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THE NIGHTINGALE IN GREEK AND LATIN POETRY

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The nightingale plays a more important rôle in European literature than any other bird. References to it are found all along the way from Homer to T. S. Eliot. The varied interpretations that poets have attached to its song show how sentiment and imagination vary with the nationality, epoch, and individuality of the writer. In Greek and Latin poetry the interpretations fall into five groups. In one group the nightingale is linked with a myth of a mother who slew her son, and the bird's song is regarded as a lament; in a second group the bird symbolizes a poet or his poems; in a third group the bird is a happy singer of springtime and love; in a fourth group the nightingale sings the praises of God; in a fifth group the virtuosity of the song is stressed.

The actual song of the bird is neutral, lending itself with equal readiness to all these interpretations. Pliny describes the song in a difficult passage.¹ He contrasts the small body and the powerful voice of the bird. He declares that it sings with a perfect knowledge of musical art and that it can produce an astonishing variety of musical effects: a great range of pitch and volume, very long and very short notes, staccato and legato, in short everything that man's ingenuity can achieve with wind instruments. But he strains our credulity when he tells us that the young take singing lessons from their elders and that the birds engage in musical contests with such zeal that the loser sometimes dies from its exertions.

The earliest poetic passage on the nightingale is one of the most beautiful. It is in the *Odyssey*.² Odysseus has returned to Ithaca

¹ Cf. Pliny, *N. H.* x, 43.

² Cf. Homer, *Od.* xix, 518-523.

but has not revealed his identity to Penelope. She tells of her grief and anxiety; in the daytime these are palliated by her household duties, but at night when others sleep her cares throng upon her. As the nightingale in early spring sings sweetly among the foliage with many trills and roulades, bewailing her dear son Itylus whom she killed by mistake—like the bird's song Penelope's thoughts turn hither and thither.

There are two main versions of the myth.³ In the version mentioned in the *Odyssey*, a mother plotting to kill the son of another killed her own son by mistake and was turned into a nightingale. In the more popular version, Procne was married to Tereus and bore him a son Itys. Tereus violated Philomela, the sister of Procne, and to insure her silence cut out her tongue. The sisters obtained vengeance by killing Itys and inducing Tereus to eat the boy's flesh. Procne was changed into a nightingale, Philomela into a swallow, and Tereus into a hoopoe. However, most of the Latin writers interchanged the first two birds, so that the nightingale was identified with Philomela, and this version has prevailed in mediaeval and modern times.

Probably the most influential Greek version of the myth was Sophocles' tragedy, *Tereus*, but to our great regret only a few fragments of it remain. The most important Latin version was Ovid's, which was read and imitated by many later poets, including Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer, Gower, and Gascoigne.*

We do not know whether Sophocles showed any interest in the birds after the transformation, but Ovid certainly did not; he was interested only in the elaboration of the human melodrama. Gower, however, supplemented the Ovidian story with a beautiful passage on the nightingale and the meaning of her song. Gas-

³ Cf. Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyc.*, s.v. *Luscinia*; Eustathius on *Od.* xix, 518, p. 1875; Apollodorus, III, xiv, 8; Ov., *Met.* vi, 426-674.

* Cf. Chrétien de Troyes, *Philomena*, ed. C. de Boer: Paris, Geuthner (1909); the authorship of this poem is, however, disputed; "The Legend of Good Women," in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. W. W. Skeat; Oxford, Clarendon Press (1899-1900), III; "The Legend of Philomela," *ibid.*, VII, 158-164; "Confessio Amantis, Liber Quintus," vs. 5551-6074, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay; Oxford, Clarendon Press (1899-1902), III; "The Complaynt of Phylomene," in *The Complete Works of George Gascoigne*, ed. J. W. Cunliffe: Cambridge University Press (1910), II, 175-207.

coigne's version was crude, but he, too, showed an interest in the birds and spent over a hundred lines in explaining the syllables he claimed to hear in the nightingale's song. Among these was *jug*, for *jugum* (the yoke of matrimony broken by Tereus) or for *jugulator* (the murderer, Procne); also *Tereu* (vocative of Tereus) and *Nemesis* (goddess of vengeance). The passage is amusing in its absurdity.

Many modern poets have made oblique references to the myth, assuming a knowledge of it on the part of their readers. Outstanding instances are Sir Philip Sidney's "The Nightingale," Matthew Arnold's "Philomela," and Swinburne's "Itylus."

One is glad to turn from the brutality of the myth to passages that show a love for the bird itself. In these the beauty of the song is emphasized, and the myth is sometimes almost forgotten, except that the song is still regarded as a lament.

The most charming tribute to the nightingale that has come down to us in Greek poetry is in Aristophanes' *Birds*. The hoopoe and the nightingale are, aside from the human characters, the chief figures in the comedy. They remember their human stories, but no bitterness remains in their hearts. Thus arises the paradox that Tereus can give affectionate praise to Procne and at the same time call her song a lament for their son Itys. He invites her to come out of the thicket to join him in calling the other birds together, till her song shall float up to the throne of Zeus; then Phoebus will play his lyre, and the other gods will sing in chorus, responding to her song.⁴

In the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, there are brief passages implying the supreme sweetness and sadness of the nightingale's song.⁵ The *Lament for Bion*, formerly attributed to Moschus, invites the nightingales to join in the lament for the dead singer.⁶ In a Latin epistle formerly attributed to Ovid, Sappho, mourning for Phaon, links the nightingale's lament with her own.⁷

⁴ Cf. Ar., *Av.* 209-222; also 659-684; 737-752.

