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“DARKLING I LISTEN”: MELANCHOLIA, SELF AND CREATIVITY IN ROMANTIC NIGHTINGALE POEMS

Abstract

The present article is an attempt to look at selected Romantic poems which concentrate on the image of the nightingale. Starting from Charlotte Smith's sonnets and continuing with poems by other writers of the period, I will try to trace the link between nature and poetic convention in English Romanticism. While some of the nightingales which sing in Romantic poetry seem deeply symbolic, other forsake poetic tradition and stubbornly persist in their birdy nature, resisting descriptions in terms of melancholia or woe. Nevertheless, the fate of Philomela, whose sad story of violation identifies the nightingale with loss, suffering and poetic creation, still remains an important context for Romantic nightingale poems.

Since the famous myth of Philomela, retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, the image of the nightingale has been deployed by writers to signify loss, pain and longing. At the same time, the nightingale's music in poetry has been characteristically linked to love, and consequently romanticized. This paper proposes to look at the image of the nightingale in early 19th century poetry, from Charlotte Smith's sonnets, through John Clare's and S.T. Coleridge's conversational poems, to Keats's ode, in order to see how this literary motif functions in English Romanticism. The Romantic nightingale, apart from symbolizing poetic creativity and inspiration which usually result from melancholy and suffering, has one more distinctive feature: it also remains a bird from a woodland, with its tiny body and tawny feathers, perching on green boughs and migrating south when the summer is over – in short, apart from a literary symbol, it also retains its natural characteristics. This observation allows for ecocritical readings of Romantic nightingale poems,

where the relationships between poetry, poets and the physical environment come to the fore.

The story of Philomela, which usually overtly or covertly underwrites poetic encounters with the nightingale, is a well-known mythological narrative of abuse, suffering and poetic song. In Book VI of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid relates a shocking fate of two sisters, Philomela and Procne, the daughters of the king of Athens. After five years of living apart from her family, Procne requests her husband Tereus to fetch her beloved sister, Philomela, from Athens. Tereus becomes obsessed with Philomela's beauty and on the way home first he rapes her and then, in order to prevent her from telling her fate, cuts her tongue out. Philomela, however, tells her story by the way of art: she weaves a tapestry which testifies to her traumatic experience. Procne's revenge is shocking: she takes Itys, the son she bore to Tereus, to a shelter near the Thracian sea, where both sisters murder him and dissemble his body into pieces. Procne serves her murdered son to Tereus for dinner, and soon afterwards the sisters present Tereus with the mutilated head of Itys. Tereus pursues Procne and Philomela, who flee from Thrace. On the way, gods intervene and save them by changing them into birds – and thus, in Roman tradition, Philomela becomes a nightingale, while Procne is transformed into a swallow. Hence, the image of the “tongueless nightingale” has been frequently employed by poets, and it has come to signify creative experience arising out of loss, darkness and solitude, where the meaning is to be found beyond words – in the tragic, soaring music of the nightingale. Philomela transformed her tonguelessness into her victory: first, weaving her story into the tapestry she became an archetype of a female artist; secondly, her nightingale music can be interpreted as a recompense for her lost human voice. Therefore, in “Evening Star and Evening Land” Geoffrey Hartman 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). Thus, the association between the poet and the bird became commonplace: the bird renders its tragic past experience in the most moving music, and the poet longs to sustain the fleeting moment of prophetic insight and frequently sings of its irrecoverable, irretrievable loss.

In English literary tradition preceding Romanticism, the most famous poetic statement on the nature of the nightingale was made by John Milton, who in *Il Penseroso* described the music of the nightingale as an expression of melancholy (ll. 61–62). Moreover, in the Invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost* Milton compared himself, the blind poet, to a nightingale who “sings darkling” (ll. 38–39). Romantic poetry seems to first emulate, and then transform this equivocation of the nightingale's song with sadness and loss, and in doing so, Romantic poets resort to another tradition – the Sapphic

