

# **‘Darkling I Listen’: The Nightingale’s Song In and Out of Poetry**

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## **Abstract**

The nightingale is a common non-endangered species of songbird found almost throughout Europe and Asia, where it has from time immemorial been regarded as the maestro of bird composition and performance. It has come to signify not music so much as poetry, especially love poetry and, of course, love itself. Although in fact only the male of the species sings, the mythology surrounding nightingales styles the singer as female; and, although most people listening to the actual sound of nightingale song would describe it as joyful, its cultural meaning is usually tragic. Both the Greek myth of Philomela and the Persian legend of the nightingale in love with the rose underpin the image of a sad female nightingale. This essay examines the nightingale’s appearances in English poetry, both in the traditional sad female role and its occasional joyful male representation, and it tries to account for the anomaly of these two contradictory images while at the same time taking into consideration the actual sounds of the wild bird and their meanings within the larger context of the ecosystem.

**Key Words:** Nightingale, birdsong, bird poetry, Philomela, zoomusicology.

## **Introduction**

The nightingale, a bird that we do not hear singing in southern Africa, is nevertheless a heavily encoded sign for all of us who speak and read English—as it is for people who participate in almost every other European

and Asian culture. Its song is associated with poetry, love, beauty, melancholy, spring ebullience and the suffering artist or lover, together with other, often contradictory meanings. It is the national bird of both Iran and Bangladesh and appears in the literature of almost every country 'from Japan to the Iberian Peninsula' (Hatto 1965:792-793). In Greek the word '*aedon*' denotes not only 'nightingale' but 'poet' and 'poem' as well (Williams 1997:20). The old Persian legend of the nightingale in love with the rose and the ancient Greek myth of Philomela recur endlessly in the literature of other and later cultures. So overlaid with cultural meanings is this nondescript little passerine bird that many writers seem unable to hear its actual song at all. This essay represents an attempt to disentangle the mythology from the reality of nightingale song, paying attention to the phenomenon of its sound, to relevant discussions in ornithology, ethology and aesthetics, and to literature, mainly English-language poetry.

As a South African who has never seen or heard a nightingale in the 'real' world, I have been able to encounter several in the 'virtual' world of the internet, where good photographs, recordings and videos of the bird are freely available. I am particularly grateful to the anonymous person who posted three long and very clear recordings of nightingale song made in a forest near Cologne, Germany, in 2002, 2003 and 2004, at <http://www.freesound.org/packsViewSingle.php?id=455>. These recordings have allowed me to some extent, by means of a series of phenomenological *epochés*, to hear nightingale's song as a pure sound, as an animal's mating call, as a musical composition, and as the essence of poetry and love according to literary tradition.

## **Birdsong**

In the preface to a discussion of nightingale song, an outline of the nature and functions of birdsong in general is relevant. Ornithologists distinguish between bird song and bird calls, the latter being shorter, invariable to particular species, used equally by both sexes, and characterised by very specific meanings, such as 'danger!' Bird song is usually performed only by the male of a species and its main purpose is to attract a mate or defend a territory (or both of these functions). Unlike calls, songs are often extremely complex in structure, being in many species of considerable duration and in sound

pattern often using ‘variations on a theme’ rather than simple repetition. Many species are programmed only with the rudiments of the song that they will later sing and must learn nearly all of the rules and possible variations—much, say ornithologists, as human children learn language (Stap 2006:10; Jarvis 2004:266). Individuals of most species develop their own personal variants and local groups follow recognizable dialects.

In humans, the relationship between language and music is very close, according to recent discoveries in neuroscience (Patel 2003:678). And, if the resemblance between birdsong and human language is striking, its parallel with human music is even more so. Songbirds use tempo, melodic phrasing, and varied rhythmic effects including *accelerando*, *ritardando*, *rubato*, syncopation, *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, ‘just as human composers do’ (Boswall 1983:286; Taylor 2008). They practise as youngsters and gradually elaborate their repertoire, in many species even after the song has achieved its practical end: the attraction of a mate and establishment of a territory. Some contemporary ornithologists, diverging from the strict anti-anthropomorphism of earlier ethology towards what is now, ironically, seen as a less ‘homocentric’ approach, believe that birds actually possess an aesthetic appreciation and take pleasure in their compositions and performances (Weinberger 1996; Taylor 2008; Boswall 1983:287). Songbirds were probably the most sophisticated musicians in the world before mankind acquired the knack—which we may have copied from birds anyway. As early as the first century BC, Lucretius wrote:

*At liquidas avium voces imitauer ore  
ante fuit multo quam levia carmina cantu  
concelebrare homines possent aurisque iuvare.*

(But imitating with the mouth the liquid notes of birds came long before men were able to repeat smooth songs in melody and please the ear) (Lucretius 1:504, 505).

Sir John Hawkins in 1776, specifically agreeing with Lucretius, also claimed that ‘the melody of birds’ gave humankind the raw material of music,

furnish[ing] the minds of intelligent creatures with such ideas of

sound, as time, and the accumulated observation of succeeding ages, could not fail to improve into a system (Hawkins 1963:1.2).

Even today musicologists are discovering the traces of birdsong in human composers' works. According to Sylvia Bowden, in an article published as recently as 2008, Beethoven not only consciously imitated the sounds of cuckoo, quail and nightingale in his 'Pastoral' Symphony, but he probably 'borrowed' the themes of several other works, including the Fifth Symphony, two piano sonatas and some of the late quartets, from the yellowhammer and the blackbird (2008:25-26). Bowden also speculates that Beethoven tended to use the keys of A and F major in his joyful and 'smiling' works because these keys 'encompass the natural range of the blackbird', a species 'whose song is usually interpreted by the human ear as joyful' (2008:28).

