Chapter 4

Bethan Roberts

Charlotte Smith and the Nightingale

Nightingales bookend Charlotte Smith’s literary career. The first edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) includes two sonnets on the nightingale, and her posthumous work for children *The Natural History of Birds* (1807) includes a section on the bird. This essay will consider the significance of the nightingale in Smith’s writing, and its wider literary and natural history context. It shows that, for Smith, the natural and literary worlds were intrinsically bound, affording her an influential place in the history of nature writing. Smith is often credited with reviving the sonnet form in the late eighteenth century, and celebrated as the first ‘Romantic’ poet, for her poetic innovation, for ‘making it new’. However, Smith’s verse also displays a deep and constitutive engagement with the literary past.[[1]](#endnote-1) I suggest that Smith’s sonnets rely on a knowledge of the literary traditions they engage with for meaning. As well as connecting with tradition through the sonnet form and via the quotations and intertextual references of her poems, she also does so through the subjects of her sonnets: the literary associations of the sites, settings, flora and fauna of Smith’s sonnets are a constitutive aspect of them. This is nowhere more apparent than in her nightingale sonnets, the most versified bird in the history of poetry, and the bird Smith most frequently writes about in her poems. Smith spent most of her life living in various locations in the Southeast of England, where the nightingale would be an annual visitor in the spring and summer months. For her, to hear the bird in its natural habitat was a cultural experience, bringing to mind its literary life. Thus, although Smith’s engagement with place is often associated with her newness – as Wordsworth stated in 1833, Smith ‘wrote […] with true feeling for rural nature, at a time when nature was not much regarded by English poets’ – for Smith, the natural world was bound to the poetic past.[[2]](#endnote-2) As well as literary, Smith was also deeply learned in natural history, and towards the end of her career turned increasingly to this mode of engaging with nature in her works. As she wrote in *Birds*, ‘The philosopher and poet should both be naturalists’, giving the examples of Homer, Virgil, Milton and Shakespeare as natural history experts.[[3]](#endnote-3) Smith published a number of natural history works for children – *Rural Walks* (1795), *Rambles Farther* (1796), *Minor Morals* (1798) and *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804) precede *Birds.* Like writers such as Gilbert White and John Clare, Smith took the majority of her observations from first-hand observation. She had no time for the birds of museums and collections, ‘stuffed and set on wires’, and her works take the form of field guides infused with literary as well as scientific references.[[4]](#endnote-4) Through a focus on Smith’s works on the nightingale, this essay will illuminate the rich interrelations between literary and natural history, poetry and science in the eighteenth century. Indeed, these interrelations are particularly tightly bound when it comes to the nightingale: throughout cultural history, the nightingale has been characterised as female, melancholy and heard singing at night, at odds with the facts, for it is the male bird which sings, both day and night.

A number of critics, especially since the burgeoning of ecocriticism, have highlighted how throughout literary history, birds have tended to be vehicles for anthropocentric concerns, ‘exploitative’ symbols, whereby the ‘actual autonomous being in is indigenous environment, is at once cancelled out’, and have urged reading bird poems with an eye to ornithological accuracy, a practice complicated in the eighteenth century by to the tendency for ornithological accounts to draw on and perpetuate the myths of literature.[[5]](#endnote-5) Thomas C. Gannon has extended this approach to a recuperation of birds as a non-human Other. In relation to Smith, he draws attention to the complexity of ‘Other-that-is-woman writing about Other-that-is-nature’, whereby nature is conflated with the human abject: ‘women and children are allowed a special relationship with other species but are at the same time juvenilized and feminized for such an easy, porous cross-species intersubjectivity’.[[6]](#endnote-6) At the same time, he highlights Smith’s ‘naturalist edge’, and the ‘scientific accuracy of her avian poetics’ – which as Gannon rightly says puts her on a par with contemporary male nature writers – while the intertextuality of her verse also led ‘to an adoption of typical Augustan animal tropes’.[[7]](#endnote-7) This essay shows how Smith herself instructs us to read across the intricate weave of nature and culture – and thus animal-human relations – as she writes as a poet negotiating literary tradition, and as a natural historian, across her works, with an ear always to the ‘real’ nightingale in its natural habitat.

