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Francesca Mackenney, "Stranger Notes": 31-49

Stranger Notes: John Clare and the Northborough Nightingales

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> I have had some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me so long for the very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell … & tho my flitting is not above three miles off – there is neither wood nor heath furzebush molehill or oak tree about it & a Nightingale never reaches so far in her summer excursions – would you believe it but the fact is it is so.
> (Clare, *Letters* 561)

In January 1832, the poet John Clare expressed some trepidation about his forthcoming move or "flitting" from his native Helpston to the fen-edge village of Northborough. The distance was scarcely three miles, though the poet was conscious that the landscape surrounding his new home was nonetheless likely to look, sound and feel very different from Helpston. Clare's letter has been seen to underscore the geographical and ecological differences between these two neighbouring villages of the Lower Welland Valley: the woods and heaths of Helpston contrast markedly with the comparatively flat, bare and treeless fens surrounding Northborough (Barrell 174; White 56). The letter also highlights the deeply personal aspects of Clare's geography or sense of place: the close, intimate acquaintance he had developed over many years with old favourite spots, flora and fauna that seemed to be "bidding me farewell". Feelings of precarity are further evident in his use of the word "flitting", intimately associated with both the movements of birds and the reluctant removal of servants on a new service (Johnson; Baker). But Clare's letter was written before he took his "flitting": it expresses an anticipation as opposed to a confirmation of how these two villages were likely to differ from each other, and the evidence strongly suggests that Clare's initial misgivings proved to be unfounded – particularly regarding the prevalence of nightingales at Northborough.

"I never had greater oppertunitys of observing the Nightingale then I had this summer", reads one of a series of prose fragments Clare penned about a bird that had apparently built its nest in his hedge (*Natural History Prose* 313). In this article, I outline the manuscript evidence affirming critical inklings that this nest was located in the poet's orchard plot at Northborough. Placing the nest offers an insight into how the environment of the fens was changing, particularly following the arrival of steam-power and subsequent draining of an extensive wetland directly neighbouring Clare's new home, Deeping Fen (Glynn 14-15; Mackenney, "'Autumn'" 6-10). It also hints at the unexpected and surprising ways in which nightingales have responded to changes in land use and management over the centuries, as this bird of the woods has variously taken up residence in garden plots in the fens or sung amongst the scrub of derelict Soviet theme parks in Berlin (Rothenberg). Such out-of-place sounds defy expectations and mix the soundscape in disorientating ways, and they led Clare to question all he thought he knew about the nesting and singing habits of nightingales. As the bird appeared to have left the Helpston woods to take up residence alongside him at his new home, the singing of Northborough nightingales led to some of Clare's deepest ruminations on the relationships between sound and memory, and the complex

feelings consequently awakened by the experience of hearing a familiar sound in a new and changing environment. Focusing on some of Clare's most famous renderings of the nightingale's song in his poetry, I argue that the manuscript context sheds light on when, where and how these poems were conceived and composed – alongside and in conversation with each other.

In *Wild Track: Sound, Text and the Idea of Birdsong* (2023), the writer and broadcaster Seán Street reflects on changes to natural soundscapes over the centuries: "some things sounded differently here in the past, some did not. Like travelling through a once familiar city, finding it changed in some respects, but with flashes of familiarity as certain scenes evoke memories, there may still be constants" (viii). Street notes the particular significance of the textual recordings of sound explored in this journal special edition (Castell et al, 5-7), in enabling readers to imagine how places sounded in past centuries, before the advent of recorded sound (Street x). Neither literary texts nor modern technologies offer an unmediated record of natural soundscapes: when we read a poem by Clare, "we are listening to him listening, just as when we hear a recording, we are listening through a microphone, wielded by another" (Street 1). For all its limitations, the imperfect medium of words nonetheless conveys a sense of "not only the sound, but the effect of the sound" on the listening poet (Street 8). Quoting Tom Garner, Street offers further insights into a listener's "affective response" to birdsong: while the familiar notes of a bird may prompt "the recall and imaginative re-experiencing of a happy memory", they may also simultaneously lead to a painful realization of change as well as loss (12). Building on the work of critics who have firmly established Clare's place as "one of the great sound poets", in this article I explore how his poems reflect and ruminate on the experience of listening in and to a world which sounds the same, but not the same (Paulin 37; Weiner 23-49; Gorji, "John Clare and the Language of Listening"). The notes of Northborough nightingales inspired Clare to recall and imaginatively revisit the Helpston woods in and through his poetry but also intensified his awareness of change and feelings of grief. A flash of familiarity in an unfamiliar place, the bird singing in his orchard became for Clare a kind of analogue for how his own poetic voice and style were developing in the Northborough years.

Placing the Nest

In her edition of the *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (1983), Margaret Grainger draws together a series of prose fragments about a nightingale that had built its nest in the poet's orchard and could consequently be heard singing one summer "constantly as it were at my very door" (Clare, *Natural History Prose* 313). Grainger notes the difficulty of dating these fragments to ascertain whether "a Helpston or a Northborough nightingale is singing" (310). To do so, it is first necessary to establish the date of Clare's flitting. Anne Tibble suggests June 1832 (Clare, *Midsummer Cushion* vii), while the poet's biographer, Jonathan Bate, more precisely pinpoints Monday 30th April of that year (363). Bate's dating is more convincing, as it refers to a farewell note from the poet to the vicar of Helpston, the Reverend Charles Mossop, dated Saturday 28th April 1832, which alludes to the family's preparations "for starting to Northbro early on Monday morning" (*Letters* 577). Assuming Monday 30th April 1832 to be the correct date, the poet would have arrived in Northborough in prime time to hear nightingales singing from late April through to June in the spring of 1832.