The relevant question to ask here is whether birdsong through the ages has influenced human musicians as a 'found object' might touch an artist's sensibilities, or as the masterpiece of a precursor might shape or influence his taste and treatment. Jeffery Boswall, a well-known BBC Natural History personality and ornithologist, phrases the question thus: 'There is a simple choice: either aesthetics is confined to one species, *Homo sapiens*, or it isn't' (1983:256). Some contemporary, environmentally-aware musicologists make the anti-homocentric choice with overwhelming confidence, carving out a new field of study, called by Dario Martinelli (2008) 'zoomusicology'<sup>1</sup>. According to Martinelli, zoomusicology is the study of the 'aesthetic use of sound communication among animals' (2008). Martinelli credits François-Bernard Mâche with inventing the discipline in 1983, in his *Musique, myth, nature, ou les Dauphins d'Arion* (translated in 1992 as *Music Myth and Nature*). Mâche's book posits a study called 'ornitho-musicology', analyses the structure of birdsong, which it claims to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Biomusicology', another recently delineated field, is similar to 'zoomusicology' but takes a more homocentric and a more traditionally scientific approach. 'Biomusicology' was defined by Nils L Wallin in 1991 as investigating the origins of music from the evolutionary, neurological and comparative perspectives (see also Brown, Merker and Wallis 2000:5; Arom 2000:28; Bickerton 2000:153-155).

be built on the principle of ‘repetition-transformation’, and states that it is time for humans to ‘begin to speak of animal musics other than with the quotation marks’ (Mâche 1992:114). Poets, of course, have always done this, as will be demonstrated in later parts of this paper.

## **The Nightingale and Its Song**

And this brings me to the nightingale, whose song, though widely spoken of as music, has, unlike the blackbird’s, not been universally accepted as an outburst of joy. The nightingale is a small, unremarkable, brownish bird belonging to the oscine (songbird) suborder of the passerines (small perching birds). It is a non-endangered species whose summer breeding-grounds extend almost throughout Asia and the warmer parts of Europe. Though it winters in Africa, it does not sing on this continent and so has not, as far as I know, entered African mythology at all. Nor is it known in the Americas, where its absence has been comically noted in poems by Wallace Stevens (1984:30) and John Crowe Ransom (1991:63-64) and its imaginary presence passionately asserted by Jorge Luis Borges (2008). For, almost throughout the Old World, the nightingale’s song has, from time immemorial, been regarded as the most beautiful of all bird-produced sounds—and even as an aesthetic ideal to which human art forms can only aspire. (This perception predates the invention of zoomusicology by millennia.)

In listening to the nightingale’s song, I am struck by its incredible variability. In fact, each bird possesses a repertoire of many thousands of individual songs (Slater 2000:54-55). Every song makes use of a dizzying variety of trills, whistles, chirps, rattles, ‘jug-jugs’ and twittering and fluting cries, both ascending and descending in pitch. The English Romantic poet, John Clare, wrote several transcriptions of the sound as he heard it, every song being of course different in its order and arrangement. Here is an excerpt from Clare’s ‘The Progress of Rhyme’:

—‘Chew-chew chew-chew’ & higher still  
‘Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer’ more loud & shrill  
‘Cheer-up cheer-up cheer-up’—& dropt  
Low ‘Tweet tweet jug jug jug’ & stopt  
One moment just to drink the sound

Her music made & then a round  
Of stranger witching notes was heard  
As if it was a stranger bird  
'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur  
Woo-it woo-it,—could this be her  
'Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew  
'Chew-rit chew-rit'—& ever new  
'Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig  
The boy stopt sudden on the brig  
To hear the 'tweet tweet tweet' so shrill  
Then 'jug jug jug' & all was still  
A minute—when a wilder strain  
Made boys and woods to pause again (Clare 1998:3.500).

This nonsense verse may seem somewhat comical as well as perhaps an early sign of the poet's later insanity, but it should be remembered that twenty-first-century birding guides include not only sonograms to help would-be 'twitchers' identify birdcalls, but also nonsense words much like Clare's, mimicking birds' calls and songs in familiar syllabic forms. Many people find these written 'words' more useful for identifying sounds than they do the abstract shapes of sonograms. Clare's transcription is a helpful record not only of how the sounds are shaped, repeated and then changed, but also of how they are patterned with silence and surprise.

As we listen to the nightingale's song we perhaps automatically judge it on a number of musical criteria, including tonal quality as well as complexity of phrasing and tune. Boswall (1983:286) claims '[p]urity of tone' to be 'the major factor in judging the musicality of birdsong'; and, indeed, the nightingale's song excels mainly in tone, which is at all times extremely sweet and clear. But its melodic arrangement is also pleasing; for, though it often repeats one note or phrase several times in a sequence, it possesses a large repertoire of these phrases, as Clare shows, and always changes to another before (human) tedium sets in. Unlike some other birdsongs, it does not achieve a strong sense of closure at any point, perhaps because the male bird often continues to sing for a very long time, refusing the sense of an ending and imparting a feeling of unlimited time and space to the possible interpretations of his song. Contrary to the species' common

name in many languages, the nightingale is not merely a night singer but will sing day and night at certain times of the year, emphasizing this sense of overabundance for those who listen to the bird in its natural environment. Boswall (1983:287) describes the quality of nightingale song as 'rich and vigorous'; many of the trills and 'jug-jug' passages are performed decidedly *con brio* and, though some longish falling high notes do occur, these also have an energy of performance that does not suggest sadness. To my ear at least, the song is an outpouring of joy and exuberance.