**Literary History[[8]](#endnote-8)**

In her sonnets, Smith presents her relationship with literary tradition in various playful and uneasy ways. She frequently draws on and simultaneously departs from her sources, and invokes a range of predominantly male authors, only to present her own position in relation to them as inferior. The nightingale is particularly suited to Smith, as a poetic subject and as an emblem of authorship. In *Birds*, Smith relates the ‘mournful story’ of the Ovidian Philomela myth – the chief Western literary connection with the bird – and also observes how the nightingale has been ‘celebrated by the poets more than any other of the feathered race’ (337 and 334). She includes quotations from poems by Petrarch, Milton, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, James Thomson, Erasmus Darwin and Coleridge, together with her own sonnets III and VII. The invocation of the nightingale permits Smith to locate herself within a strong literary lineage yet through the Philomela myth, the bird’s song comes to represent a specifically female, elegiac voice, and in a sense encodes the position of the woman writer. As Smith tells the tale, it is one about the suppression of voice: when Philomela threatens to make her rape known, Tereus is provoked ‘by the eloquence of her sorrow, and the justness of her indignation’, to cut out her tongue (337). She first finds a voice by weaving her story in a tapestry for her sister, who is struck by her ‘dumb eloquence’ (337). At the end of the tale, Philomela’s voice, her ‘eloquence’, is finally restored fully through her transformation in to the bird with its expressive and melancholy song. The long-standing association of the singing bird as melancholy befits Smith’s morose speaker in *Elegiac Sonnets* who sets out the relationship between pain and artistic expression in the first sonnet of the sequence, for ‘those paint sorrow best – who feel it most!’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The misreading of the bird as female, and its elegiac, mythical associations, inspired several women poets to draw on the nightingale-Philomela as poetic subject or persona in the eighteenth century: Elizabeth Singer Rowe published under the *nom de plume* ‘Philomela’, while Anne Finch, Sarah Nixon and Catherine Talbot addressed the bird in their poems. Writing about the nightingale permits them a reticent, self-effacing means to public poetic expression. In *Birds*, Smith’s own two sonnets on the nightingale appear under the playful introduction of ‘an inferior poet, to whom you may notwithstanding be partial’ (340), a typical self-marginalising statement contradicted by the juxtaposition of her own sonnets with those of Petrarch and Milton. Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook finds the swallow to be a personally appropriate emblem of authorship for Smith: the nightingale is ‘too passive and too eroticized’, whereas the domestic, maternal swallow ‘authorizes and legitimates Smith’s publications’.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, Smith’s identification in *Elegiac Sonnets* is certainly with the nightingale, and she evades any erotic element, drawing on its passivity, while its literary associations authorise and legitimise her authorship in a different way.

The first of Smith’s nightingale sonnets is sonnet III ‘To a nightingale’:

Poor melancholy bird – that all night long

 Tell’st to the Moon thy tale of tender woe;

 From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,

And whence this mournful melody of song?

Thy poet’s musing fancy would translate

 What mean the sounds that swell thy little breast,

 When still at dewy eve thou leavest thy nest,

Thus to the listening Night to sing thy fate?

Pale Sorrow’s victims wert thou once among,

 Tho’ now released in woodlands wild to rove?

 Say – hast thou felt from friends some cruel wrong,

Or died’st thou – martyr of disastrous love?

Ah! songstress sad! that such my lot might be,

To sigh, and sing at liberty – like thee! (18)

