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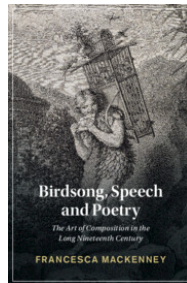
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BIRDSONG, SPEECH, AND POETRY



By **Francesca Mackenney**
(Cambridge, 2022) x + 184 pp.
Reviewed by **Hee Eun Helen Lee** on 2023-03-22.

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Francesca Mackenney frames an original argument on birdsong and science by asking how human beings have experienced birdsong and explaining how they have "translated" it into human words and phrases. Mackenney reads birdsong not as a figure, a metaphor, or a poetic trope, but as something analogous to human expression -- and thus a means by which scientists, philosophers, and poets have explored the nature and origins of the human arts of music, speech, and poetry (108). By visually analyzing the complex patterning of a bird's voice, she writes, twentieth-century sonograms can capture sounds and structures that human ears cannot pick up. It is precisely what escapes the human ear that raises critical questions for poetic form -- questions about what poetry can and cannot do, and about how it differs from a piece of music (6).

In raising these questions, her book takes its place with recent interdisciplinary works on music, nature, and poetry such as Elizabeth K. Helsinger's *Poetry and the Thought of Song in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2015), Elizabeth Eva Leach's *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry* (2018), and a collection of essays, *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music* (2020) edited by Delia da Sousa Correa.

Mackenney opens her book with two introductory chapters on the intellectual contexts of birdsong in Romantic and Victorian poetry. The first surveys "the science of birdsong" in the long nineteenth century. The second treats "the science of language" from speculations of Rousseau and Herder to the establishment of the New Philology in the 1860s. Mackenney

considers the complicated equation of language and thought in the long nineteenth century with further explorations of its underlying cultural and political implications.

The following three chapters show how poets ranging from Coleridge and Wordsworth to Thomas Hardy grappled with larger questions surrounding birdsong, speech, and poetry. Comparing and contrasting Coleridge with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Chapter three first sets Coleridge's metaphysical renderings of birdsong beside Dorothy Wordsworth's careful and detailed observations of birds and their songs, and then shows how William synthesized both responses to raise larger questions about the activities of human and non-human minds. In Chapters four and five, Mackenney shows how poets like Clare and Hardy appropriated Wordsworth's explorations in their own works.

In her chapter on Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth, and William Wordsworth, Mackenney examines the various ways the Romantics thought and wrote about birds, animals, Nature, song, and their interrelations. For instance, of the birds' "sweet jargoning" in Part V (line 363) of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," Mackenney writes:

As 'the language of birds' seems awkwardly fitted to the metre here, Coleridge deepens our sense of a hidden meaning behind these utterances: an incipient mode of communication which may seem on the very brink of breaking words, birdsong remains a sensual, inscrutable mode of expression which we can neither fully articulate nor comprehend in our own tongue (68).

As Mackenney construes "sweet jargoning," it denotes a sound that conveys and provokes complex emotive and psychological states beyond the bounds of human consciousness. Though the "Rime" otherwise features a seabird that cannot sing, Mackenney also cites Coleridgean poems about birds that can, such as "The Nightingale." And as already noted, she clearly distinguishes between Coleridge's metaphysical response to nature and her exploration of Dorothy's detailed observations of it, especially her close attention to the emotional and social aspects of voice that humans share with other animals.

While Coleridge metaphysically absorbs the "one life within us and abroad," we are told that Dorothy's alertness to the natural world was not inhibited by "any larger all-encompassing theory" (69). Quoting from her journals, Mackenney argues that Dorothy's writings about nature should not be dismissed as merely fanciful, sentimental, or overwrought with human imagination. "Nature," Mackenney claims, "is always in her writing a thing in itself and in its own right, however darkly glimpsed by even its most patient and excellent observers" (71). In *Zoonomia*, Mackenney reminds us, Darwin had asserted that animal knowledge is "acquired" through fear at the sight of mankind, and the language of this fear is passed down from one generation of birds to the next. By contrast, Dorothy's writing about birds breathes sympathy for a creature struggling with a hostile and unpredictable world. Attentive to the emotional and social import of birdsong, she opens herself to the implicit and analogical resemblances between the call of birds and the speech of humans.

