution of the English countryside. In its first fifty lines, “Ode to a Nightingale” evokes the vast, unpeopled forests of the medieval period, home to a rich diversity of flora and fauna.

The recurrent, stubbornly archetypal image of the nightingale enables readers of Romantic poetry to discern how the idea of nature, and indeed the very meaning of the word “nature,” was transformed over the course of the Romantic period. The British Romantic writers formulated an innovative and in many respects original way of understanding the natural world. Such a collective understanding may authentically be termed “ecological” (and not merely “proto-ecological,” as Kroeber writes in *Ecological Literary Criticism*), since, for the first time in the Western intellectual tradition, poetry evinces the essential elements of a modern ecological worldview. Especially in such poets as Charlotte Smith, Coleridge, and Keats, the Romantic era appeared on the threshold of an ecological perception, a sensibility that regards all of nature as an assemblage of biotic communities characterized by diversity, complexity, and symbiosis.

Traditional literary symbols such as the nightingale take on renewed significance in the wake of this ecological understanding; no longer a mythic embodiment of melancholy, the nightingale for Charlotte Smith, for Coleridge, and for Keats, becomes once again a real bird in a real forest, singing its own “swift jug jug” of springtime, of love and joyfulness. By being itself, the nightingale takes on the mysterious complexity of nature, which has the power to give life, to sustain it, and to destroy it, without regard to human desire.

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