one. Sappho, in a poetic fragment, evokes the nightingale's joyful aspect, calling it "the messenger of spring, the sweet voiced nightingale" (McKusick 35). Yet, Sappho's lyrics have always been associated with (unfulfilled) desire. Hence, this resulted in another quality of her verse: the oxymoronic bitter-sweetness of love, known as the notion of *dulce amarum* (Maxwell 32). The province of *dulce amarum* is well recognized in the verse of Charlotte Smith, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* collection features three poems that employ the nightingale motif. The first of the triad, "To a Nightingale," is the most conventional of the group, as the bird becomes traditionally associated with melancholy, suffering and darkness. In these terms Smith evokes famous lines from *Il Penseroso*, where Milton explicitly defines the nightingale's song as "most musical, most melancholy" (ll. 61–62). For Smith, the bird's lament is "the tale of tender woe" (l.2), stemming from "sad course" but resulting in "sweet sorrow" (l.3) Smith alludes to the painful story of Philomela, when she suggests that the bird is now "releas'd in woodlands wild to rove" (l.10) but in her past she was a "pale sorrow's victim" (l.9), possibly betrayed and cruelly wronged by someone whom she deemed a friend (l.11). Moreover, there is little doubt as to the fact that the nightingale sings of her own story from the past (l.8). The music of the nightingale in this poem, then, functions both as inspiration to a poet, whose task is to translate the notes of the song into words of a poetic text, and as a recompense for the past loss and pain by a right "to sigh and sing at liberty," a privilege envied by the poetic speaker of the sonnet.

It is in the other two poems by Smith, "On the Departure of the Nightingale" and "On the Return of the Nightingale" that the conventional qualities of literary nightingales fuse with Smith's engagement with the actual natural processes. The poems relate the migration of the nightingale after summer and its return during spring. As some critics point out, Smith's poems echo her contemporary theories as to why the nightingales disappear in winter: "There were two competing hypotheses: do they migrate south, or do they hibernate, either in hollow trees, or perhaps underwater? (McKusick 38). Smith alludes to these theories, when she muses: 'Whether on spring thy wandering flights await/Or whether silent in our groves you dwell' ("On the Departure of the Nightingale," (ll. 4–5). Moreover, despite still very conventional poetic apostrophes ("soft minstrel of the early year" l.2, "sweet poet of the woods" l.1) Smith demonstrates her skills of intent and careful observation of nature: whoever wants to look for a nightingale, "shall glide / Through the lone brake that shades [her] mossy nest" (8–9). It is this emphasis on natural places and natural process, rather than artificial and conventional literary motifs, which predominate in the third poem of the triad. "The Return of the Nightingale" celebrates the awakening of the earth

in spring and the renewal of the natural cycle. The nightingale is now associated with an “instinctive power” that brings this regeneration and with a “soft voice of young and timid Love” (ll. 5–7). The poems also engage the theme of artistic vocation: it is the music of the nightingale that “charm[s] the wondering poet’s pensive way” (l.11), just as the previously discussed sonnet identified the bird as a “sweet poet of the woods” (l.1).

Samuel Tylor Coleridge’s use of the nightingale motif well exemplifies the two competing tendencies, the literary and the natural, in talking about the nightingale in Romantic poetry. The bird features in Coleridge’s verse twice, in “To the Nightingale” (1795, published 1796) and, more famously, in “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem” (1798). While the first of the two texts emulates Miltonic tradition in associating the nightingale with melancholy and sadness, in the second poem Coleridge offers a corrective on the first and also presents himself in a different light: not a poet resorting to the use of fixed poetic diction, but a writer looking at the world with a fresh perception, working to defamiliarise symbols which have been too much burdened by overused mythological and literary associations.

“To the Nightingale” is a courtly love lyric (Fay 216), where the poet invokes the nightingale, pays tribute to the bird’s song and acknowledges its potency, in order to declare his preference for the voice of his beloved Sara. Nevertheless, before the nightingale loses in the competition, its associations are thoroughly established: it is the “Sister of love-lorn Poets, Philomel!” (l.1) singing when “the full-orb’d Queen [...] shines above” (l.8). The bird warbles “sad [its] pity-pleading strains” (l.11), and Coleridge directly quotes from Milton calling it “Most musical, most melancholy’ Bird” (l.17). The use of this last quotation deserves most attention, since it is repeated in the next poem, “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem,” but its meaning changes. What is more, by resorting to repetition Coleridge wants his readers to notice this change and ponder its implications. It is, after all, only three years between the writing of both poems; why then, if the nightingale was a sad, suffering Philomel in the first text, has it transformed into a joyful spirit of nature in the second? And, even more poignantly, why does Coleridge want us to mark this transformation so much that he repeats exactly the same Miltonic phrase, but this time shows it as artificial and overused?