As for William Wordsworth, Mackenney insightfully probes a "pre-verbal, musical and subvocal language of thought or 'undersong'" in his poetry. Building on the work of Sydney and Eva Mary Grew, who long ago showed how [William Cowper's conception of music influenced Wordsworth](#), Mackenney finds the resonance of music in parts of *The Prelude*, where musical passages recall intimate associations to memory and meditation and thus facilitate a more "comprehensive" view of the poet's individuality and growth. According to Mackenney, birds such as a "single wren" sweetly singing "in the nave" of Furness Abbey (1850 *Prelude* 2. 118-20) and "a little band" of redbreasts (1850 *Preude* 7. 24-25) reflect on what music brings to human lives by way of association: sounds that helped assuage the loneliness of city life for the poet.

In William's focus on his memories of rural music as well as in Dorothy's implicit analogies between what Mackenney calls the "tremulous lives of birds and the no less tremulous lives of human beings" (73), Mackenney finds anticipations of Clare and Hardy. "Clare's literary development," she argues, "also involved unlearning a negative form of self-consciousness - the shyness which, time and again in Clare's poetry, is seen to result in silences, blocks and choking fears." Clare, the so-called "peasant poet," paid particular attention to nightingales, accurately describing the birds but not reducing them to mere "transcriptions from nature" (101). According to Mackenney, Clare challenges ideas about poetry and what constitutes the "poetic" self. Almost chiding the Romantic mythification of the nightingale, as in Keats' famous ode, Clare "forces his readers to acknowledge a mysterious, but nonetheless highly alert, intelligent creature anxiously defending its home..." (103). In "The Progress of Rhyme," probably composed between 1824 and 1832 (Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period*, ed. Robinson and Powell [OUP 1998] 4: 456-61), Clare compares the development of birdsong with the development of human language. In examining Clare's comparison of the chattering of birds with the poet's forming of syllables and meaning, Mackenney offers a subtle and significant way to disrupt and create a disjuncture of complete authorial agency in birdsong, speech, and poetry. The famous transcription of the nightingale's song then appears in the same thread of thinking about how a bird's song may be related to human words, but also, and more importantly, on how the poet's early thoughts and mutterings develop gradually into syllables and strains, until the poet finally embraces "My heart's companion poesy" (qtd. 125).

Mackenney's last chapter places Hardy's writing within the context of the heated dispute that arose between evolutionary theory and "The New Philology" regarding the relationship between language and the thinking mind (137). She complicates the opposition between humans and animals by noting not only the blurriness of lines between their ways of learning to communicate, but also the communication of human categories in social status and gender. Although she chiefly considers Hardy's poetry, she cites *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to show how Hardy grapples with nature's indifference as it is rather than as a projection of human motives and values. This illustrates his awareness of a common error in anthropomorphism -- to interpret animal life as a portrait of human life.

Poetry, as Hardy conceived it, was "an archaic, musical and elliptical mode of expression" that he believed better expressed both his thoughts and *the thoughts of others*" (138, italics mine). To show how Hardy reveals the interconnectedness between all races and classes of human beings, and the "whole conscious world collectively" (qtd. Robert Gittings, *Thomas Hardy's Later Years* [1978], 138), Mackenney cites such well-known poems as "The Darkling Thrush" and "The Blinded Bird" along with the lesser known, "The Spring Call" and "The Puzzled Game-Birds," as well as his contributions to his second wife Florence Emily Hardy's collection *The Book of Baby Birds* (1912). In these poems, Mackenney argues, Hardy offers a "revisionist reading of Romanticism." Unlike the birdsong poems of his predecessors, who used their imaginations to interpret birdsongs, Hardy's birdsong poems depict the reality of life and hardship in the birds' own world.

Ultimately, viewing culture's attention to poetic expression and formation of human thought and the ongoing discussion on relationship between humans and other creatures, Mackenney expands the discussion in various ways. In the process, her wide-ranging knowledge of the nineteenth-century science offers compelling readings of canonical and non-canonical works to raise burgeoning questions about race, gender and class in literature of the long nineteenth century. The scientific analogy between birdsong and human speech explored in this book answers and develops further lines of inquiry about the relationship between humans and animals and the cognitive capacities of other species but also about how they differ from and resemble our own. She offers ways literary scholars can respond to the sounds and song of other species in the Anthropocene.

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