Of course, we need to be suspicious of an interpretation of a sound as 'happy' or 'sad' in and of itself. That human music is capable of arousing specific emotions in a human listener is above debate, but whether the music itself expresses these emotions is a more complex question. Susanne Langer claims that 'formal properties' of human emotion may be imitated by music: 'patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change, etc' (Langer 1942:193; see also Kivy 1980:146; Radford 1989:74; Robinson 1994:13-14). Following Langer, Leonard B Meyer in his seminal book on *Emotion and Meaning in Music* claims that human 'moods and sentiments' are often 'diffuse and characterless' and therefore not easily conveyed by music (1956:266). What music communicates is not so much the emotion itself as the *behaviour* associated in a specific culture with this emotion:

In Western culture, for example, grief is communicated by a special type of behaviour: physical gestures and motor behaviour tend to be minimal; facial expression reflects the cultural picture of sorrow; the range of vocal expression is confined and often sporadic; weeping is customary .... But such designative emotional behaviour is not the only possible way of denoting grief. Were the standardized expression of grief in Western culture different, were it, for instance, that of an incessant and violent wailing and moaning, then the 'expression' of grief in Western music would be different (1956:267).

Meyer goes on to explain how the representation of specific feelings becomes conventionalized in a culture by 'particular musical devices' (1956:267). If we are to regard nightingale's song as an example of music in

the human sense, we must surely acknowledge that it does not display any of the conventional Western tokens of grief, such as 'slow tempi and low ranges' (1956:258) in its structure; nor does it stylize in any way Meyer's alternative types of grief-expression, 'wailing or moaning', nor any other version of the animal kingdom's widely comprehensible cries of pain. Meyer also mentions that 'connotative complexes' such as associations between 'darkness, night and cold' or spring, youth, and carefree exuberance; or alternatively 'a text, a plot, or a program established by the composer' can help to fix the meaning and emotion of a particular piece (1956:265-266).

Of course, the conventions associated with feelings such as grief are *human* conventions; even weeping, which is biological as well as conventional, is an expression of *human* grief—though cries of pain are more-or-less universal. In old-style ethology, it would have seemed naïve anthropomorphism to assume that bird emotions closely resembled human emotions or that they were expressed in similar ways. However, contemporary zoomusicologists find many more points of contact between human and bird music than science would earlier have accepted. Birdsong, according to Hollis Taylor (2008), can fit human genres such as 'national anthem' (asserting territorial rights), 'serenade' (in courtship) and 'group password'. It would be difficult to imagine these genres devoid of the appropriate feeling, even in the repertoire of species that we must perceive as other than ourselves. And otherness is probably never absolute; intelligibly expressed feelings are evident throughout the animal kingdom. For example, health and exuberant life are always finding ways of flowing into physical expressions of easily interpretable joy. These are most often evident in spring and, in the case of birdsong, in the morning, when different bird species tend to combine their vocal talents in the dawn chorus.

We know that the recordings under study were made in spring and early summer—and that nightingales characteristically sing only in these seasons. We can assume from our knowledge of ornithology that the bird is singing for love—not with a broken heart but confidently, since his tone is similar when he warns off other males once he has established a family and a territory. The bird-composer's 'programme' is thus at least partly known to us. Our interpretation is also aided by one of Meyer's 'connotative complexes'—spring and exuberance—roused by that sexual spur of which Chaucer writes so eloquently in the *Canterbury Tales*:



And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages) (Chaucer 1958:1).

In other words, both the composer's programme and the relevant connotative complex suggest a joyful message.

The song is also gratuitously beautiful, elaborated beyond any possible utility that it could serve and hence, with Boswell and other zoomusicologists (Boswell 1983:286; Taylor 2008), we may assume that the bird takes an artist's pleasure in the composition for its own sake. In fact, according to the famous British ornithologist, W H Thorpe, writing fifty years ago:

The idea that birdsong is often an expression of irrepressible joy can be supported with some plausible arguments and is certainly not without some scientific justification (Thorpe 1958:536).

In listening to these recordings, even without the natural accompaniment of moonlit woodland in the European or Asian springtime, I am incapable of interpreting them as anything other than an outpouring of joy—one which I, being human, am almost capable of sharing<sup>2</sup>.

## **The Nightingale in Poetry**

### *(1) The Sad Female Nightingale*

In poetry, the nightingale's song has usually been associated with love; science and most people's impressions of the song do not quarrel with this. The song is also a general symbol for music and poetry, which is also understandable, given its beauty, its widespread popularity and the immense period in which Eurasian humans have been exposed to it. If, as Lucretius and Hawkins speculate, we received our early aesthetic education from birds, their song may well have supplied some of the sparks of pleasure and awareness that kindled musical and poetic impulses in our ancestors in the first place.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Colin Radford, music that is 'gay, i.e., is expressive of gaiety, laughter, light-heartedness', is '*infectious*' (1989:74; author's emphasis).

What is less easily accepted is that, in Western and Middle Eastern literature, the commonest affect communicated by nightingales and their song is profoundly sorrowful. This is despite the actual impression that the song makes and in the teeth of the fact that birdsong is part of the collocation of signs that include spring, morning, youthful love and new awakenings, as in:

Sumer is icumen in  
Lhude sing! cuccu.  
Groweth sed and bloweth med  
and springth the wude nu.  
Sing! cuccu (Davies 1963:52).

The nightingale has not been absolutely precluded from such spring associations. As we shall see later, from the beginning there have been joyful representations as well as unhappy ones. Significantly, the sad nightingale is almost always depicted as female, whereas the happy nightingale is usually male.

