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Wordless Words: Children, Language, and Nature's Ministry in 'The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem'

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IN THE NOTEBOOK ENTRIES of the 1790s, Coleridge devoted considerable attention to observing his children's growth, particularly their early attempts at language and their relationship to nature. These musings on children deeply influence the conversation poems, particularly "Frost at Midnight" and the lesser known "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem." In this paper, I would like to explore the ways in which "The Nightingale" posits a complex philosophical and theological concept of communication: namely, that a child-like mind, which is pure, unself-conscious and full of wonderment can best understand nature as the spiritual language of God.

The 1798 version of "The Nightingale" has been somewhat neglected by critics, perhaps because it appears formless or rambling compared to other great conversation poems like "Frost at Midnight." However, I will argue that in fact, the poem does have a coherent structure: it contains a carefully orchestrated series of different perspectives and encounters with the voice of nature, embodied by the nightingale's song. As the poem progresses, empty literary convention and second-hand interpretations of nature are gradually pared away in favor of an increasingly direct engagement with the language of nature, culminating in two non-verbal gestures: Hartley holding up his forefinger to "bid us listen" to the nightingale's song, and the child ceasing his crying as he "laughs most silently" with the moonlight glittering in his eyes. These non-verbal gestures carry the philosophical weight of the poem: they are direct apprehensions of nature, untrammelled, unmediated, and unscripted - and although they are simple and wordless, they succeed as true moments of poetic communication.

There are two terms that are vital to interpreting this poem: one is "the language of nature" and the other is the "ministry of nature." Looking at "The Nightingale" and "Frost at Midnight" together, we can cobble together Coleridge's understanding of these terms. In "Frost at Midnight," he writes:

... so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.¹

These lapidary lines set out several key Coleridgean concepts. Firstly, the language of nature is composed of "lovely shapes and sounds intelligible"—namely the beautiful sights and sounds of nature that are understandable or "intelligible" as an "eternal language" uttered by God. The book of nature as a companion to the Holy Scriptures as a Revelation of God

¹ *PW* (CC) 1456.

is an ancient concept² that is central to the Romantics understanding of the relationship of nature, humanity, and the spiritual world. Coleridge also sets out the idea of nature's ministry in this passage, or the belief that God ministers or aids humanity through the forms of nature, by teaching "Himself in all, and all things in himself." Coleridge does not elaborate exactly how nature ministers to humanity: in "Frost at Midnight" he calls it "secret ministry"³ twice, once in the first line, and again a few lines before the end. Its silence underscores that the ministry of nature is a wordless, intuitive interchange, but also that nature's workings and meanings are obscure and difficult to fully comprehend. Finally, this passage suggests that the innocence and openness of a child is needed to "see and hear" this language and be aided by its ministry.

This conception of nature as a language and as a ministering force for humanity is echoed in "The Nightingale." In the section below, Coleridge chides a poet to surrender himself to nature's language, again assuming its supremacy over its human equivalent:

And many a poet echoes the conceit
 Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
 When he had better far have stretched his limbs
 Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
 By Sun or Moon-light, to the influxes
 Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
 Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
 And of his fame forgetful!⁴

A key phrase repeats between these lines and the earlier passage from "Frost at Midnight"—namely, "shapes and sounds," which are the building blocks of the language of nature. In "The Nightingale," these shapes and sounds are expressed as the modulation and variation of the bird's song, which is the voice or language of nature itself. But the passage above gives us even further valuable insight about Coleridge's concept of language and nature. Firstly, in order to understand nature truly, he must set aside his own literary preconceptions and relinquish his identity as a poet, becoming "of his song/ And of his fame forgetful"; secondly, he adds to "shapes and sounds" the phrase "shifting elements" to give a degree of mutability and uncertainty to the language of nature — it is no mere fixed hieroglyphic, but an organically growing and changing language; and finally, the poet must "surrender his whole spirit" or yield in child-like passivity to the influence of nature. Coleridge is asking for the reader to make a transition away from stale literary

² The term originates in late Antiquity, when Chrysostom and Augustine coined the phrase, and became popular in the early modern period. By the Romantic era, it was a widely used metaphor. See Klaas van Berkel and Arjo Vanderjagt, eds., *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History* (Leuven, Paris and Dudley, MA.: Peeters, 2006) ix.