In a note dated 19th April 1832, the poet tells us he had "heard the Nightingale for the first time this season – in Hilly wood" (*Natural History Prose* 322). The note confirms that Clare certainly heard nightingales before leaving for Northborough,

though, significantly, the Helpston nightingales are typically associated with wooded areas surrounding the poet's native village. The first mention of a bird nesting in the poet's orchard appears in a note dated May 29th (though the year remains tantalisingly uncertain):

> May 29 My Frederick found to day saturday a Nightingales nest in the bottom of the orchard hedge with 4 eggs in it & tho there is but one oak tree as I am told in the Lordship she had got some \oak leaves/ about her nest – in the woods she generally nay always uses dead oak leaves very plentifully at the bottom or outside of her nest & seldom or rarely puts any within side but here she had got dead grass on the out side & a few \old/ oak leaves eaten bare to the fibres by insects within side of her nest & I never in my life as yet saw a nightingales nest without oak leaves & I have found a many & as many as seven one May in Bushy Close & Royce Wood at Helpstone. (Pet. MS A58, 10)

Since 29th May fell on a Saturday in 1830, Grainger deems it "reasonable" to suppose that the nest was found at Helpston two years before the poet took his flitting (Clare, *Natural History Prose* 309). However, as Grainger also points out, the note itself sets up a clear contrast between the nesting habits of nightingales here and there, now and then at "Bushy Close & Royce Wood at Helpstone" (309). The unspecified "Lordship" may refer to the Milton estate, where Clare rented his new cottage and where there appeared to be comparatively few wooded areas. The note suggests an encounter with this bird in a new environment, which leads the poet to question his thinking about nightingales: he is reassured to see the old oak leaves, though their appearance "within side of her nest" offers insights into how the bird's habits may vary depending on local conditions. On the back of a letter addressed to the poet at Northborough, Clare penned a few lines evidently inspired by these fresh observations of the bird in a new setting: "But build she where she may she ever weaves / Some favourite scraps of withered oaken leaves" (Pet. MS A58, 15).

Nesting in his orchard, the bird's proximity evidently enabled Clare to study its singing at close range over the course of what appears to have been a single summer:

> she whistled without effort – never raising the feathers of her throat & neck & head as I had seen her but piping as quietly as the Robin & as if the song almost came involuntary without her knowing it – I watched her frequently & never saw her in that extacy as she seemed to be in when I have watched her in my old woods at Helpstone (Pet. MS A58, 15).

Many naturalists in this period noted differences between the songs of individual nightingales, as well as "variations" between birds inhabiting different regions, which Daines Barrington compared with "provincial dialects" (280). Clare's ear may well have distinguished such slight variations in song, though he specifically refers to how the bird never seemed to raise the "feathers of her throat & neck & head" as he had witnessed "in my old woods at Helpstone". At the same time, the bird's effortless, if rather lacklustre "whistle" seems to echo back the poet's own feelings of homesickness in ways that prefigure the bird of his poem, "The Flitting". While Clare is looking and listening more attentively than ever before, his notes also reflect a deep personal sympathy with lives that seemed as precarious and vulnerable as his own. Another note

dated June 5th attributes the "seeming sadder" singing of the bird to the ominous appearance of a magpie haunting its nest, "yet we hope the young has escaped" (Pet. MS A58, 9).

The author of an 1835 unsigned review provides the clearest evidence that nightingales did indeed make it so far in their summer excursions. Following a visit to the poet at his cottage, the anonymous author recalls that Clare:

> pointed out to us a spot in the hedge of his orchard where a nightingale had built her nest, which some rude hand had removed, and he expressed his sorrow at the spoliation, and his indignation at the offender, in no measured terms. There is in Clare a simplicity of heart and manner which endears him to you with the first knowledge of him: he is subject to melancholy moments; but when he has a friend with him, he can share the "flow of soul," – his manner and his conversation are most enchanting and delightful. We look upon the few hours we spent at his cottage at Northborough as among the happiest of our life. (Storey, *Critical Heritage* 243)

It is possible, though surely unlikely that there were two nests, one at Helpston and one at Northborough. The most plausible scenario is that the bird appeared to be nesting and raising its young in a new environment, just as Clare was himself leaving his old woods behind and settling into a new home with a growing family. While Clare's writings refer to the depredations of a magpie, the review alludes to the another "rude" and presumably human hand that may have removed the nest entirely at a later stage. The reviewer sensitively touches on signs of the poet's "melancholy" and there can be little doubt of the depth of Clare's feeling: his encounters with nightingales at Northborough enkindled his hopes as well as his fears, as he grappled with a worsening illness that would tragically lead to his confinement at an asylum in 1837. In a series of poems about nightingales composed in the early 1830s, Clare at once reflects and consciously ruminates on the relationship between sound and memory, and the role that poetry can play in recording and imaginatively revisiting an experience of listening at a particular time and in a particular place.