⁵ Cf. Ae., *Ag.* 1140-1145; Soph., *O. C.* 16-18; *El.* 107; 147-149; Eur., *Hel.* 1107-1112; *Rhes.* 546-550.

⁶ Cf. *Bucolicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, Incertorum Idyllia* I (Moschus III).

⁷ Cf. *Œuvres Complètes d'Ovide*, ed. C. L. F. Panckoucke: Paris (1834), I, 188-191: *Heroides* xv, *Sappho Phaoni* vss. 135-156. On the question of authorship cf. A. Palmer, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Heroides*: London, George Bell and Sons, (1874), pp. vii f.

A passage in Vergil's *Georgics*⁸ is perhaps a rationalized version of the myth, but it also shows a spontaneous sympathy for the bird. Instead of a transformed princess mourning for her son, we find a bird bewailing the loss of its own fledglings:

*Qualis populea maerens Philomela sub umbra
amissos queritur fetus, quos durus arator
observans nido implumis detraxit: at illa
flet noctem; ramoque sedens miserabile carmen
integrat et maestis late loca questibus implet.*

Thomson in his *Seasons* ("Spring") protests against the caging of birds and introduces a free imitation of Vergil's lines:

Oft, when returning with her loaded bill,
Th'astonished mother finds a vacant nest,
By the hard hand of unrelenting clowns
Robb'd, to the ground the vain provision falls;
Her pinions ruffle, and low-drooping, scarce
Can bear the mourner to the poplar shade;
Where, all abandon'd to despair, she sings
Her sorrows through the night; and, on the bough,
Sole-sitting, still at every dying fall
Takes up again her lamentable strain
Of winding woe; till, wide around, the woods
Sigh to her song, and with her wail resound.

In the second group of passages, the nightingale stands for the poet or his poetry. Hesiod tells a sort of parable in which a hawk seizes and threatens a nightingale, presumably meaning a tyrant threatening the poet himself.⁹ Callimachus, in a brief elegy for his friend the poet Heraclitus, calls the poems of the latter "pleasant voices," "nightingales," which death cannot destroy.¹⁰

There is a third group of poems which either assert or imply that the song of the nightingale is joyous. This is foreshadowed by a passage in Plato's *Phaedo* in which Socrates is represented as asserting that no bird's song should be regarded as a lament, not even that of the nightingale, swallow, or hoopoe. This is note-

⁸ IV, 511-515.

⁹ Cf. Hes., *Works and Days* 202-212.

¹⁰ Cf. Callimachus, *Epigram* II (Wilamowitz, ed. 4, 1925). A translation by W. J. Cory may be found in the *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, No. 288.

worthy as being the oldest explicit vindication of the joyousness of bird songs against a literary tradition. Geddes in his note on the passage seemed to be unaware that any one between Plato and Coleridge had depicted the song as cheerful.¹¹ Nevertheless, a poem by Meleager of Gadara depicts the renewal of vegetation in the spring, the activity of herdsmen and sailors, the singing of the nightingale and other birds, and concludes, "Why should not the poet sing of his beloved in the spring?"¹² He does not specifically say that the song of the nightingale is joyous, but this may fairly be inferred from the joyous tone of the whole poem. Joyousness is definitely asserted in various mediaeval poems to which I shall recur further on.

A fourth group of poems belongs especially to the Middle Ages. That period turned men's thoughts from earth to heaven. It is not surprising to find that the nightingale received an entirely new interpretation when literature passed into the hands of the clergy. Alcuin's "De Luscinia" shows that a sufficiently pious auditor will hear only praise of God in the song of the nightingale. Alcuin was the learned abbot who tried to instill some sweetness and light into Charlemagne's court. His poem tells what joy and solace he found in the bird's sweet song. What a happy creature she is, to be able to praise God so constantly day and night! God must have intended her to arouse men from the stupor of wine and sleep to join her in His praise.¹³

There is a more elaborate interpretation in a beautiful Latin poem variously attributed to St. Bonaventura, John Peckham, and others.¹⁴ Lydgate later made two attempts to render the same

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 85A. Cf. W. D. Geddes, *The Phaedo of Plato*: London and Edinburgh, Williams and Norgate (1863), 247-250.

¹² Cf. Meleager, *Epigram* cx; R. Aldington, *Medallions in Clay*: New York, A. A. Knopf (1921), 37; the translation seems to be inaccurate in the last line.

¹³ Cf. P. S. Allen, *The Romanesque Lyric*: Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press (1928), 338 f. (Latin by Alcuin) and 148 f. (English by H. M. Jones).