The cultural connotations of birdsong are immediately apparent, as the nightingale is presented as ‘melancholy’, ‘sad’ and ‘mournful’, singing with ‘woe’ and ‘sorrow’ all in the first stanza. The third edition gives a specific provenance, informing the reader that ‘the idea [is] from the 43d sonnet of Petrarch’ (18), 311 in modern editions, in which Petrarch hears and attempts to decipher the—unusually, male—nightingale’s song: ‘That nightingale that so sweetly weeps, perhaps for his children or for his dear consort, fills the sky and the fields with sweetness in so many grieving, skilful notes, || and all night he seems to accompany me and remind me of my harsh fate’.[[11]](#endnote-11) This is thus the ‘idea’ Smith takes from Petrarch, as her sonnet also considers the source of the nightingale’s supposed sadness. For Petrarch, the song is a reminder of his ‘harsh fate’, for this is one of Petrarch’s ‘in morte’ sonnets, written following the death of Laura. Although Smith does not transpose this aspect to her own sonnet, the elegiac context is apposite. Smith’s eldest son had died in 1777, in his eleventh year. Petrarch’s male nightingale weeps for ‘his children’, and his sonnet draws on an episode in book four of Virgil’s *Georgics* in which the grief of Orpheus is compared to that of a female nightingale which has lost her children. The literary history of Smith’s sonnet is thus involved in shifting genders and subjectivities (Petrarch’s male nightingale becomes a ‘songstress sad’), and the nightingale is fluid and mercurial in its transformations between them. Smith also departs from Petrarch in form taking the unusual *abba cddc effegg* rhyme scheme, a practice she continues in the ‘translations from Petrarch’ included in later editions of *Elegiac Sonnets*, central to her playful approach to her literary forbears. Smith’s sonnets are animated by the complexities that arise for the women poet encountering and appropriating male literary tradition. Here, literary tradition is simultaneously dispossessing and empowering, as through Petrarch’s male nightingale, aligned with the male poet’s grief over the dead, voiceless female subject, her sonnet reaches back through and inherits the song of a grieving mother bird with access to Orphic power.

There are interesting parallels between Smith’s sonnet III and a ‘Sonnet In ye Manner of Petrarch –’ by Catherine Talbot (written 1758-1761). Although Smith could not have known of Talbot’s sonnet, unpublished in her lifetime, the similarities between them demonstrate the ways in which the nightingale was appropriated as a pertinent trope for the exploration of voice for the woman poet. The poem opens thus:

The nightingale that sits on Yonder spray,

 Tho’ all of night she plains her hapless Fate,

 Yet since she can in liberty relate

Her griefs, that freedom does those griefs allay.—

But I, aye me! must all the livelong day,

Conceal with sembled cheer a cheerless state[.][[12]](#endnote-12)

As in Smith’s sonnet, a contrast is established between the nightingale, at liberty to sing of her ‘hapless Fate’, and the speaker, who is not. In both poems, the nightingale is an idealised version of the woman poet, rather than one the speaker can identify with. They are poised between expression and restraint, as their speakers—to an extent—express grief, although they may profess they are not at liberty to do so. A similar approach to the nightingale and Philomela can be seen in other poems by eighteenth-century women poets. Anne Finch praises the nightingale’s song, and aspires to ‘set my Numbers to thy layes’, again celebrating the liberty of the bird: ‘Free as thine shall be my song’, at its ‘pleasing best when unconfin’d’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Yet, despite attempting to match the bird’s song, the attempt fails, with the implication that the speaker is not as ‘free’ or ‘unconfined’ as the bird. Sarah Dixon’s ‘The Nightingal’ (1740) similarly celebrates the nightingale while disestablishing the speaker from it. She addresses Philomela, to whom the Gods ‘Gave in Exchange, for a frail Woman’s Tongue, / A lasting Power to please with thy inimitable song’.[[14]](#endnote-14) The poem perversely celebrates Philomela’s violation, as woman’s ‘frail’ voice has been replaced with one of ‘power’: something, it is suggested, Nixon’s own voice lacks. By contrast, in poems by contemporary male poets, the nightingale’s song is invoked to the spirit of the poem without suggestion of deference or failure: ‘Lend me your song, ye nightingales! oh, pour / The mazy-running soul of melody / Into my various verse!’ as James Thomson writes in *Spring* (1728).[[15]](#endnote-15) Throughout literary history, the nightingale’s song has of course been aligned with poetic voice, and in the eighteenth-century, Milton was most closely associated with the bird, especially through his invocation in book three of *Paradise Lost* (1667). His depiction of the nightingale as ‘Philomel’ in ‘Il Penseroso’ (1645) – which furthered the association between the bird and night and melancholy – was also widely referenced.