Sing on Sweet Bird

"The Nightingales Nest" was first published in a local newspaper, the *Stamford Bee*, on 30th November 1832. It is generally thought to have been written sometime that year, though it remains uncertain whether the poem was composed before, after or during the poet's "flitting" on 30th April. It may have been directly inspired by the nightingales Clare heard at Hilly wood in those first few weeks of April, or it may have been composed or revised as he was settling into his new home. It is a poem profoundly concerned with place, though that concern acquires a deeper resonance when we consider that the poem is either a fond farewell to – or an imaginative revisiting of – the Helpston woods it so lovingly describes:

> Up this green wood land ride lets softly rove
> & list the nightingale – she dwelleth here
> Hush let the wood gate softly clap – for fear
> The noise may drive her from her home of love
> For here Ive heard her many a merry year
> At morn & eve nay all the live long day

> As though she lived on song – this very spot
> Just where that old mans beard all wildly trails
> Rude arbours oer the rode & stops the way
> & where that child its blue bell flowers hath got
> Laughing & creeping through the mossy rails
> There have I hunted like a very boy
> Creeping on hands & knees through matted thorns
> To find her nest & watch her feed her young.
> (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: lines 1-14)

Clare invites us to follow him "on hands & knees" in search of the nightingale's nest, with the vivid sense of immediacy that Bate traces back to poems originally penned for the poet's children (369-70). As Clare similarly "takes his urban readers by the imaginary hand and gives them a field lesson in natural history" (Bate 370), he prompts a boyish love of adventure while reminding the novice or uninitiated reader that a sentient creature is listening back and all too easily disturbed by human "noise". The poem celebrates a particular moment or experience, though Clare slips seamlessly from the present to the past continuous in ways which vitally connect the here and now with a lifetime of listening, "for here Ive heard her many a merry year". There is no sense in this poem of an irrevocable rift between the past and the present, the child and the man: the poet retains his boyish sense of wonder and excitement, even as he gently takes the reader by the hand in ways which mirror the bird's tender care for its young.

"The Nightingales Nest" has been rightly celebrated for its immediacy, but the question of when and where it was composed complicates our understanding of the techniques that Clare may be seen fine-tuning in this poem. Clare fuses together past, present and future: the many "merry" years of study, the pleasure of the here and now, the desire to safeguard "the old wood lands legacy of song" (line 93). He does not mourn the fading of fancy's visions, as he does so frequently elsewhere in his writing. But the poem likely was not written here "in this very spot" in the way that the poet would like us to think:

> & where these crimping fern-leaves ramp among
> The hazels under boughs – Ive nestled down
> & watched her while she sung – & her renown
> Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird
> Should have no better dress then russet brown
> Her wings would tremble in her extacy
> & feathers stand on end as 't'were with joy
> & mouth wide open to release her heart
> Of its out sobbing songs – the happiest part
> Of summers fame she shared – for so to me
> Did happy fancies shapen her employ. (lines 17-27)

The poem has long been celebrated as one of Clare's "most natural" as well as "most literary" works: it draws from the poet's own first-hand experience, though in ways which challenge what various predecessors and contemporaries – notably John Keats – had written about "so famed a bird" (Colclough 60; Haughton; Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* 1-14). The passage also intriguingly recalls Clare's note on the bird nesting in his orchard: "I watched her frequently & never saw her in that extacy as she seemed to be in when I have watched her in my old woods at Helpstone", the bird

seeming never to raise "the feathers of her throat & neck & head" in quite the same way (Pet. MS A58, 15). The poem may predate the note, though the echoes open up the possibility that the scenes so vividly described in "The Nightingales Nest" were lovingly recalled from memory as the poet was settling into his new home. For all its accuracy, the poem shows an awareness of how the poet's own "happy fancies" subtly shape his response to the bird's music. And in this regard, its "out sobbing songs" subtly anticipate the "seeming sadder" music of the Northborough bird.

Clare's poem has been read against the grain of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", though a series of allusions suggests a deeper level of engagement with Keatsian ideas about nature and its relation to the ideal realm of art:

> Sing on sweet bird may no worse hap befall
> Thy visions then the fear that now deceives
> We will not plunder music of its dower
> Nor turn this spot of happiness to thrall
> For melody seems hid in every flower
> That blossoms near thy home – these harebells all
> Seems bowing with the beautiful in song
> & gaping cuckoo with its spotted leaves
> Seems blushing of the spring it has heard. (lines 67-75)

"Sing on sweet bird" may recall Shakespeare, but the phrasing is also reminiscent of Keats's play on the lines from *Twelfth Night* in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on" (lines 11-12). The labouring poet famously shied away from Keats's allusions to the "Grecian Mythol[og]y" which "I cannot follow", though he read and admired the volume in which the ode appeared (*Letters* 519, 80). According to Adam White, "bold variations" on phrases from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are especially pronounced in Clare's own ruminations on joy, beauty and the eternity of a natural world that "shalt survive" (50). Keats's lines muse on the still figures depicted on the side of the urn, their silent pipes and timbrels leaving the melody up to the poet's imagination. There is a conflict in Keats's poem between the "sensual ear" and a more imaginative kind of listening (line 13), a conflict that is also at play and richly re-conceived in Clare's poem. Clare wants us to understand that his nightingale is a living creature as opposed to a silent artifact, still image or poetic trope, though the poet reminds us that sounds rendered in and through poetic language are necessarily to some extent imagined melodies. Whether a fond farewell or recollection, Clare's poem urges the bird of the Helpston woods to "sing on": the lines affirm a touching kind of hope or faith in poetry, that can record, suspend, and, in a sense, safeguard the song – or the poet's experience of listening to it – in written words.