In 1798 poem, Coleridge exposes the convention he himself previously used as ridiculous: “A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!/ In Nature there is nothing melancholy” (ll. 14–15). Further, he eagerly explains the roots of the convention:

But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,

(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit; (ll. 16–23)

In the struggle between nature and culture, nature wins; the poet traces the habit of tracing the theme of neglected, unrequited love in the song of the nightingale to both egotism of the poet who used it for the first time and the lack of originality and reflection on the part of writers who emulate it; in the process, Coleridge indirectly rebukes himself for having done so three years previously. The change may have been related, it seems, to the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which collection, as Wordsworth tells us in “Advertisement,” was to be experimental and original in both form and contents:

The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. [...] Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [...] they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. It is desirable that such readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that, while they are perusing this book, they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favorable to the author’s wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.

Wordsworth insists that our “pre-established codes of decision” stem from convention and should thus be disregarded. Two years later, writing the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, he will similarly argue that the tendency to echo unreflectively certain fixed poetic conceits (in a misguided assumption that they grant the text a poetic quality) should be rejected. Despite the fact that his claims in the “Preface” gave rise to the famous Coleridge-Wordsworth controversy, Coleridge must have converted to the latter conviction, as his 1798 poem evidences. Moreover, he uses “The Nightingale: A Conversational Poem” to radically alter his image as a poet. He states that it is “In ball-rooms and hot theatres,” that young people “still / Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs/O’er Philomela’s pity-pleading strains” (ll.37–39); in contrast, he chooses to look for a nightingale which is the product of nature and not culture, a “merry bird” which sings “delicious notes” (ll. 43,45). Coleridge presents himself to the reader as a poet writing in a “green language,” recording consciousness of “the influxes/Of shapes and sounds

and shifting elements” (ll. 27–28) together with an awareness how important the changes of weather are for vegetation: “Yet let us think upon the vernal showers/ That gladden the green earth, and we shall find / A pleasure in the dimness of the stars” (ll. 9–11). The nightingale as a symbol has been thoroughly defamiliarised.

If Charlotte Smith and Coleridge hovered on the brink of the literary and the actual, the truly Romantic preoccupation with nature is demonstrated by another poet of the period, who, because of his preoccupation with the common, low themes, earned the label of a “peasant poet”: John Clare. In his representations of nature which are at once truthful and poetic, Clare is unprecedented. “The Nightingale’s Nest” is totally devoid of poetic conventions: the nightingale is what it is – a bird in green woodland. If one wants to find the bird’s nest, one needs to come “[c]reeping on hands and knees through matted thorn” (l.13) struggling with bushes and entangling foliage. The description of the bird is similarly de-romanticized: “and her renown / Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird / Should have no better dress than russet brown” (ll. 19–21). The description of the singing bird, which follows, also emphasizes intent observation and sensitive, if almost scientific scrutiny:

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. (ll. 22–25)

The outstanding quality of Clare’s poetry lays in his extraordinary skill to observe the world as objectively and closely as a man of science, who is yet endowed with truly Romantic sensitivity. Thus, he takes the readers on a botanic and ornithological journey of discovery, as when he describes the nightingale’s nest:

How curious is the nest; no other bird
Uses such loose materials, or weaves
Its dwelling in such spots: dead oaken leaves
Are placed without, and velvet moss within,
And little scraps of grass, and, scant and spare,
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair; (ll. 76–81)

Yet, at the same time Clare also speaks as a true nature lover: in his poem we hear both the fascination with the natural places, plants and birds and a deep respect for them. As Jonathan Bate notes, “‘The Nightingale’s Nest’ begins from the sense of intimacy not only with the bird, the nest and its environment, but also with the reader” (368). Furthermore, the poem gives us a “sense of stumbling upon a secret, gaining access to something magical

and precious, but also fragile and vulnerable” (Bate 379). It is with the voice of an ecologically-minded poet and an insightful, considerate person, not a dispassionate scientist that Clare urges the reader to

put that bramble by –
Nay, trample on its branches and get near.
How subtle is the bird! she started out,
And raised a plaintive note of danger nigh,
Ere we were past the brambles; and now, near
Her nest, she sudden stops – as choking fear,
That might betray her home. (ll. 55–61)

Unlike in Smith’s sonnets, Clare’s image of the nightingale is not invested with sorrow, melancholy or woe; neither does the bird personify love or hope – in short, it does not function as a literary artifact any more. Similarly, the poet does not project his own emotions onto the nightingale – what is more, personal feelings of the speaker do not encroach on the theme of the poem. Instead, his poem records a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of the commonplace. If it is Keats who speaks of a “camelion poet,” a poetical character who, unlike the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” does not observe the world through the prism of his own mental states, it is Clare who in the “The Nightingale’s Nest” perfectly demonstrates this concept.