I should note here that, despite the clear connections between birdsong and music, the nightingale's song has come—by the same displacement that portrays the poet as singer—mostly to represent poetry rather than music. This connection has held for a very long time: as mentioned, the ancient Greek word for 'nightingale' can mean both 'poet' and 'poetry' as well (Williams 1997:20).

The association of the nightingale with poetry stems, at least partly, from the Philomela myth, which also accounts for the nightingale's feminine gender in many representations. In this myth, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, who also cuts out her tongue to silence her. However, she weaves a tapestry that tells the story of the rape and sends it to her sister Procne, with whom she then takes revenge on Tereus by serving him his own son Itys in a stew for dinner. After this the gods turn all the protagonists into birds. Although there are several versions of the story, Philomela is usually changed into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow, Tereus into a hoopoe and Itys into a goldfinch. Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes and Ovid all make use of this myth; as do many later poets, including in English, Philip Sidney, John Milton, Mark Akenside, Mary Robinson, Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Crowe Ransom and T S Eliot. Since Philomel has

been violated, deprived of the power of ordinary speech but given the magical gift of song instead, this is a very seductive image of the suffering artist, transforming pain into beauty.

The two Victorian poets probably portray the nightingale's song most tragically. Arnold favours a less common version of the myth, in which Philomela, the nightingale, is actually the metamorphosis of the other, married sister in the story. Witnessing her 'dumb sister's pain' has provided her with a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome that bequeaths her so much 'passion' and 'pain' that she is inconsolable even by such British solaces as 'the sweet tranquil Thames' and 'this English grass':

Hark! ah, the Nightingale!  
The tawny-throated!  
Hark! From that moonlit cedar what a burst!  
What triumph! hark! what pain!

O wanderer from a Grecian shore,  
Still, after many years, in distant lands,  
Still nourishing in thy bewildered brain  
That wild, unquenched, deep-sunken, old-world pain,  
Say, will it never heal?  
And can this fragrant lawn  
With its cool trees, and night,  
And the sweet, tranquil Thames,  
And moonshine, and the dew,  
To thy racked heart and brain  
Afford no balm?

Dost thou tonight behold,  
Here, through the moonlight on this English grass,  
The unfriendly palace in the Thracian wild?  
Dost thou again peruse  
With hot cheeks and seared eyes  
The too clear web, and thy dumb sister's shame?  
Dost thou once more assay  
Thy flight, and feel come over thee,

Poor fugitive, the feathery change  
Once more, and once more seem to make resound  
With love and hate, triumph and agony,  
Lone Daulis, and the high Cephissian vale?  
Listen, Eugenia,—  
How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!  
Again—thou hearest?  
Eternal passion!  
Eternal pain! (Arnold 1897:204-205).

The speaker and his Eugenia seem unable to resist the compulsions of Philomela's passionate pain, the expressions of a tortured, 'rack'd heart and brain'. The poem is itself compelling and evokes with great compression the paradoxical attractiveness of tragic art. It also suggests both the rhythms of nightingale song and the excitement of the listener's reception, in the wonderful line: 'How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!' But, to me at least, it does not call to mind the actual sound of the nightingale at all. If Arnold's speaker had been paying real attention to the bird's song, surely he might have been able to hear, as Clare did, its admonition to 'Cheer-up, cheer-up, cheer-up'!

Swinburne, allowing Philomela herself to speak in his 'Itylus', uses the commoner version of the myth:

O swallow, sister, O fair sweet swallow,  
Why wilt thou fly after spring to the south,  
The soft south whither thine heart is set?  
Shall not the grief of the old time follow?  
Shall not the song thereof cleave to thy mouth?  
Hast thou forgotten ere I forget?

O swallow, sister, O fleet sweet swallow,  
Thy way is long to the sun and the south;  
But I, fulfill'd of my heart's desire,  
Shedding my song upon height, upon hollow,  
From tawny body and sweet small mouth  
Feed the heart of the night with fire.

.....

O swallow, sister, O rapid swallow,  
I pray thee sing not a little space.  
Are not the roofs and the lintels wet?  
The woven web that was plain to follow,  
The small slain body, the flower-like face,  
Can I remember if thou forget?

O sister, sister, thy first-begotten!  
The hands that cling and the feet that follow,  
The voice of the child's blood crying yet,  
Who hath remember'd me? who hath forgotten?  
Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow,  
But the world shall end when I forget (Swinburne 1940:27-29).

There is something bird-like in the repetitions of this poem—repetitions that come with multiple variations, weaving an artefact of binding, hypnotic beauty. But, if the nightingale's astonishing voice does 'feed the heart of the night with fire', surely this 'fire' is animated by 'heart's desire', not perversely and violently 'fulfill'd' of it? The speaker contrasts the swallow's amnesiac spring songs with Philomel's unforgettable memories of love and horror. As in Arnold, these suggest the 'terrible beauty' (Yeats 1933:203) of tragedy, here opposed to more superficial and ephemeral art forms. But the poem, purportedly a representation of nightingale's song, is itself a lament, and when I return to the recordings and listen even with the most tragic thoughts I can muster, I cannot hear anything like it—though I do catch echoes of the spring song, of the 'fleet sweet' bird who cares not that the 'way to the sun and the south' is long, for her memory is short...