The irregular rhyme scheme in this poem is a mark of Clare's poetic development: critics have increasingly recognized the variety, subtlety and underlying ambition of his metres, rhymes and stanza forms, particularly how they evoke the sounds and rhythms of the world they describe as well as the "complex structures of feeling" they enkindle (Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* 103; Hodgson). Clare experiments with many meters and rhyme schemes, but "The Nightingales Nest" follows a pattern of his own invention. The poem might be read as a kind of long irregular sonnet: Clare slips sometimes into a quatrain, an irregular sestet or the odd rhyming couplet, but the poem follows no strict stanza form and the rhymes never settle on a set pattern – as they do, by way of contrast, in the ten-line stanza that Keats crafted

out of a Shakespearean quatrain and a Petrarchan sestet in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale". Clare's poem might be taken as a formal response to the frustrations that he expressed in his letter in defence of Keats, in which he lambasts "cursd critics" who insist that "a Sonnet cannot be a Sonnet unless it be precisely 14 lines" (*Letters* 82). Clare's poem works in defiance of the critic's "pruning knife", as he terms it (*Letters* 82): the irregular rhymes evoke a sense of organic growth, the differences as well as the connections between natural phenomena in a place where "that old mans beard all wildly trails".

The rhymes also draw together the "counteracting senses" of sight and sound in Clare's evocations of place (Potkay). The names of flowers in this poem have aural connotations and qualities: Clare substitutes the "cuckoo flower" for the "orchis" of an earlier draft (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: 460), a revision which accentuates the connection between the sonic and visual aspects of the world he describes. The delicate, nodding bell-shaped heads of the harebells look like musical instruments, which bow their heads in ways that appear attuned to, in agreement with or in worship of the "beautiful in song". Clare's own playful, visual perceptions of sound may be seen to mirror our own practices as readers, as we cast our eyes over written symbols or signs and imagine how they sound by and through the mind's ear. The irregular rhyme scheme enhances our sense of a "music hid in every flower": these are intricate and irregular patterns of sound, which encourage us to listen out for the rhyme – a rhyme that sometimes follows soon, is sometimes delayed, and sometimes never comes. We may not always find a rhyme where we might expect it but discover half rhymes and alliterative patterns "hid" half or part way through the line. Underpinning this poem is a desire to write in ways that "sing at once to the ear and the eye", as Clare writes in one of the poems for his children: to create a kind of "music so sweet" that it is able to recall and revisit old favourite spots – in time, as well as place – so that "we even seem taking our rambles again" ("The Holiday Walk", *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: lines 299, 301-2).

More ominously, the word "thrall" seems to echo Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", in which the knight awakens on the cold hillside where "no birds sing" (lines 40, 4). John Goodridge notes the difficulties of pinning down Clare's "intertextual relationship" with Keats's poem, a version of which was first printed roughly a decade earlier in Leigh Hunt's *Indicator* in May 1820: while there is no specific mention of the poem in Clare's letters, Goodridge notes various textual allusions which suggest that the poet read and responded to Keats's celebrated work (218). The two poets use the word "thrall" in comparable, though distinct ways. Keats's ballad is famously ambiguous, leaving it uncertain whether the knight is in thrall to La Belle Dame or to his own deceiving muse or visions of her cruelty. The word is also open to interpretation in Clare's poem, though in a different way: it may refer to mishap or the disinterested – and often cruel – workings of nature. Alternatively, it may suggest the bird's or indeed the poet's own fretful imaginings or "visions" of what the future may bring. The word "plunder" hints at a real as well as a psychic threat: the bird-nesting boys who may literally rob the eggs from the nest, but also the "choaking fear" (line 60) that threatens to silence the bird or the crisis of poetic faith that has the power to "turn this spot of happiness to thrall", if the poet yields to it. Different kinds of threat are inextricably bound up in each other (real and imagined, actual and psychic), in ways which either poignantly foreground or actively respond to the spoilation of the nest at Northborough. At the poem's close, Clare hopes against or knowingly defies that fate, with the words "we'll leave them still unknown to wrong" (line 92).

Stranger Notes

Written at a time of great upheaval, "The Nightingales Nest" hints at how the sounds of this bird spurred the poet to retrace his steps through the Helpston woods that he was soon to leave or had already left behind. But the evidence suggests that other famous poems and passages about nightingales were written after the poet's flitting, as he sat listening to the bird singing in his orchard at Northborough. In a now infamous note, the poet tells us "I can sit at my window here & hear the nightingale singing in the orchard & I attempted to take down her notes" (Pet. MS A58, 10):

> Chee chew chee chew chee
> chew – cheer cheer cheer
> chew chew chew chee
> – up cheer up cheer up
> tweet tweet tweet jug jug
> jug (Pet. MS A58, 1)
>
> wew wew wew – chur chur
> woo it woo it tweet tweet
> tweet jug jug jug
>
> tee rew tee rew tee rew – gur
> gur – chew rit chew rit – chur-chur chur
> chur will-will will-will tweet-em
> tweet em jug jug jug jug
>
> grig grig grig chew chew (Pet MS A58, 3)
>
> wevy wit wevy wit
> wevy wit – chee-chit
> chee-chit chee chit
> weewit weewit wee
> wit cheer cheer
> cheer – pelew
> pelew pelew –
> bring a jug bring a
> jug bring a jug. (Pet MS A58, 8)

Clare's transcription has been much discussed (Karlin 79; Weiner 41; Mackenney, *Birdsong* 104-5), though the context in which it was composed alters the mood and significance of his effort to "syllable the sounds" (Pet. MS A58, 10). Grainger stitches the transcription together, though parts are scribbled across several pages: its scattered state may suggest that it was written on multiple occasions, possibly in different places. The first four lines appear on a letter addressed to the poet at Helpston, though the date of the postmark has frustratingly faded away: 'May 18?2' (Pet MS A58, 1). Grainger suggests 1822 (Clare, *Natural History Prose* 309), while Eric Robinson more decisively lands upon May 1832, suggesting that the letter may have been forwarded to the poet from his old address shortly following his flitting in April of that year (Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: 617). It is possible that Clare wrote on the back of an old letter

from a decade or so before, but the faded number looks like a three and the later date is more in keeping with the overall evidence that a Northborough nightingale is singing. Clare famously incorporated this transcription into his poem "The Progress of Ryhme", while the last eight lines are also scribbled in the margins alongside draft verses of the poem that would become "The Flitting". The manuscript context offers insights into not only when and where, but also how these poems were composed – and may consequently be read – in conversation with each other.