The keenly literary nature of Smith’s sonnet III notwithstanding, we get the strong impression that the speaker is located outdoors and encounters the nightingale in its natural habitat, amid ‘woodlands wild’. This impression is accentuated by the natural detail of other sonnets in the volume, such as VIII ‘To spring’, another woodland poem, in which ‘the young leaves, unfolding, scarce conceal / Beneath their early shade, the half-formed nest / Of finch or woodlark’ (21, lines 2-4). In his 1777 essay ‘An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry’ John Aikin urged poets to take to the fields for their poetic materials, with a new attention to and emphasis on precision and accuracy. He argues that ‘the accurate and scientific study of nature would obviate many of the defects usually discoverable in poetical compositions’, defects which include ‘supineness and servile imitation’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Smith first began writing poems in the year in which Aiken’s essay was published, and *Elegiac Sonnets* answers its call, evincing the rare ‘true feeling for rural nature’ Wordsworth celebrates. Smith’s poems very much present us with a speaker-poet in the natural world, keenly aware of literary tradition, yet with an eye always to the natural history detail of their surroundings.

Smith’s second nightingale sonnet, VII ‘On the departure of the nightingale’ invokes Milton, as noted, the chief literary association with the nightingale at this time. Befitting Smith’s first edition of sonnets, the sonnet she quotes from is Milton’s own first sonnet written early in his poetic career (*c*. 1629). In his first sonnet Milton assumes the role of an artless young lover, typical of his early poems:

O nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray

 Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still,

 Thou with fresh hope the lover’s heart dost fill,

 While the jolly hours lead on propitious May,

Thy liquid notes that close the eye of day,

 First heard before the shallow cuckoo’s bill

 Portend success in love[.][[17]](#endnote-17)

The sonnet alludes to the idea that it is good luck in love to hear the nightingale before the cuckoo. Through the nightingale the poet announces allegiance to both poetry and love, as the sonnet ends:

 Whether the Muse, or Love call thee his mate,

 Both them I serve, and of their train am I.[[18]](#endnote-18)

It is this announcement that Smith transposes to her own sonnet VII:

Sweet poet of the woods! – a long adieu!

 Farewel, soft minstrel of the early year!

Ah! ’twill be long ere thou shalt sing anew,

 And pour thy music on ‘the Night’s dull ear.’

Whether on Spring thy wandering flights await,

 Or whether silent in our groves you dwell,

The pensive Muse shall own you for her mate,

 And still protect the song she loves so well.

With cautious step the love-lorn youth shall glide

 Through the lone brake that shades thy mossy nest;

And shepherd girls from eyes profane shall hide

 The gentle bird, who sings of pity best:

For still thy voice shall soft affections move,

And still be dear to Sorrow, and to Love! (21)

Again, a natural history impression is given by the evocation of the secretive nightingale’s habitat: ‘the lone brake […] shades thy mossy nest’. The reference to Milton’s sonnet is made in line seven, whereby a note at the end of the line directs the reader to the final two lines of Milton’s sonnet. Within Smith’s sonnet, the lines have been revised, however: the ‘pensive Muse’ is a mate of the nightingale, but not ‘Love’, although the final line of Smith’s sonnet restores the amorous association, and adds ‘Sorrow’ (the more Smithian sentiment) to the nightingale’s remit. The relationship between the two sonnets is an uneasy one. While Milton’s poet welcomes and wishes for the nightingale’s song and presence, Smith’s sonnet focuses on the ‘departure’ or silence of the bird. As Milton presents his poetic project as jointly concerned with love and poetry, dependent on hearing the nightingale, the nightingale’s disappearance in the octave and the suppression of ‘love’ from the textual borrowing in Smith’s sonnet subtly displaces Milton’s authority, as her sonnet takes the English sonnet form. This seems particularly significant, for poets that did precede Smith in the eighteenth century in using the sonnet – Thomas Warton, Thomas Gray and Thomas Edwards – wrote in the Italian form, largely through the influence of Milton. Smith took the sonnet in a different formal direction with her use of the English and irregular sonnet forms. Thus, sonnet VII dramatises its ‘departure’ from Milton – and it does so formally through its English form – while appearing to herald his influence through the quotation.