³ *PW* (CC) I 456.

⁴ *PW* (CC) I 517. All following references to "The Nightingale" are from *PW* (CC) I 516-520.

language and turn to witness first-hand the language of nature instead, an act that the poem itself incarnates. This shift away from the human towards the natural is a linguistic move, it is a literary move, and ultimately a spiritual move: shedding the adult persona becomes redemptive, fulfilling the adage from Mark: "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein."⁵ The purity of childhood is a state closer to God, and although the child unconsciously enjoys this oneness, the adult must actively recapture it. In *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge writes:

For never can I look and meditate on the vegetable creation without a feeling similar to that with which we gaze at a beautiful infant that has fed itself asleep at its mother's bosom, and smiles in its strange dream of obscure yet happy sensations. The same tender and genial pleasure takes possession of me, and this pleasure is checked and drawn inward by the like aching melancholy, by the same whispered remonstrance, and made restless by a similar impulse of aspiration. It seems as if the soul said to herself: from this state hast *thou* fallen!⁶

Childhood is elevated to a state of innocence and oneness, and the admonition "from this state hast *thou* fallen!" is a call to restore unity with the divinity, the "life and light of nature" that he sees in the vegetable creation.⁷

Emulating the purity of childhood in order to understand the language of nature is a consistent theme in Coleridge's writing. Before beginning upon a close reading of the poem, it would be illuminating to examine some of his notebook entries that reveal his thoughts about nature, language and childhood. Coleridge sees children, as many Romantic poets do, as the epitome of purity: unself-conscious, and intuitively engaged with nature and spirit.⁸ A child's earliest experiments with language are guided by principles of love and communion, experienced through the mother-child bond. Coleridge is especially interested in the relationship between mother and infant as a kind of philosophical and emotional grounding point of purity, oneness, and harmony, an idea which he develops at length in his *Opus Maximum*.⁹ He comments, "To trace the if not the absolute birth yet the growth & endurancy of Language from the Mother talking to the Child at her Breast—O What a subject for some happy moment of deep feeling, and strong imagination.—"¹⁰ Language itself is founded upon the intuitive and wordless interchange between mother and child. In another remarkable entry, Coleridge traces the

⁵ Mark 10:15.

⁶ *LS (CC)* 71.

⁷ *LS (CC)* 73.

⁸ Judith Plotz in *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001) writes "The mental qualities imputed to childhood are those befitting a solitary creative genius who in isolation from human society is able to form unitary visions of a world instinct with meaning. Within the Romantic discourse of essential childhood, the mind of the child is set up as a sanctuary or bank vault of valuable but socially-endangered psychological powers: idealism, holism, vision, animism, faith, and isolated self-sufficiency." 13.

⁹ See *OM (CC)* 119-136.

¹⁰ *CN II* 2352 21.536.

infant-mother bond as a source of wordless love:

When the little creature has slept out its sleep and stilled its hunger at the mother's bosom/ that very hunger a mode of Love, all made up of Kisses—and coos and wantons with pleasure, and laughs and plays bob cherry with the Mother, that is all, all to it—it understands not either itself or its Mother—but clings to her, and has a right, an undescrivable Right to cling to her—seeks her, thanks her, loves her, without forethought, without afterthought—O me thinks if it had been written, I should have invoked a hundred Times the Our *Father* that art in heaven, hallowed be thy name! —¹¹

This intense form of communication is not verbal, nor is it even fully conscious: indeed it is “without forethought, without afterthought.” The poet must intervene to translate these wordless words on behalf of the infant—most strikingly, with a prayer, and not just any prayer, but the Lord's prayer “invoked a hundred Times.” Human language cannot match that wordless and intimate connection; in fact, this experience has not yet been put in words adequately: he says “*if* it had been written” (emphasis mine). So often in Coleridge's writing the conditional tense appears when a longing for union and oneness is in equal parts tantalizing and unachievable. In these two notebook entries, the intuitive bond of child and mother is seen as the epitome of union and communion.