"The Progress of Ryhme" is the work of several years, its date of composition thought to span or fall somewhere between 1824 and 1832. Parts of the poem are scattered over several manuscripts, suggesting that Clare returned to the work at intervals, either envisioning or belatedly stitching the poem together as a whole. While it is unclear when Clare began work on the poem, one of its most famous passages incorporates – and was therefore composed after – Clare transcribed the song of the nightingale at Northborough:

> – & nightingales O I have stood
> Beside the pingle & the wood
> & oer the old oak railing hung
> To listen every note they sung
> & left boys making taws of hay
> To muse & listen half the day
> The more I listened & the more
> Each note seemed sweeter then before
> & aye so different was the strain
> She'd scarce repeat the note again
> – "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 & woods to pause again
> Words were not left to hum the spell
> Could they be birds that sung so well –
> I thought & may be more then I
> That musics self had left the sky
> To cheer me with its majic strain
> & then I hummed the words again
> Till fancy pictured standing bye

> My hearts companion poesy
> (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: lines 233-68).

There is no mention of Clare's new home in the poem, though the setting is noticeably different from the dense, thorny undergrowth delineated in "The Nightingales Nest": this is a bird of the wood but also the "pingle" (a small, enclosed piece of land), surrounded by the "bushy borders" in which the poet often found the bird bringing its newly fledged young to feed (*Natural History Prose* 78). In the poem, Clare recalls how he would leave his playmates behind to seek out the bird ("to muse & listen half the day"), but the poem also finely captures how this bird of the scrub and borderlands may suddenly and loudly interrupt the daily hustle and bustle of human life – and stop the boy on the brig in his tracks.

If it is true that the song transcribed in this poem was that of a Northborough nightingale, there is only the slightest suggestion of this new environment in Clare's rendering of a sound that transports him back to the woods of his formative years. It carries him back emotionally and poetically also, to a kind of boyish love of sounds and imitating them – as the poet, in his writing, does something akin to the cowboy with bits of "oaten straw" (line 215). A love of the sound over and above the semantic sense of words marks the beginnings of poetry: "The Progress of Ryhme" charts Clare's own progress or poetic development, though it is also a poem of return – to the "downright pleasure" of arranging words in tuneful order, in ways distinct from, though analogous to, the nightingale's virtuosity (*Letters* 571).

The "stranger" notes of the nightingale may refer to the bird's virtuosity, how the notes seemed "so varied" to Clare that "every time she starts again after the pauses seems to be somthing different to what she uttered before" (Pet MS A58, 10). The phrase may also refer to the act of writing itself, as Clare's "translation" of the bird's music "makes new words out of raw sounds and estranges existing words from their meanings" in the ways that Stephanie Kuduk Weiner finely delineates (42). It also hints at the feelings enkindled by hearing a familiar sound in an unfamiliar place, an experience that vividly recalls memories of Helpston even as it rubs the sore of Clare's homesickness. A flash of familiarity, though one that throws into stark relief Clare's consciousness of change and feelings of alienation.

The nightingale's song transports the poet back to those early experience of musing and listening for half the day, but it also draws attention to how his feelings and responses to those sounds have changed. Listening to the Northborough nightingales may well have offered a vivid experience of the Romantic ethos of making the familiar seem strange: those sounds carry Clare back to an irrecoverable time in his boyhood, but hearing them in a new place, time and context is also like hearing them again for the first time. That word "strange" reflects a deep ambivalence regarding this experience of getting to know the sounds again: it suggests feelings of unease as well as excitement at the new or unfamiliar – always holding out the possibility that strange sounds may become familiar through careful study, repeated acts of noticing, listening and writing.

The rhyming couplets in this poem appear to follow a far more regular scheme than that developed in "The Nightingales Nest", a regularity which might be taken as a sign that Clare began this poem at an earlier stage in his career. But the fact that he chose to weave the song of a Northborough nightingale into a poem so long in the making is significant, as the rhymes offer a way for Clare to reflect on his "progress" at a crucial, transitional stage in his life and writing. As the rhyme of "before" and "more" neatly encapsulates, Clare's rhymes face backwards and forwards at once

according to the double movement outlined by Peter McDonald: a rhyming word, as McDonald observes, "casts itself forwards into the next lines of a poem, but it also a mode of listening backwards within the poem, so that every rhymed utterance is also an echo of itself" (12). In Clare's poem, the rhymes listen back (they savour, prolong or "drink the sound"), but they also propel the poet forwards and leave him hanging, waiting for what will come next – urging on a restless desire or "itching after ryhme" (line 204).