¹⁴ Cf. *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae . . . Opera Omnia . . . Ad Claras Aquas* (Quaracchi), ex typogr. Collegii S. Bonaventurae (1882-1902), VIII, 669-674; also quoted in part and discussed in *Registrum Epistolarum Johannis Peckham . . .* ed. C. T. Martin: London, Longmans Green and Co. (1885-1888), III, p. cv. (Public Records Office. *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, no. 77).

theme in English.¹⁵ According to these Latin and English poems, the nightingale knows when the day of her death has come. She begins to sing at dawn and her song at different hours celebrates the events of religious history from the creation of the world to Christ's passion. She gradually exhausts herself and at the hour corresponding to the death of Christ she breathes her last. To the mediaeval clergy the whole visible world was a system of symbols of religious truth, and the nightingale found her honorable place in that system.

But not all mediaeval Latin poetry was pious; much of it was amorous, as may be seen in the *Carmina Burana* and the *Carmina Cantabrigiensia*. Numerous poems in these collections associate the nightingale's song with springtime and love, as Meleager had done, and therefore belong in our third group.¹⁶ In these poems we read that in the spring the nightingale "grows cheerful" (*hilarescit*) and that her song "incites to love" (*suscitat amores*). Elsewhere in one of these collections, to be sure, we find references to the Greek myth and to the bird's "complaints."¹⁷ The following stanza is typical of the joyous interpretation:

*Fronde nemus induitur,
iam canit philomena,
cum variis coloribus
iam prata sunt amena,
spatiari dulce est
per loca nemorosa;
dulcius est carpere
iam liliū cum rosa,
dulcissimum est ludere
cum virgine formosa.*¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. *Lydgate's Minor Poems. The Two Nightingale Poems*, ed. O. Glauning: London, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. (1900) (E.E.T.S. extra series LXXX); "A Searing of the Nightingale," in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H. N. MacCracken: London, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. (1911) (E.E.T.S., extra series CVII), 221-34; MacCracken regards the other poem, printed by Glauning as not Lydgate's (xxxiii f.).

¹⁶ Cf. *Carmina Burana*, ed. J. A. Schmeller (Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart XVI): Stuttgart, Literarischer Verein (1847), No. 49 (stanza 3); 52 (3); 65 (68); 102 (2); 103 (4); 113 (1); 135; 140 (2); *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Carmina Cantabrigiensia*, ed. K. Strecker: Berlin (1926), No. 10.

¹⁷ Cf. *Carmina Burana* 33 (1); 65 (63); 108 (1); 125 (8).

¹⁸ *Carmina Burana* 103 (4); verse translation, J. A. Symonds, *Wine, Women, and Song*: New York, McClure (1907), 95 f.

Many Provençal lyrics open with descriptions of the joys of spring, including the song of the nightingale, similar to the Latin stanza just cited. Even when the poet is sad, he introduces the joyous song of the bird as a contrast to his woe. Thus Bernart de Ventadorn complains:

Alas, I die of yearning! I sleep neither morning nor evening, for at night when I seek repose the nightingale sings and shouts, and I, who was once in the habit of singing, die of grief and woe when I hear sounds of joy and mirth.¹⁹

Some Latin poems of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance constitute a fifth group, in which, as in Pliny's prose account, stress is laid on the musical skill displayed in the song, and no emotion either sad or joyous is imputed to it.²⁰ Among these, the lines written early in the seventeenth century by the Roman Jesuit, Famiano Strada, remind us most definitely of Pliny. But instead of a contest between nightingales we find a contest between a luteplayer and a nightingale, in which the bird dies from her exertions. Crashaw imitated and expanded this poem in his "Music's Duel." These efforts of Strada are scarcely poems at all, but elaborate rhetorical exercises displaying extraordinary vocabularies, without real feeling.

Thus poets of many types have found material in the song of the nightingale. The interpretations they have given to it illustrate on the one hand the persistence of certain traditions and conventions and on the other the inexhaustible variety of poetic imagination and sentiment. They also illustrate the debt of Roman poetry to the Greeks, the vitality of Latin poetry in the Middle Ages, and the debt of modern poetry to Greek and Latin sources.²¹

¹⁹ *Bernart de Ventadorn*, ed. C. Appel: Halle am S., Niemeyer (1915), No. 45.

²⁰ Cf. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, Vol. XIV, *Eugenii Toletani Episcopi Carmina*, p. 253 f.; A. Riese, *Anthologia Latina*²: Leipzig, Teubner (1906), Vol. I, Part 2, No. 762; J. H. Pitman, "The Riddles of Aldhelm," No. 22, *Yale Studies in English* LXVII: New Haven, Yale University Press (1925); R. P. Famianae Stradae . . . *Eloquentia Bipartita* . . . : Oxoniae (1662), 329-332.

²¹ On the general subject cf. H. W. Garrod, *The Profession of Poetry and Other Lectures*: Oxford, Clarendon Press (1929), 131-159; Phil Robinson, *The Poets' Birds*: London, Chatto and Windus (1883), 303-327 (selections from English poetry on the nightingale); H. J. Massingham, *Poems about Birds from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*: London, Dutton (1922); F. N. Patton, *Bards and the Birds*: London, Reeves and Turner (1894) (general collections of English poems on birds).