In his notebooks, Coleridge also envisions children as vessels of the spirit working through nature. One entry describes his two boys: “Children in the wind—hair floating, tossing, a miniature of the agitated Trees, below which they play'd—the elder whirling for joy, the one in petticoats, a fat Baby, eddying half willingly, half by the force of the Gust—driven backward, struggling forward both drunk with the pleasure, both shouting their hymn of Joy.”¹² Here the children are “eddying half-willingly” with only partial volition: the power of nature drives them into a joyous rapture. Coleridge is drawn to these images of eddying, whirling, and spinning, envisioning the child as an instrument of nature.¹³ He describes Hartley's “usual whirl-about gladness”¹⁴ as if the emotion and continual movement defined him. These images of children as conduits of natural forces, carefree and unself-conscious, mirror the descriptions of the nightingales abandoning themselves to the power of the wind in “To the Nightingale”: “Many a nightingale perch giddily/ On blossomy twig still swinging from the breeze,/ And to that motion tune his wanton song/ Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head.” Children and nightingales are conduits of the creative powers at work in nature. However

¹¹ CN III 4348 (N. 21½ .39). This passage is invoked again in an extended discussion of the mother-child bond in Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*, in a chapter entitled “Of the Origin of the Idea of God in the Mind of Man.” See *OM* (CC) 120.

¹² CN 1:330 21.32.

¹³ Even more literally, Coleridge compares Hartley to an Eolian Harp in *CL* II 909.

¹⁴ CN I 1001 21.153.

there is an important distinction to be made here. In the passage quoted earlier from *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge upheld the innocence of infancy as a state from which we have fallen. Children do not rationally understand their connection to nature, but intuitively yield to its influence. Adults must *actively* return to this state of being:

From this state hast *thou* fallen! Such shouldst thou still become, thyself all permeable to a holier power!... to that life and light of nature, I say, which shines in every plant and flower, even as the transmitted power, love and wisdom of God over all fills, and shines through, nature! But what the plant *is* by an act not its own and unconsciously—*that* must *thou* make thyself to *become*—must by prayer and a watchful and unresisting spirit, join at least with the preventive and assisting grace to *make* thyself, in that light of conscience which inflameth not, and with that knowledge which puffeth not up!¹⁵

Children and nightingales are not conscious in the same ways as adults are; they do not “read” nature in the same manner as an adult. In this poem, their reading is not literary but spiritual, an intuitive engagement with the living powers of nature, a relationship that Coleridge craved and actively pursued. He later regretted the potential confusion of God and Nature in these lines, and of course it is not the only instance of a more seasoned and theologically subtle Coleridge looking back on the quasi-panteism of his early writing. However, even in his later writing Coleridge never really abandons the theme of union: he just finds more suitable theological expressions, such as Trinitarianism and the concept of *logos* to express a potential union of the natural and spiritual worlds.¹⁶

If we look at “The Nightingale” through the lens of Coleridge’s thoughts on children, language, and nature, we see that the poem sets out quite a profound and radical agenda: a child’s wordless, innocent, and intuitive appreciation of the nightingale’s song is a truer “reading” of nature’s language than the storied literary tradition of melancholy nightingales. The poem illustrates this thesis as it moves through different interpreters of the birdsong: a slew of different poets (including Coleridge himself, as well as Dorothy and William Wordsworth), a “night-wandering man,” who first called the nightingale’s song melancholy, and “youths and maidens most poetical,” as well as two ingénues, a “most gentle Maid,” and Hartley. Each group responds to the birdsong differently: in brief, the poets wrestle with the limits and prejudices of human language and literary tradition, while the virginal maid and Hartley are rapt, devout, and child-like listeners, perfectly in tune with the language of nature.

The goal of the first stanza of the poem is to free the nightingale from its literary baggage, dating back to Greek and Roman mythology and Milton’s

¹⁵ *LS* (CC) 71.

¹⁶ See chapter six of my book *Coleridge’s Responses: Coleridge on Nature and Vision* (London: Continuum, 2008).

iconic depiction of the bird as a melancholic in “Il Penseroso.”¹⁷ Rather than enhancing the pleasure of the song, this literary heritage has dulled its original potency, and Coleridge the poet wishes to reinstate an original, fresh, direct relationship to natural phenomena. The poem begins, as Gene Bernstein notes, with a series of negations:¹⁸ “No cloud, no relique of the sunken day... no long thin slip/ Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues”—this barrage of negatives suggests that Coleridge is stripping away literary convention from the very start and inviting the reader to see the scene freshly and intimately. He calls directly to the reader to hear the song as simply as a child: “And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,” echoing Hartley’s request to “bid us listen” to the bird in the last stanza.