Rhyme is – among other things – an aid to memory, and may be read as an effort to preserve Clare's experiences of listening in written words. But the poem also reflects what McDonald perceives as a "fundamentally Wordsworthian" understanding of rhyme "as a kind of repetition – of similarity with dissimilarity, or dissimilarity with similarity" (11). That sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar is in keeping with Isobel Armstrong's characterization of the Romantic poem which "is built up by, or builds itself out of, repetition, because this is the way it can meet its own image and grow by making itself other to itself… The movement of Romantic poetry is one of slow, cumulative growth through repetition which can take many forms" (35). Clare's poem recalls and repeats, but also grows by making itself "other to itself" in ways analogous to the generative growth of the natural forms from which it derives inspiration. The "stranger" notes of the nightingale are key to Clare's exploration of this double movement of the progress of rhyme: its potential to look backwards and forwards, to estrange and to refresh, to lose and to discover itself anew.

The "stranger witching notes" of the nightingale recall the scenes of Clare's youth, but they acquire a poignant significance when we consider that part of Clare's transcription is scribbled in the margins alongside draft verses from the "The Flitting":

> Such scenes mere shadows ~~are~~ seem to me
> Dull unpersonifying things
> I love with ~~nature's self~~ my old home to be
> By quiet woods & gravel springs
> Where little pebbles wear as smooth
> As hermits beads by gentle floods
> Where noises doth my spirits sooth
> & warms them into singing moods. (MS A58, 8)

Scribbled alongside this verse, the last few lines of Clare's transcription connects with these ruminations on place and sound: how the "noises" affect him differently depending on when and "where" they are heard. The transcription draws to a close with "bring a jug bring a jug", playfully hinting at the at once personifying and "unpersonifying" tendencies of the poetic imagination: a tendency to impose human meanings on an animal beyond the frame of human reference, but also to laugh at its own absurdity; to form words out of syllables, but also to twist language into nonsensical sounds and rhythms. Clare's amendments to his wording are slight though apt, as they place greater weight on the poet's subjective feelings about "my old home". He later changed the opening "such" to "strange", which clarifies our sense that it is not so much the scenes themselves as their strangeness or unfamiliarity that make them appear "dull" or – as Clare would later amend his wording in the second line – "vague" to the poet ("The Flitting", *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: lines 89-90). The changes further strengthen verbal echoes between poems – the "stranger witching notes" of the bird "The Progress of Ryhme" ghosted in the "strange scenes" of "The Flitting".

Famously, the bird of "The Flitting" will echo back the poet's own longing for home:

> I walk adown the narrow lane
> The nightingale is singing now
> But like to me she seems at loss
> For royce wood & its shielding bough
> I lean upon the window sill
> The trees & summer happy seem
> Green sunny green they shine – but still
> My heart goes far away to dream.
> (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: lines 25-32)

This is no bird of the wood, but of narrow lanes and garden plots. Both the nightingale and the poet appear as woodland exiles, surviving in a world that appears at once more enclosed, more restricted and more dangerous, lacking the cover or protection of Royce Wood's "shielding bough". The poem may offer a rare intimate glimpse of the poet sitting by his window at Northborough, as he listened to a song that vividly recalled his boyhood at Helpston even as it deepened his feelings of loss. The last line offers an insight into Clare's aesthetic in "The Nightingales Nest" and "The Progress of Ryhme", as the notes of the nightingale prompt him to recall and revisit those places where "my heart goes far away to dream".

"The Flitting" may be said to follow a kind of ballad stanza, though the use of the iambic tetrameter throughout slows the pace in ways reflective of the poet's mood or state of mind. As opposed to the "leaping and lingering" movement associated with the common measure (alternating between iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines), Clare's metre drags its feet in ways that evoke both the poet's flatness of mood and longing for home. The rhyme scheme adds to this sense of evenness, or mirroring: it creates a feeling of uncanniness, of an old song that sounds the same, but not the same. The nightingale sings, but in a way that sounds and feels very different to Clare. Summer has returned and the fields are green, but "still" the poet thinks only of those woods and fields of his boyhood at Helpston. These sounds and images engender pleasant memories, but feelings of pleasure are levelled or flattened out by a sense of loss. Clare's aurality is well known, but his poems also presage and work through a distinctly modern experience of listening to an altered, strangely remixed and changing soundscape.

Listening to nightingales at Northborough prompted memories of home along with feelings of strangeness, a sense of wonder fraught with unease and alienation. Poems like "The Flitting" show Clare working through these feelings, but this process was rudely interrupted by the spoilation of the nightingale's nest in his orchard hedge. In the margins of his notes about the bird he had watched and heard over the summer, Clare scrawled a sonnet that directly refutes the hopes and visions of an earlier time:

> There is a cruelty in all
> From tyrant man to meaner things
> & nature holds inhuman thrall
> Against herself so sorrow sings
> A nightingale had built its nest
> Low in my weedy orchard hedge
> The kecks grew up to give her rest

& safety gave its secret pledge
That bye & bye her young should flye
But trouble was ordained to come
A magpie had her dwelling nigh
& like a robber found her home
& one by one it took away
& murdererd musics little heirs.
(*Poems of the Middle Period* 5: 62)

The word "thrall" directly recalls and redresses "The Nightingales Nest": it voices a stark recognition that all life is subject to the disinterested and often cruel workings of nature, and the fading or disillusionment of poetic vision as a consequence. The poem has a rigid regularity, following the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet that locks both the poem and the world it describes into a set and seemingly inescapable pattern or fate. The slightly truncated iambic tetrameter strays from convention, though it furthers our sense of a music stunted or cut short. The four beats also make the line more evenly split, the mid-line breaks often setting up a contrast in ways evocative of a natural world at war with itself. The sonnet is itself in a kind of thrall, set to a fixed pattern or preordained law.