Another archetype is the Persian legend of the female nightingale in love with the rose, singing with her breast against a thorn to relieve love's pain. Perhaps because of the Western obsession with courtly love, this image, in which unrequited love is picturesquely stylized, has long been an emblem of the poetic vocation. In his 'Philomela', Philip Sidney binds it together with the Philomel myth and even so complains that his own love causes him more pain than the nightingale's:

The nightingale, as soon as April bringeth  
Unto her rested sense a perfect waking,  
While late-bare Earth, proud of new clothing, springeth,  
Sings out her woes, a thorn her song-book making;  
    And mournfully bewailing,  
    Her throat in tunes expresseth  
    What grief her breast oppreseth,  
For Tereus' force on her chaste will prevailing.  
O Philomela fair, O take some gladness  
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness:  
    Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;  
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.

Alas, she hath no other cause of anguish  
But Tereus' love, on her by strong hand wroken;  
Wherein she suffering all her spirits' languish,  
Full womanlike complains her will was broken.  
    But I who, daily craving,  
    Cannot have to content me,  
    Have more cause to lament me,  
Since wanting is more woe than too much having.  
O Philomela fair, O take some gladness  
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness:  
    Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;  
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth (Sidney 1965:208).

This somewhat sexist argument—that rape, being an excess of love, is not as bad as deprivation of love, ‘Since wanting is more woe than too much having’—omits not only any real consideration of the nature of rape but also any reference to the cutting out of Philomela’s tongue. But, of course, we are not supposed take these aspects of the poem seriously; the lover is making witty use of hyperbole to argue a point. The excess is evident not only in the speaker’s extreme claims but also in his mixture of metaphor and of the two myths: Philomela is using the thorn in her breast as a ‘song-book’. Here the raped and mutilated heroine of one story is transposed into the unnamed protagonist of the other, the suffering of the two compounded together and

changed into something more like the poet's by a metaphoric transformation of the thorn into a 'song-book'. As Sidney reiterates throughout his work, the painful and unrequited nature of his love is the source of both material and motivation for his poetry; it acts as his 'song-book'. But perhaps Sidney is not quite as far away from the real sounds of birdsong as the artificiality of his *oeuvre* would suggest. His Philomela may be pictured as rather enjoying her supposedly mournful singing, since she has made sure that she is well 'rested' before starting, and her surroundings, particularly the self-satisfied and well-dressed 'earth', seem very pleasant. Perhaps the reader is intended to see the nightingale as accepting the speaker's advice and 'tak[ing] some gladness'.

The nightingale and thorn legend, which shapes Oscar Wilde's poignant little fairy tale, 'The Nightingale and the Rose', was also used by the eighteenth-century poets, Anne Finch and Mary Robinson. In 'To the Nightingale', Finch employs the image analogically, a parallel to the poet's striking up of an attitude:

And still th' unhappy Poet's Breast  
Like thine, when best he sings, is plac'd against a Thorn (Finch  
1979:154).

Finch's poem is not itself a very 'unhappy' one; rather, it dramatises a gentle and amusing lesson for poets. Addressing the nightingale as well as her own Muse, the speaker discovers that, in all moods, the nightingale's song 'far ... outflies' her own; she accuses the nightingale of neglecting its 'Bus'ness'; and she ends with the rueful self-admission that 'we Poets that have Speech' tend to '[c]riticize' and 'censure' those with talents 'transcendent to our own'. The comment about the nightingale—and the inferior, human poet—being essentially 'unhappy' and singing/writing best under the influence of pain is simply thrown out, as if it were an accepted commonplace needing no elaboration.

As might be expected in the later eighteenth century, Robinson's 'Ode: To the Nightingale' is a much more emotional poem, but its speaker appears to accept the same commonplace. The nightingale is addressed as 'Sweet Bird of Sorrow' and its song described as a 'plaintive Song of Care' whose 'heart-piercing' effectiveness is a direct consequence of loss. The

speaker speculates that, as in her own case, the nightingale's 'wayward fate / Hath robbed [it] of [its] bosom's mate'. This posture of sorrow, shared by both bird singer and human poet, is a potent sign of their sensibility. The speaker claims to have tried 'in vain' to take part in the superficialities of human pleasure<sup>3</sup>:

Vain was the Hope—in vain I sought  
The placid hour of careless thought,  
Where Fashion winged her light career,  
And sportive Pleasure danced along,  
Oft have I shunned the blithsome throng,  
To hide the involuntary tear,  
For e'en where rapturous transports glow,  
From the full Heart the conscious tear will flow (Robinson 1995:114).

Her 'full heart' and heightened, melancholic consciousness do not allow her to blend in with the 'blithsome throng'. Instead she seeks the company of the nightingale, whose sorrow is intricately connected with the beauty of its song. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes increasingly self-absorbed and, as she sets herself more and more at centre stage, she abrogates even the nightingale's claim to the thorn in the breast:

Then come, Sweet Bird, and with thy strain,  
Steal from my breast the thorn of pain (Robinson 1995:115).

So much unhappier is the speaker that the nightingale's sad song is actually presumed to have the power to cheer her up. But its power is in the end found insufficient: 'not e'en [the nightingale's] melting Strains / Can calm the heart, where Tyrant Sorrow reigns'. Whereas Finch, who places a thorn in the breast of both poet and nightingale, explicitly judges the nightingale's song to be superior, Robinson takes the thorn for herself and implies that her own poetry is superior to nightingale's song because it is more inconsolably

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<sup>3</sup> Having been a celebrated Shakespearean actress, a mistress of the Prince Regent and the subject of a famous painting by Thomas Gainsborough, Robinson herself had certainly tasted the life of fashionable pleasure.

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sorrowful. In neither of these poems is there much direct observation of actual birdsong, though Robinson's does use the night setting and 'dark woods' of traditional nightingale singing to enhance her poem's Romantic melancholy.