Coleridge refutes tradition by debunking the cliché of Milton’s “most musical, most melancholy bird,” which had become a stale literary convention by 1798. He claims “In nature there is nothing melancholy” but instead of blaming Milton for this error, he invents a “night-wandering man,” a poet who due to some personal tribulation, erroneously imposed a melancholy meaning on the nightingale’s song instead of surrendering himself to its sound without prejudice. Here we begin to see the contrast between a jaded adult’s view as opposed to a child-like openness to the language of nature: the “night-wandering man” is called a “poor wretch!” who “filled all things with himself,/ And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale/ Of his own sorrow”—in other words, instead of losing himself in nature, he imposes his personal woes onto nature, in effect grafting his human language inharmoniously onto the language of nature. A good poet, “should share in Nature’s immortality,/ A venerable thing! and so his song/ Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself/ Be loved like Nature!” If he surrendered his poetic persona, he could merge with the creative forces in nature and in poetry—note the reciprocal language in the lines above. But he is not the only one—“youths and maidens most poetical” who are spending their twilight evenings in “ball-rooms and hot theatres” are also adopting the second-hand tradition of the melancholy nightingale instead of listening to his song first hand.

After criticizing the limits and flaws of second-hand and conventional views of the nightingale, the poem suddenly changes tack: the rest of the poem celebrates the ideal interpreters of nature’s language, as it is embodied in the nightingale’s song. The first three interpreters are Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Dorothy: “My Friend, and thou, Our Sister! We have learnt/ A different lore: we may not thus profane/ Nature’s sweet voices, always full of love/ And joyance!” This phrase “a different lore” is key here—it is shorthand for the language of nature, as opposed to the book-learned lore of

¹⁷ See, Frank Doggett’s “Romanticism’s Singing Bird.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 14.4 (1974): 547-561; Fred V. Randel’s “Coleridge and the Contentiousness of Romantic Nightingales.” *Studies in Romanticism* 21:1 (1982): 33-55; and Robert Koepp’s “What [His] Bird’s Worth”: Coleridge’s “*The Nightingale*” and His *Birds of Different Feathers*.” *Coleridge Bulletin: The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge* 14 (1999): 53-9 for more on the literary legacy of the nightingale’s song.

¹⁸ Gene Bernstein, “The Secondary Imagination in “The Nightingale,” *ELH* 48.2 (1981): 339-350.

literary tradition.¹⁹ This word ‘lore’ also appears in “Frost at Midnight” in Coleridge’s achingly beautiful lines “My babe so beautiful! It thrills my heart/ With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,/ And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,/ And in far other scenes!”²⁰ The choice of the word “lore” is vital here: it suggests knowledge almost mystical, or a set of beliefs handed down from generation to generation. This “lore” is a not just a language or a set of symbols, it is a process of opening and surrendering oneself to the spiritual influences of nature.

The next listener of the nightingale’s song is the intriguing and oft-discussed “most gentle Maid.” Criticized by some as an awkward gothic motif, I think that Coleridge advances a step further in searching for an ideal interpreter for the nightingale’s song. The maid is outside of society, unprejudiced by its customs and traditions. Not only does she “know all their notes” she is described like a religious devotee—“Even like a Lady Vowed and dedicate/ To something more than Nature in the grove.” She is witness not only to the beauty and the variety of the nightingale’s song, but also to its meaning—namely, the “something more than Nature” that is embodied in the song—its spiritual meaning.

However the story of the gentle maid has dark undertones: who is this lady? Why does she wander around an abandoned castle? Doesn’t she crave other human contact? Is her observation of birds that “perch giddily” and “tune his wanton song/ Like tipsy joy that reels with tossing head” infused with sexual tension? “Wanton” suggests lasciviousness, but in poetic and archaic usage it also meant “sportive, frolicsome” or “impelled by caprice or fancy.”²¹ Perhaps both readings are appropriate. According to Tim Fulford, Coleridge was drawn to the Hebrew term “Shekhinah,” which refers to God’s presence in the world, but also “an androgynous first created being, a spiritual archetype in which male and female were one, which could be refound by man and wife in sexual union.”²² The gentle maid could be a coded reference to the kind of love he had not found in his own marriage and which would, within a year, find its focus in Sara Hutchinson. Coleridge often conflates the union between mother and child, man and woman, and self with nature.²³ If so, the thought is not carried through to completion: the gentle maid section ends as abruptly as it began, and the next stanza bids farewell to the nightingale. It is a strange interlude in the poem that implies a coded, subconscious, or deeply personal meaning that is not entirely coherent.