The nightingale features in one further sonnet – LV ‘The Return of the Nightingale. Written in May 1791’, published in the sixth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (1791):

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! (48, lines 9-14)

The sonnet is unusual in its treatment of the poetic figure, as the nightingale now seems redundant to the speaker whose suffering has gone beyond that which the nightingale is capable of soothing or symbolising. The first two lines refer back to a previous poetic self when the bird was ‘hail’d’ and welcomed. Unlike the majority of Smith’s sonnets, LV does not include the intertextual reference which usually animate them. Thus, while earlier sonnet VII may be based around the departure of the nightingale, the bird does still ‘charm’ the poet, while its literary history underpins the poem. Contrastingly, LV is ‘on’ the bird’s return, yet the poem in a sense denies it a meaning and the lack of literary allusion implies its redundancy to Smith’s poetic project. Smith’s sonnets are involved in a complex set of ‘migrations’, steeped in Smith’s natural history knowledge of course: a note to sonnet VII refers us to ‘the supposed migration of the nightingale’ (more of which below). The bird itself, along with its literary history and relevance as a poetic figure, comes and goes across the two poems as its migration and Smith’s complex use of the bird interleave.

**Natural History**

Smith’s *A Natural History of Birds* was published success of her earlier natural history works for children: as she writes in the first letter:

Our late conferences on various subjects of Natural History have awakened your curiosity, my children, and as you wish to hear more of the varieties of Birds, their habits, and history, I will communicate the observations I have made, and consult the books I have about me, and endeavour to give you a general idea of these animals. (243)

The work takes the epistolary, rather than the ‘conversation’ form of her preceding works –yet of a maternal, Smith-like character and her wards – yet the impression is given of continuation here in audience and subject, and the work similarly blends ‘observation’, fieldwork, and ‘books’ – both of poetry and natural history. She follows the taxonomy of Linnaeus ‘the best authority’ rather than of Buffon, and stresses the importance of ‘orders, classes, and species’, which ‘give a precise and determinate idea of the objects we desire to understand’ (244). *Birds* joined a vast number of ornithological and natural history publications which had flooded the literary marketplace in the eighteenth century. The accuracy of many of these texts varies, and the nightingale has a special place in ornithological discourse due to its deep-rooted mythological associations. Many works recycle previous texts and include poems among their sources, permitting inaccuracies to be perpetuated. John Ray and Francis Willughby in their *Ornithology* (1678), and Thomas Pennant in his *British Zoology* (1768), quote from Pliny’s *Natural History* (in translation) in their accounts, for example, in which the singing bird is characterised as female. Pennant draws on Pliny regardless that he only ‘in general’ expresses ‘the truth’, and he also introduces Milton‘as the best judge of melody’, including a number of quotations from poems ‘Il Penseroso’ and *Paradise Lost* in which the nightingale is female and sings at night.[[19]](#endnote-19) By contrast, George Montagu, writing on the nightingale in his *Ornithological Dictionary* (1802), in which the nightingale is gendered male, notes that ‘we confine our pen to the facts . . . we must refer our readers to the British Zoology, for the more classical and elegant information’, as elegance gives way to truth and accuracy.[[20]](#endnote-20) Indeed, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the singing bird is described as and understood to be male more frequently. In an essay of 1773 Daines Barrington observes that it is the male nightingale which sings, and he also attempts to affix ‘precise ideas’ to its ‘celebrated descriptions’.[[21]](#endnote-21) He produces a table in which singing birds are given marks in different categories, and the nightingale clearly wins: in a turn aside from the poetical and mythological, Barrington in a supposedly scientific way deduces that the nightingale’s song is superlative, and is ‘plaintive’, a category in which it excels.[[22]](#endnote-22) It is also more frequently and clearly stated that the male nightingale sings to attract the female. As the Comte de Buffon writes, the male bird, ‘stimulated to court the joys of love . . . warble[s] his amorous tales’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Despite pronouncing that only the male bird sings, Buffon still refers to a singing, caged hen nightingale, however, and to a ‘sweet Philomela’, as the two genders and different versions of the bird seem able to coincide; propagated by the inclusion and amalgamation of a variety of previous works.[[24]](#endnote-24) In Thomas Bewick’s popular *British Birds* (1797), the singing bird is again male, entertaining the female during the incubation period ‘with his beautiful singing’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The year after Bewick’s *Birds*, Coleridge’s ‘The Nightingale. A Conversational Poem’—included in Smith’s nightingale genealogy—was published, marking a major turning point in the poetical life of the bird, for it is also male here. Coleridge undoes the connection with Milton, between the nightingale and melancholy, and indeed with poetic tradition and myth. Hearing the nightingale’s song, he muses ‘‘Most musical, most melancholy’ Bird! / A melancholy Bird? O idle thought! In nature there is nothing melancholy’.[[26]](#endnote-26) He traces and locates the source of the connection with melancholy to a ‘night-wandering Man’, ‘And many a poet echoes the conceit’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Jettisoning ‘Philomela’s pity-pleading strains’, he promotes ‘A different lore’ of ‘the merry Nightingale / That crowds, and hurries and precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes’, a ‘love chaunt’.[[28]](#endnote-28) Coleridge’s poem is a response and corrective to the melancholy, Philomela nightingale poems which precede it, including Smith’s own, as the male nightingale is appropriated by male poet in a mutually supportive turn in both natural and literary history. Indeed, in *Birds* when she introduces Coleridge’s poem following her own two sonnets, Smith writes that: ‘There are poets, however, who consider these tones as being indicative of joy, rather than melancholy’, nodding to the way in which Coleridge departs from her. Coleridge’s poem is steeped in male conversation, between male nightingales and male poets, from Wordsworth, to whom the poem is partially addressed, to Keats who composed his ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ (1819) a month after he met Coleridge, and discussed nightingales and poetry.