Other poets, such as William Drummond of Hawthornden, Charlotte Smith and Robert Southey, represent the nightingale as female and sorrowful without directly evoking either the Philomela or the thorn myths. Drummond, writing in the earlier seventeenth century, questions the nightingale as to why she sends forth 'Such sad lamenting strains', since 'winter [is] gone' and the world is happy. The couplet of his sonnet offers ample reply:

The bird, as if my questions did her move,  
With trembling wings sobb'd forth, I love, I love! (Drummond  
nd:59).

Smith, who represents nightingales differently in different poems, in her sonnet 'To a Nightingale' (1993:14) addresses the bird as 'songstress sad', an epithet almost exactly imitated in Southey's sonnet, 'Sad songstress' (cited by McKusick 2007:38). In both of these late-eighteenth-century lyrics, which really belong to the age of sensibility rather than to the Romantic period, the speaker seems to integrate the nightingale's melancholy with the beauty of its song. It is as if the collocation of sadness, tenderness, sweetness, pensiveness, evening/night, 'woodland wild' and 'dark tower' is naturally entailed by the idea of beauty; a joyful sound would break the seamless sequence (Doggett 1974:554).

In his 'Nightingales', the late-Victorian Robert Bridges does not specify the birds' gender as such, but alludes to a 'dark nocturnal secret' that they 'pour' into 'the raptured ear of men':

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,  
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom  
Ye learn your song:  
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,  
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air  
Bloom the year long!

Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams:  
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,  
    A throe of the heart,  
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,  
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,  
    For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men  
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,  
    As night is withdrawn  
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,  
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day  
    Welcome the dawn (Bridges *et al* 1955:55).

The nightingales' 'secret' could be either the Philomel story of rape, mutilation, murder and cannibalism or the thorn in the heart of the Persian nightingale. Either way, the song is an expression of a painful, perverse eroticism. Under its enchantment, the man who opens the dialogue in the first stanza yearns for a magical other place, where the mountains are '[b]eautiful' and the flowers unfading. This longing presumably causes him to neglect the beauty of what is real and transient in his own world: the 'sweet-springing woods and bursting boughs of May', serenaded innocently by the joyful—and nightingale-free—'choir of day'. And, in fact, the romantic world suggested by these nightingales is 'barren' and (perhaps sexually) 'spent'; its attractiveness lies solely in the compulsion of the 'forbidden'; it is invested with darkness because what it hides is the horror of the repressed.

James C McKusick (2007:35-36), echoing Williams's discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Bianca Among the Nightingales' (Williams 1997:9-10, 169-225), claims that the female nightingale is a female 'archetype', related to evil seductresses such as the Sirens, the *Lorelei*, Spenser's Duessa, Coleridge's Geraldine and Keats's Lamia. This theory may not seem widely applicable, since the female nightingale is usually portrayed as a victim, but in Bridges's poem, which neither Williams nor McKusick discusses, it resonates intriguingly. Bridges's nightingales, themselves 'haunt[ed]' by desire, use their nocturnal singing to contaminate men with the same obsessive unhappiness.

Writing somewhat earlier in the nineteenth century, Barrett Browning was, as Williams demonstrates, deeply concerned with nightingales and what they signified in the (masculine) poetic tradition. At times her nightingale is clearly female: in 'The Lost Bower' 'she leans on thorny tree', according to the Persian legend (Barrett Browning 1974:152). In her most important nightingale poem, 'Bianca Among the Nightingales', the birds are of indeterminate gender; but they are certainly implicated in women's suffering, for they represent to the female speaker both her own erotic desire and the madness that desire brings about in her:

We paled with love, we shook with love,  
We kissed so close we could not vow;  
Till Giulio whispered, 'Sweet, above  
God's Ever guarantees this Now.'  
And through his words the nightingales  
Drove straight and full their long clear call,  
Like arrows through heroic mails,  
And love was awful in it all.  
The nightingales, the nightingales!

.....

Giulio, my Giulio! —sing they so,  
And you be silent? Do I speak,  
And you not hear? An arm you throw  
Round some one, and I feel so weak?  
—Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,  
They sing for hate, they sing for doom,  
They'll sing through death who sing through night,  
They'll sing and stun me in the tomb—  
The nightingales, the nightingales! (Barrett Browning 1974:428-430).

When her lover Giulio betrays her, Bianca blames the nightingales who serenaded and encouraged her moment of supreme love. The fatal enchantment of nightingale song here ensnares a woman, not a man as in Bridges's lyric, and the snare is laid not in a perversion of desire but in

female desire itself, which, in an oppressive age, is often allowed no expression at all.

## (2) *The Joyful (Usually Male) Nightingale*

As mentioned, this 'sad female' nightingale was never the only way of characterising the bird in poetry. Sappho, as far back as the seventh century BC, writes of 'the messenger of spring, the sweet voiced nightingale' (<http://sacred-texts.com/cla/sappho/sappho1.htm>). Many Mediaeval references also connect the nightingale appreciatively with spring, happy desire and a specifically masculine exuberance. In one version of the 'Holly and Ivy' carol, which is in fact a *querelle* or quarrel between male and female<sup>4</sup>, the masculine holly's superiority is asserted because:

Holy hath birdes,  
A full faire flock:  
The nightingale, the poppinguy,  
The gayntil laverok (Davies 1963:176).

Ivy can boast only the ill-omened owl, which is starkly contrasted to this merry 'flok'. In a more personal vein, the Provençal poet, Bernart de Ventadorn, claims: 'The nightingale rejoices beside the blossom on the branch, and I have such great envy of him that I cannot but keep from singing' (quoted in Dogget 1974:548).