Despite the ecologically-oriented strand in Romantic poetry, the tendency which made the creative poet identify with the singing nightingale strongly prevailed in the poetry of the period. “A poet is a nightingale,” Shelley says in “A Defense of Poetry,” “who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (1031). This famous identification of the poet with the nightingale and poetry with the bird’s song underwrites “Ode to the Nightingale,” unquestionably the most famous of the nightingale poems. Keats’s nightingale is both a muse and an artist. Decidedly female, it is invoked as the “light-winged Dryad of the trees,” while the speaker listens to its rapturous song in “embalmed darkness.” “Darkling I listen” confesses Keats, echoing Milton’s opening of the third book of *Paradise Lost*, where the poet’s fate is compared to that of the nightingale which “sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid” (196.39). Keats’s poetic nightingale, however, has lost most of its natural qualities described by Smith, Clare and Coleridge. Instead, it becomes a poetic artifact. Keats, although he uses a real song of a real nightingale as a springboard for his poem (as the sources tell us), in the course of his poetic meditation transforms the bird from a natural creature into a symbol of poetic vocation and permanence, located in the unseen,

unreachable world of ideals which a mortal man can only glimpse for a moment, but whose sustaining is impossible. It inhabits a shady, green recess which is not touched by time, nor pain or death. The nightingale is the mythical Dryad, a wood nymph, and its song metamorphoses from the happy warbling the poet hears as he starts writing to a triumphant anthem, primarily defying mutability and change:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn; (ll. 61–67)

The song of the bird makes Keats approach this supreme moment in the life of any creative artist, the state of heightened consciousness that borders on spiritual pain (“My heart aches,” says Keats in line 1), which is a precondition for writing. The Sapphic tradition visibly surfaces in the Ode. Delight and happiness in the bird’s song result in sorrow and pain when the speaker realizes his own predicament. Thus, when Keats proclaims that he will fly to the nightingale on the wings of poesy, he longs for the imaginative union with the bird, getting immersed in its song not from a safe distance, but experiencing it as his own. Hence, as Harold Bloom observes, this encounter allows Keats to detach, even for a moment, from “the world of mutability, where every increase in consciousness is an increase in sorrow” and to inhabit the realm of the bird, “the world he has at once entered and created” (Bloom 408–409). What such process entails is the symbolic identification of the poet with the nightingale, his poetry with the bird’s song. To get dissolved in the song of the bird and in the process of artistic composition is to achieve transcendence. Paradoxically, Keats’s poem is pervaded by concepts of death and dying – when he has achieved the union with the bird, more than ever it seems “rich to die,” “to cease upon midnight with no pain” when the nightingale is “pouring away [its] soul in ecstasy” (ll. 55–57). In this context, death means entering a state of permanent, not temporary union with the ideal. As he stays alive, this intimate moment of contact is broken and the poet hurls down to his habitual self: “Forlorn! The very world is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self” (ll. 71–72). The intensity of the imaginative experience results in ontological questioning: the boundaries between the world of reality and the world of imagination become unstable. Keats ends his ode with a pervading question: “Was it a vision or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: do I wake or sleep?” (ll. 79–80).

As I hope to have demonstrated, Romantic poets frequently and eagerly resorted to writing about the nightingales, but their perspectives differed. Some of the poems discussed in the present article encourage readers to adopt an essentially ecological understanding of their relation to the natural world and consequently strive to alter the tradition which, by the force of the Classical and poetic heritage, divorced the nightingale from its natural surroundings. Poets like John Clare easily forsake the literary convention; others, like Coleridge or Smith, try to disentangle the nightingale from the traditional associations by first responding to and then rejecting the Miltonic tradition. In turn, Keats embraces the nightingale as a literary artifact and although he overtly echoes Milton, still he manages to transform the nightingale of his literary forefather into another symbol: not of a blind poet, who sings “darkling,” and whose poetic vision is a recompense for the loss of the sensory one, but of the permanent existence in the ideal world which can be glimpsed through art and poetry, but which cannot be sustained.

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