James C. McKusick has argued that ‘*Elegiac Sonnets* witnessed . . . the return of the nightingale’, as well as the sonnet form to English poetry, together with Coleridge’s conversation poem, ‘rescu[ing the bird] from its mythic associations’, and – while it may still retain an element of the literary – presents instead ‘real’ birds that inhabit ‘real’ English groves.[[29]](#endnote-29) However, for Smith the nightingale should never be freed from its literary associations, and for her to encounter the ‘real’ bird is to encounter the literary past. In *Birds* the status of the nightingale as the most celebrated and poeticised of birds is almost its most salient feature. Whereas Coleridge seeks to disentangle the nightingale from literary tradition and myth, promoting the different ‘lore’ of the natural world, Smith, perhaps more than any other poet holds the two overtly in dialogue. Indeed, Coleridge’s attempt to disentangle the nightingale from literary tradition appears somewhat disingenuous when literary tradition is shown to be so much part of what the bird is about. As Nick Groom writes, ‘In spite of Coleridge’s attempts to demystify the nightingale, the bird’s very being is defined by its cultural identity’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Coleridge himself acknowledges this in the verse note he included with his poem when he initially sent it to Wordsworth: ‘In stale blank verse a subject stale. I send per post my Nightingale’, undercutting the way he undoes the poetical trappings of the bird within the poem.[[31]](#endnote-31) Moreover, the source and nature of Coleridge’s ornithological knowledge is intriguing. While we do not know for certain that he read Buffon, we know that he read Gilbert White and William Bartram, and the poetic originality of Coleridge’s nightingales suggest a different and additional sort of knowledge beyond that which can be gleaned from stretching out beside a mossy forest-dell. Even if Coleridge has relinquished books – as recommended in another *Lyrical Ballads* poem ‘The Tables Turned’ – his poem evinces something of a scientific mode of observation and engagement required in order to deduce important aspects such as the sex of the singing bird, when and why it sings. Debbie Sly has drawn attention to this aspect of Coleridge’s poem, and also questions the provenance of its knowledge, deeming that the poem presents an ‘impossible project’, presenting a ‘mediated’ experience, while purporting not to.[[32]](#endnote-32) Coleridge’s poem is variously implicated and in dialogue with nature’s lore, natural history, literary tradition and myth.

Smith was well read in natural history, and *Birds* makes reference to a number of precedents. Her main sources are two anonymous works: *The Natural History of Birds* (1791), and *The Elements of Natural History* (1802). In her own *Birds*, Smith gathers different accounts, mediating between them and her own observations. Remarks are often introduced in a deferent way, qualified by ‘perhaps’ and ‘it seems’. Noting that ‘It is said’ that nightingales are not found north of Yorkshire she writes that ‘I am not indeed sure that this is the fact, but I have often known it asserted’ (335): she is always careful where she is unable to confirm reliably, or observe first hand. Commenting on migration, a matter on which ornithologists were still at odds, Smith is only able to state that ‘doubts have arisen, whether the Nightingale really retire into other countries, or remain silent in this country from the middle of June’, while we get the strong sense that Smith herself has observed that ‘the Nightingale is a solitary bird, and though it really sings all day, is usually celebrated for it’s [sic] song during the night’ (335). She departs from *The Elements of Natural History* here, in which it is stated that the nightingale sings only at night. Finally, while ‘the voice of the Nightingale is considered generally as expressive of melancholy’, she finds that ‘some of it’s [*sic*] various notes are certainly very cheerful’ (335). (Like Coleridge, she delves in to the reasons behind the nightingale’s melancholy associations: ‘Perhaps the impression is given by the mournful story told of the metamorphosis of an unhappy virgin into this bird’ (337).) Smith’s tone is non-committal, ambivalent. Smith does not comment on the sex of the bird, but in her main sources, it is observed that while both sing, ‘The males always sing better, as well as louder’, and ‘Female nightingales have been known to sing, but their song is inferior’.[[33]](#endnote-33) While Smith may curiously avoid this issue, her reference to herself as ‘an inferior poet’, may again be playful in this context: natural history—as it was understood at the time—echoes Smith’s sense of her place in literary history.