Almost throughout the Early and Late Modern periods, an assortment of poems represents the nightingale's song as happy. Even Milton, who identifies the 'most melancholy' nightingale with Philomela in 'Il Penseroso' (1969:93), apostrophizes a very cheerful bird, '[p]ortend[ing] success in love', in his 'Sonnet I' (1969:78). Similarly ambivalent is Charlotte Smith, who matches her 'songstress sad' sonnet, written in 1784, with Sonnet LV, 'The Return of the Nightingale: Written in 1791', in which

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<sup>4</sup> In other Mediaeval *querelles*, such as 'The Owl and the Nightingale' and 'The Thrush and the Nightingale', the nightingale represents womanhood, and consistently wins her debate with the male bird; in these poems the female nightingale is not sorrowful and has no mythical ancestry.

she associates the nightingale with ‘Hope’ and describes its song as ‘the soft voice of young and timid Love’ (Smith 1993:49-50).

In the high Romantic period, the nightingale is almost always happy. John Clare, that painstaking chronicler of the natural world, not only transcribes the actual syllables of the bird’s song as quoted earlier, but asserts that his own (nonsense) ‘words’ are inadequate to communicate the ‘spell’ cast by the ‘witching notes’; and he emphasizes the joyful nature of the song, imagining:

That musics self had left the sky  
To cheer [him] with its majic strain (Clare 1998:3.500-501).

To a Romantic poet, ‘musics self’—and of course, poetry’s self—would be essentially natural forces, exemplified not only in elemental sounds such as the ‘tumult of [the wind’s] mighty harmonies’ (Shelley 1943:579; see Abrams 1960:38), but also in the song of a bird, be it nightingale, skylark or cuckoo. Bird poems proliferate at this time, for a bird is a beautiful, aerial, non-human but sentient being, lacking that fatal human self-consciousness (Hartman 1970:47-48) and hence remaining responsive to Nature’s great shaping power, the ‘intellectual Breeze’ (Coleridge 1963:53), or the ‘motion and ... spirit’ that ‘impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things’ (Wordsworth 1971:164).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Conversation Poem’, ‘The Nightingale’, explicitly associates nightingales’ song with this ‘correspondent breeze’ (Abrams 1960:49); for when the moon suddenly emerges from clouds, he conceives its power sweeping as a ‘gale’ though the birds, whose singing harmonizes with the ‘awaken[ing] earth’:

the moon  
Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky  
With one sensation, and these wakeful birds  
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,  
As if some sudden gale had swept at once  
A hundred airy harps! (Coleridge 1963:162)

Coleridge is quite didactic about the nightingale’s ‘joyance’ in this poem. He explicitly contradicts Milton in ‘Il Penseroso’:

'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!  
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!  
In Nature there is nothing melancholy (Coleridge 1963:160).

Like Clare, Coleridge has obviously paid close attention to the song of real birds (Hirsch 2007), for he describes it in detail:

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 (Coleridge  
1963:161).

The Modernist D.H. Lawrence follows very closely in Coleridge's Romantic footsteps in his essay 'The Nightingale' for, where Coleridge pooh-poohs the idea of the 'melancholy bird' and suggests that some depressed poet was listening to 'his own sorrow' when he made up the tale of 'Philomela's pity-pleading sounds', Lawrence writes:

They say, with that "Jug! jug! jug!," that she is sobbing. How they hear it is a mystery. How anyone who didn't have his ears on upside down ever heard the nightingale's 'sobbing', I don't know.

Anyhow it's a male sound, a most intensely and undilutedly male sound. A pure assertion.... Nothing in the world so unforlorn (1936:40).

Lawrence of course cannot resist appropriating joyful exuberance as exclusively male, but his transcription into human words of the song has a certain amusing if anthropomorphic plausibility to it:

Hello! Hello! Behold! Behold! It is I! It is I! What a mar-mar-marvellous occurrence! What! (1936:41)

The main butt of Lawrence's essay is another Romantic poet, John Keats, whose 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1959:207-209) is probably the most famous of all nightingale poems. Lawrence completely misreads Keats,

whose nightingale, though female, is no sorrowful Philomela but a ‘Dryad’ so supremely ‘happy in [her] happiness’ that the poem’s speaker is pained by the discrepancy between it and the ‘weariness, the fever and the fret’ of human life. According to Karl Kroeber (1994:76), precisely by ‘not attributing his sorrow to the bird’ the speaker manages to show the ‘tragic implications in human self-consciousness’. His intense desire is to escape his world’s sorrows—or his consciousness of them—and fly to her:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.

The nightingale’s extravagantly beautiful song turns the human world by contrast into a spectral nightmare of agonies. This contrast is imitated in Thomas Hardy’s *fin de siècle* bird poem, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, except that Hardy’s speaker is simply mystified by the bird’s outpouring of joy in his bleakly depressing world, whereas Keats’s is transported with longing. And, *pace* Lawrence, Poesy’s ‘wings’ apparently answer to the speaker’s wish, for a few lines later he declares himself ‘Already with thee!’ and, forgetful of the tragic mundane world, he becomes increasingly absorbed into the beauty of the night and the song. Finally, his captivation in the moment of the song’s ecstasy tempts him to die:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

This wished-for death would not—at least for the speaker—be sad, for it would annihilate his consciousness at the moment of supreme happiness. However, the thought of death itself awakes the distracting quality of human meta-consciousness, which nudges him into an awareness of the discrepancy between death and the nightingale's life-affirming song: 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!'. This realization sets off a chain of thoughts that finally brings the chime of the word 'forlorn', which 'tolls' the speaker back to his 'sole self' and the forlorn condition of being human. Though later (Victorian) poets, shifting their relation to nature toward a more subjective understanding and a stronger application of the 'pathetic fallacy', may have read Keats's ode as presenting a sad nightingale, it is in fact the speaker and humanity who are sad in this poem.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Gender, Melancholia, Poetry and Nightingale Song**