Clare follows a Shakespearean rhyme scheme, though the sonnet's argument is set up in an unusual way: the first line bluntly announces the clinching thought of the poem, rather than thinking through the problem over the first few quatrains. We are denied hope from the beginning, as the second and third quatrain lead us through the particulars of the situation that has led to the bleak realization pronounced in the opening line. The thought of the second quatrain spills into the third, seeming to momentarily entertain the hope "that bye & bye her young should flye". But any hope is swiftly crushed in the delayed volta in following line, as the poem returns to the fixed pattern suggestive of the trouble that was always "ordained to come". Rhymes and sonic patterns do not suggest harmony or unity in nature, but sorrow. The poem breaks off with an unrhymed couplet, suggesting both a disharmony in nature and the disenchantment of the poet. Scrawled alongside Clare's notes about the bird in his "weedy orchard hedge", the manuscript context brutally brings home how the poem answers – and refutes – his earlier poetic vision or faith.

The Shy Come Nightingale

The spoilation of the nest at Northborough must have seemed especially cruel, given that the bird's voice offered Clare a connection with the Helpston woods at a time of personal upheaval. But the poet would allow the bird to sing on in another sonnet, which offers an alternative account of the progress – and resilience – both of the nightingale's song and Clare's own poetry. The sonnet was never published in the poet's lifetime, though it confidently asserts the embattled self-assurance that Clare's writing achieved at Northborough:

When first we hear the shy come nightingales
They seem to mutter oer their songs in fear
& climbing e'er so soft the spinney rails
All stops as if no bird was any where
The kindled bushes with the young leaves thin
Lets curious eyes to search a long way in
Untill impatience cannot see or hear

> The hidden music – gets but little way
> Upon the path – when up the songs begin
> Full loud a moment & then low again
> But when a day or two confirms her stay
> Boldly she sings & loud for half the day
> & soon the village brings the woodmans tale
> Of having heard the new come nightingale.
> (*Poems of the Middle Period* 5: 222-3)

The sonnet was composed at Northborough, though the inspiration came much earlier in the poet's career. In the early 1820s, Clare penned a series of "Natural History Letters" addressed to his publisher, Taylor's partner, James Hessey. In remarks on the nightingale, Clare tells Hessey he "must repeat your quotation from Chaucer to illustrate" his own observations of this "shoy" bird:

> The new abashed nightingale
> That stinteth first when she beginneth sing
> When that she heareth any herde's tale
> Or in the hedges any white stearing
> & after siker doth her voice out ring.
> (*Natural History Prose* 37)

The quotation is taken from *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Chaucer compares the bird's faltering attempts at song with a young woman's murmured expressions of love. Hessey's interest in the lines were likely sparked by William Hazlitt, whose works he and Taylor published a few years earlier. For Hazlitt, the "new abashed nightingale" was "one of the most beautiful passages" in Chaucer: he used it as an example of the Chaucerian "simile" in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817; 93) and, later, *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818; 42). Clare owned copies of these and several other works by Hazlitt (Powell 28) and expressed his admiration in letter to Taylor (April 1821): "I like Hazlitts Lectures uncommon – his style is the most pleasing of any living prose writer I have met with" (*Letters* 178). Clare's remarks on Hazlitt's style suggest that he offered the poet an accessible form of literary criticism, while a set of quotations from the English poets may have informed Clare's developing sense of literary tradition and the canon.

In focusing in on a description of the nightingale, Hazlitt was engaging with Coleridge and a larger debate regarding this bird as a figure for poetry. In *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, he employed the example of "the new abashed nightingale" to illustrate the accuracy or matter-of-factness of Chaucerian figurative language: "everything in Chaucer has a downright reality" (92). Later, in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, Hazlitt returned to the quotation and qualified his analysis with a significant phrase, "at least in the relator's mind" (42). In this later work, Hazlitt explores how the "picturesque" and the "dramatic" blend in Chaucer's writing; his "metaphors" are "as like as possible to the things themselves", but external objects also "indicate character, as symbols of internal sentiment" (45-6). For Hazlitt, the "new abashed nightingale" exemplifies this particular quality of the Chaucerian simile: "this is so true and natural, and beautifully simple, that the two things seem identified with each other" (43). The blending of "downright reality" with internal sentiment would undoubtedly have appealed to Clare, as it shares affinities with his own approach to listening to nightingales at Northborough.

Hazlitt goes on to draw an implicit analogy between the "new abashed nightingale" and the father of English poetry himself. He attributes Chaucer's mode of metaphor to the "rude simplicity" of the age in which he wrote (*Lectures on the English Poets* 45). As there were "none of the common-places of poetic diction in our author's time", Chaucer was "obliged to inspect things for himself, to look narrowly, and almost to handle the object, as in the obscurity of morning we partly see and partly grope our way" (46). Hazlitt's description of the poet's mode of writing is reminiscent of the young bird while learning to sing: "like a stammerer, or a dumb person, that has just found the use of speech", Chaucer "crowds many things together with eager haste, with anxious pauses, and fond repetitions to prevent mistake" (46). Clare's own "rude" verse was judged in much the same terms, his class and educational background seen to augment the freshness of his imagery and originality of his style: the poet's educational disadvantages were seen to free his writing from literary commonplaces as they forced him to rely on "*actual observation*" of the natural world, while his supposed ignorance of grammar spurred him to "invent new forms of expression, as singular as they are vigorous and appropriate" (Storey, *Critical Heritage* 68). Hazlitt suggests a parallel between the "rude" poet and the nightingale, which is wittily implied and played upon in Clare's own rendering of a "shoy" bird's progress.