Whereas in other contexts these moments of ambivalence might appear suggestive of a lack, or as befitting a woman writer hesitantly entering into a male domain, they increase rather than take away from Smith’s authority. She writes at a time when ornithology was still emerging as a scientific discipline, and in which much erroneous material, stated as fact, was still being reiterated and produced. Stating moments of doubt only, albeit paradoxically, serves to strengthen her reliability. Clare perceived that Smith ‘wrote more from what she had seen of nature then [*sic*] from what she had read of it’, an approach to writing about nature championed by Gilbert White, who professed ‘to be an outdoor naturalist, one that takes his observations from the subject itself, and not from the writings of others’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Yet Smith also shared with Clare the joy of ‘look[ing] on nature with a poetic feeling’, as Clare wrote, taking delight in occasions ‘when an object in nature brings up in ones mind an image of poetry that describes it from some favourite author’.[[35]](#endnote-35) Like Smith, Clare had no time for ‘carcasses in glass cases’ or ‘collections of dryed specimens’, preferring to encounter the nightingale in is natural environment. Smith’s *Birds* is underpinned by this rare combination of observation and accuracy in the field, with a ‘poetic feeling’ involving both a love of the environment and a keen awareness of how nature and culture are intertwined. Thus, Smith’s *Birds* has an important place in the history of nature writing; beyond Clare (whose prose natural history works went unpublished in his lifetime), it finds a legacy in the work of ‘new’ nature writers such as Tim Dee, Richard Mabey and Mark Cocker whose prose – infused with ‘poetic feeling’ – combines field work and literary history.

Turning back to Smith’s sonnets, the close relationship between literary and natural history in Smith’s work becomes further apparent. As well as reworking sonnets named in *Birds*, they also raise some of the same ornithological points, and display a similar ambivalence. In the first sonnet, the poet’s ‘fancy’ must translate the bird’s song. Smith draws attention to the role of the poet—and perhaps scientist—in interpreting the natural world, and highlighting the fact that this will always be steeped in subjectivity and ‘lore’. While Smith hears and judges the song to be melancholy as a poet—aware of the Ovidian myth—she is also able to deduce cheerful notes based on empirical observation, and her sonnet depends on being able to ‘translate’ and interpret across nature and culture. The second sonnet holds natural and literary history more closely in dialogue. There is the same indeterminacy about migration present in her later natural history: ‘Whether on Spring thy wandering flights await, / Or whether silent in our groves you dwell’, whatever the facts regarding migration, ‘The pensive Muse shall own thee for her mate’: Smith’s interest in ornithological knowledge is in balance with that of poetry. Again, this is bound up with Smith’s sense of literary tradition; the way she positions herself in relation to Milton relies on the bird’s ‘departure’ or silence, the later sonnet LV on its return for the construction of Smith’s authorial persona and position. Clare may have perceived that Smith ‘wrote more from what she had seen of nature then from what she had read of it’, but only ‘more from’. At variance with Wordsworth’s ‘The Tables Turned’, ‘Science and of Art’ should *combine* with ‘a heart / That watches and receives’.[[36]](#endnote-36) To Smith the natural world was also experienced alongside what she had read—in works of poetry and natural history—and like the nightingale itself, she too should be encountered across all three.