All this leads me to the crucial question: Why should the idea of the sad female nightingale become so widespread and popular—going, it seems, against the grain of the senses and the natural sciences? The answer of course lies in the fact that the bird's song itself has become—from early on—so heavily overlaid by cultural meanings that only the rare writer can apprehend the actual phenomenon of its sound—and this writer is sure to exist in a cultural moment that is uneasy about the status of traditional icons, so that these images have become 'more naked' as it were, and easier to 'see' or 'hear'. The Romantics lived through one of these moments, as did of



course the Modernists, though not so many of the latter were interested in natural history for its own sake.

The nightingale signifies poetry and erotic love, both of which may be portrayed as exuberantly joyful in an uncomplicated age; but both possess a depressing aspect, which may tend to fall uppermost in a period that visualizes itself as belated or decadent. The story of Philomela is very compelling; it is the ‘most suggestive’ of all the Greek transformation myths, according to Jeni Williams (1997:19). However early it was actually composed, it is ‘belated’ in that it already portrays the bird’s beautiful and intricate song as the result of trauma and as a magical metamorphosis of ordinary speech into art. Geoffrey Hartman picks up on this myth in writing about the state of poetic history after Milton, which he calls a ‘*philomel moment*’, ‘when the theme of loss merges with the theme of voice’, because at this point in history it is *loss*—of Paradise, of eyesight—that creates poetic inspiration (Hartman 2004:63). And Jonathan Goldberg, focussing on the Renaissance, sees melancholy at the heart of the writing process in every age. Using the Freudian explanation of melancholy as the result of the young child’s loss of the mother’s breast and resultant substitution of the narcissistic self, he claims: ‘The constitution of the *I* and the object in loss provides the scene of writing, the generation of the text’ (1986:47).

If poetry be founded on loss, then one meaning of the nightingale’s song—poetry or the poem—is likely to carry the affect of melancholy. This is even more likely if the subject-matter of the poetry should be—as it often is—loss, too. The compelling theme of courtly love, which outlives its late-Mediaeval invention, places deprivation of the beloved at the heart of love. Erotic love, as so many of its narratives outside the popular romance affirm, is a melancholy pursuit. The figure with the lute in the darkened garden, whose close double and companion is the nightingale, does not draw himself towards a happy ending.

But why, we ask, should this poetic love-melancholy become associated with a *female* nightingale, when the typical poet as well as the heart-broken protagonist of the courtly narrative is male? First of all, we should consider that the nightingale, to some poets, comes to occupy the role of a muse (Doggett 1974:550; Segal 1993:18; McKusick 2007:37). This role, very closely identified with the production of poetry, usually by a male poet, is traditionally a female one. According to Catherine Maxwell, even Milton,

who in *Paradise Lost* uses Urania and the Holy Spirit as muses, actually, in his blindness, more closely identifies his art with the nightingale, 'the wakeful bird' who in Book III '[s]ings darkling' and who, in 'Il Penseroso', to Coleridge's disgust, is described as 'most melancholy' (Milton 1969:257, 93). This, Maxwell claims, is because Milton identifies his blindness with a symbolic castration, a parallel to the mutilation suffered by Philomela. This loss of sight and of male gender is a 'necessary loss for the true compensatory vision that inspires song' (Maxwell 2008:24). The Philomela figure is thus an appropriate muse for the suffering poet.

More generally, love-melancholy may always have been associated more with women than with men. Jennifer Radden, in her history of melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva (2000:40), shows that there was a general consensus about the female nature of insanity, including depression and/or melancholy, from the middle of the nineteenth century. The Victorian period was, of course, an age of great melancholy, despite public denouncements of the sentiment (Riede 2005:2). It is perhaps not surprising that Victorian nightingales are invariably grief-stricken and nearly always female.

But the correlation between women and melancholy goes back further than the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter (1985:80-81), writing of Ophelia, identifies a Renaissance belief in a type of female melancholy that was deterministically biological, brought on, like hysteria, by women's physical make-up. This emotional, love-triggered state was very different from the fashionable melancholia affected at this time by men, which was essentially intellectual in origin (Radden 2000:81; Schiesari 1992:265). Whereas men had to think themselves into a melancholy state, to women in a patriarchal environment it perhaps came naturally. Certainly Dürer always depicts the figure of Melancholy as a woman.

This series of associations, circling around the seductive and troubling myth of Philomela, tinged with the sexist beliefs of various ages, leaning eastward toward the nightingale-and-thorn image and strengthened by every important writer contributing toward the sequence, has become over the ages an enclosing aura through which many poets have been unable to perceive any real nightingale or song. Of course not all poets possess the desire to 'draw from the life' anyway, the more classically-inclined being more interested in the myth than the bird in the first place. But the 'sad

female nightingale' perception does remain an incongruity in a culture in which nightingales' actual, awe-inspiring song has been audible in spring and summer in almost every woodland and open space for all the ages in which Europe and Asia have been inhabited by humans. It is a perception that testifies to the power of the imagination over the senses. Our present age is in the process of turning our senses as well as our intellect towards those aspects of the material world which we are in imminent danger of losing: the very many species that we humans have placed in jeopardy by our profligate use of the planet's resources. Although ours may be a period that allows us to hear the nightingale's actual song, we should perhaps strive not to lose too much of the mythology that made this song so poignant to the best poets of the past.

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