Clare's poem also recalls a small, but remarkable group of sonnets in the Romantic period that deploy the Chaucerian simile in new ways. Perhaps most famously, Charlotte Smith describes the bird's "prelusive notes" in "The Return of the Nightingale":

> 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! (49-50)

While the bird's "prelusive notes" are again associated with "young and timid love", the speaker's response to these sounds of spring is tinged with melancholy in ways that may well have chimed with Clare at Northborough. It is well known that Clare admired Smith "because she wrote more from what she had seen of nature then from what she had read of it" (*Natural History Prose* 34), but her sonnets also ruminate on the concern that preoccupies Hazlitt's reading of Chaucer – the relationship between external nature and internal sentiment, the song of the bird and the feelings it enkindles in the listening poet. Smith's sonnets also dwell deeply on the relationship between sound and memory, as the song sparks recollections that sharpen the poet's realization of her altered feelings or state of mind.

A similar trope appears in a sonnet by Alfred Lord Tennyson, printed alongside a version of Clare's "The Nightingales Nest" in *Friendship's Offering* in 1833:

> Check every outflash, every ruder sally
> Of thought and speech; speak low, and give
> Thy spirit to mild-minded Melancholy;
> This is the place. Through yonder poplar alley,
> Below, the blue green river windeth slowly;
> But in the middle of the sombre valley,
> The crispèd waters whisper musically,
> And all the haunted place is dark and holy.
> The nightingale, with long and low preamble,
> Warbled from wonder knoll of solemn larches,
> And in and out the woodbine's flowery arches
> The summer midges wove their wanton gambol,
> And all the white stemmed pinewood slept above –
> When in this valley first I told my love. (29)

The poem modulates the many influences that Clare and Tennyson shared with each other (Smith, Coleridge, Keats), though Tennyson's take on the bird's voice is distinct: the "long and low preamble" is associated with a youthful, bashful mode of speech, distinct from a spontaneous "outflash". Significantly, the word "rude" is not associated with the untrained or uneducated, but with bolder, more practiced – and implicitly less sincere – effusions of passion. The irregular rhyme scheme emulates the murmuring hesitancy of those first expressions of love: the lines waver into irregular and half rhymes, while dense alliterative patterns create a kind of murmured musicality suggestive of the bird's own "long and low preamble". In ways which recall Smith and would have appealed to Clare's own sensibilities, the closing sestet shifts from the immediacy of the present ("this is the place") to the memory of an event that took place there long ago ("when in this valley first I told my love").

Clare's sonnet thinks back to Chaucer and other influences, as well as to an earlier stage in his own poetic career and development. His poem does not deal in metaphors or similes, though verbal echoes and allusions point to an implied connection between the development of the bird's voice and that of poetry itself – and particularly that of a "shoy" labouring poet. The sonnet begins with a relatively conventional quatrain (*abab*), though the imperfect rhyme of "fear" and "where" conveys a sense of the bird's muffled notes as well as its desire to hide or disguise its whereabouts. But the sonnet soon strays far from this structure. Clare falls freely into his own unique rhyming pattern (*ccbdccddee*), gleefully at once a "rude" imperfect imitation and a bold, wilful departure from the sonnet's rules. Clare's rhymes are both progressive and regressive, the poem almost circling back to the opening rhyme in its final couplet to suggest both return and reinvention, tradition and experimentation. Clare's sonnet does not express melancholy or regret, but resilience and trust in the embattled sounds of nature – as well as his own resurgent and unabashed voice.

Clare's sonnet begins with the kind of immediacy widely perceived as characteristic of his lyric poems: reader and poet are drawn together in the collective "we" of the first line ("When first we hear…"). But this connection is undermined by the poem's close. The poem travels from the collective "we" to the more individual, localised figure of the woodman, from "we hear" to "he has heard". That opening collective "we" is unravelled and undone, as the illusion of a direct, immediate and

collective experience of listening is exposed as a distanced, delayed and mediated experience of hearing a tale – or reading a poem - about listening. This unravelling self-consciously draws attention to the poet's own lyric devices: the nightingale's song is heard later and from a distance, in ways suggestive of how the poet has skilfully shared his own experience of listening with readers from further afield. The poem begins by drawing the reader in but concludes with a reminder that we "hear" at the poet's invitation and according to his skill. The tone and stance are different from "The Nightingales Nest", the invitation rescinded at the poem's close as the collective "we" becomes more narrowly how and when we locals listen here.

The word "brings" in the final couplet complicates matters still further: an earlier draft more simply reads, "& soon the village hears the woodmans tale / How he has heard the new come nightingale" (see *Poems of the Middle Period*, 5: 233). Clare's revision may simply seek to avoid the repetition of the verb to hear, but it also calls attention to the different kinds of listening that take place in this poem. The village no longer passively hears or receives, but actively brings, transports and to this extent adapts the woodsman's tale. Yet it remains unclear where or to whom the village brings this tale, to the speaker or the reader or both. We might align the woodman with the speaker, though the woodman's tale may be different from that recounted in the poem – a tale of another listener listening somewhere else. The word "brings" thus underscores spatial and temporal differences between the woodman, the village, the speaker and the reader, even as it emphasizes the connections between them in and through the tales they share. It suggests how the nightingale's song brings Clare back to the woods of his boyhood, but also, in turn, how his poetry brings these experiences to the reader – with all the attendant possibilities and risks of that endeavour, for shy birds and poets alike. It is also a reminder of how the poet strove to maintain the privacy and security afforded even by those "young leaves thin", and points to how Clare cleverly disguises the whereabouts of his poetic voice in ways at once shrewdly defensive and wittily suggestive of the bird's own "hidden music".

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