NOTES

1. Smith’s relationship with literary tradition can thus appear contradictory. In *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Stuart Curran showed how poets of the period engaged with the forms of earlier poetry much more than had been understood. However, in celebrating Smith as a ‘Romantic’ poet, she became aligned with a literary-historical model prevalent since M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) whereby Romantic writers appear to break with the past. For other accounts of Smith as a ‘Romantic’ poet see Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2003) and *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, 1784–1807* ((Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Wordsworth, note to ‘Stanzas suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bees’ Head, on the coast of Cumberland’ (1833), in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 403. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charlotte Smith, *A Natural History of Birds, Intended Chiefly for Young Persons*, in *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, gen. ed. Stuart Curran, 14 vols., Pickering Masters [London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007], 13: 244. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically within the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Smith, *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, 13: 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Tony Pinkney, ‘Romantic Ecology’, in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. Duncan Wu (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 411-19: 414. See also John Rowlett, ‘Ornithological Knowledge and Literary Understanding’, *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 30 (1999): 625-47 and James C. McKusick, ‘The Return of the Nightingale’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 38 (2007), 34-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas C. Gannon, *Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic and Contemporary Native American Literature*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2009), 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gannon, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Part of this section has appeared, in a longer form, in Bethan Roberts, *Charlotte Smith and the Sonnet: Place, Tradition and Form* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Smith, *Poems*, in *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 13: 17, line 14. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically within the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, ‘Charlotte Smith and “The Swallow”: Migration and Romantic Authorship’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 72 (2009), 48-67: 61 and 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Francesco Petrarca, ‘311’, in *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Durling (London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 490. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Catherine Talbot, ‘Sonnet: In the Manner of Petrarch –’, *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine E. Ingrassia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 861, lines 1-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Anne Finch, ‘To the Nightingale’, *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century*, 860, lines 4, 5, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Sarah Dixon, ‘The Nightingal’, *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century*, 861, lines 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. James Thomson, ‘Spring’, *Poetical Works*, ed. by J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 25, lines 76-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. John Aikin, *An Essay on The Application of Natural History to Poetry* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. John Milton, ‘Sonnet I’, *Complete Shorter Poems,* ed. John Carey, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1997), 92, lines 1-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Milton, 93, lines 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Thomas Pennant, *British Zoology*, 4 vols (London: Benjamin White, 1768), 2, 255-256. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. George Montagu, *Ornithological Dictionary; Or, Alphabetical Synopsis of British Birds*, 2 vols (London: J. White, 1802), 1, *s.v*. ‘Nightingale’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Daines Barrington, ‘XXXI. Experiments and Observations on the Singing of Birds’, *Philosophical Transactions: Giving Some Account of the Present Undertakings, Studies, and Labours, of the Ingenious, in many Considerable Parts of the World*, LXIII, part I (London: Locker Davies, 1773), 249-91: 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Barrington, 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Natural History of Birds, Fish, Insects and Reptiles*, 5 vols(London: J. S. Barr, 1793), 5, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Buffon, 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ralph Beilby and Thomas Bewick, *History of British Birds. The Figures Engraved on Wood by T. Bewick. Vol. I. Containing the History and Description of Land Birds* (Newcastle: 1797), 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘The Nightingale; A Conversational Poem, Written in April, 1798, in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1991), 41, lines 12-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Coleridge, 41, lines 16, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Coleridge, 42, lines 41, 43-45, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. McKusick, 37 and 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Nick Groom, ‘Plastic Daffodils: The Pastoral, the Picturesque, and Cultural Environmentalism’, *Climate Change and the Humanities: Historical, Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Contemporary Environmental Crisis*, ed. Alexander Elliott, James Cullis, Vinita Damodaran (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Debbie Sly, ‘‘With Skirmish and Capricious Passagings’: Ornithological and Poetic Discourse in the Nightingale Poems of Coleridge and Clare’, *Worcester Papers in English and Cultural Studies*, 3 (2005), 6-19: 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Coleridge, quoted by Brett and Jones in *Lyrical Ballads*, 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Elements of Natural History; Being an Introduction to the Systema Naturae of Linnaeus*, 2 vols (London: Cadell and Davies, 1802), 2, 144; *The Natural History of Birds; Containing a Variety of Facts Selected from Several Writers, and Intended for the Amusement and Instruction of Children*, 3 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1791), 3, 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Penguin, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Clare, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. William Wordsworth, ‘The Tables Turned’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 104, lines 29-32 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)