However meaningful the “gentle maid” may be for Coleridge as an auditor

¹⁹ See also Susan Luther, “A Different Lore’: Coleridge’s ‘The Nightingale.’” *The Wordsworth Circle* 20: (1989): 91-7.

²⁰ *PW (CC)* I 456.

²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²² Tim Fulford, *Coleridge’s Figurative Language* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 87.

²³ I am grateful to Graham Davidson’s insightful comments on this paper, particularly the Fulford reference; the similarities between the “gentle Maid” and Coleridge’s later love for Sara Hutchinson; and the following passages that suggest the merging of different forms of love: *CN* II 2495 and *CN* IV 5463 f.57. Feedback on this paper from the Coleridge Summer Conference broadened my thoughts on this poem considerably; William Davis noted the potential sexual tension of the “gentle Maid section,” and Jim Mays suggested that weight of the poem is centered upon the “gentle Maid” section, as opposed to the end of the poem.

of the nightingale, I would argue that in the end, Hartley is upheld as the true interpreter of the language of nature. If the gentle maid section is ambiguous and somewhat dark, the celebration of Hartley's interaction with the bird is joyous and pure. At the heart of the poem is a very unconventional hero and two decidedly unliterary gestures: little Hartley holding up his forefinger to "bid us listen" to the nightingale's song, and ceasing his tears as he "laughs most silently" upon beholding the moon.²⁴ His enjoyment of nature is unmediated and free from any darker associations or meanings. He is the ideal auditor of the bird's song, although he cannot fully articulate the reasons for his joy. Although his powers of human speech are limited—"he mars all things with his imitative lisp"—he is capable of a pure, intuitive gesture of communication. In another silent gesture, when he "beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,/ Suspends his sobs and laughs most silently" he is also wordlessly capturing a powerful instance of nature's ministry. Found at the climax of the poem, the gestures of a child—these wordless words—are upheld as ideal engagements with the language of nature. The fact that these interactions are intuitive, not fully conscious, and non-verbal does not degrade them for Coleridge; in fact these qualities underscore the purity of the experience.

In "The Nightingale," first-hand experience trumps poetic tradition. A child trumps generations of poets, because his two silent, intuitive gestures are more direct, unmediated, and true than centuries of poetic tradition. Although the child's purity, passivity, unself-consciousness, and capacity for wonder makes the child the best interpreter of the language of nature, there is a paradox here: Hartley's gestures are non-verbal. Coleridge the poet must step in as interpreter: it is *his* poetic language that transmits Hartley's anecdotes and brings us as readers along with him on this poetic journey. While setting out to destabilize the literary tradition of the nightingale, in the end, Coleridge creates another second-hand account of the nightingale's song. However, along the way he has attempted to fuse some of the best elements of childhood (its freshness and its sense of unity) with the best of nature's language (its spiritual power and meaning) and forge a new imaginative interpretation of the nightingale's song. For in Coleridge's own aesthetic view as stated in the *Biographia*, his goal as a poet is not to become a child, but rather "To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar... this is the character and privilege of genius."²⁵ I think that perhaps, more than any other of Coleridge's poems, "The Nightingale" fulfills these lofty goals.

²⁴ Another example of an infant's wordless gesture coinciding with early intuitions of love can be found in "The Garden of Boccaccio": "A tremulous Warmth crept gradual o'er my Chest,/As though an Infant's Finger touch'd my Breast./ And one by one (I know not whence) were brought/ All Spirits of Power, that most had stirr'd my Thought/ In selfless Boyhood, on a new world tost/ Of wonder, and in its own fancies lost;/ Or charmed my Youth, that, kindled from above,/ Loved ere it loved, and sought a form for Love." *PW* (CC) II 1089.

²⁵ *BL* (CC) I 82