

[Review] Francesca Mackenney. *Birdsong, Speech and Poetry: The Art of Composition in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 244 pp. ISBN 9781316513712.

Wendy Woodward

University of the Western Cape

Francesca Mackenney's enquiry is underpinned by the unquestionable assumption that birds and nonhuman animals are deserving of ethical consideration, as well as the fruitful interplay between science (or what passed for science at the time) and poetic inspirations. Mackenney locates birdsong philosophically, poetically and scientifically as an 'analogy' for the origins of human language. Theories of birdsong in the late eighteenth and long nineteenth century are analysed and contextualised in relation to the then debates about animal language, with Mackenney extending such debates into ideas on race, gender, class and sexuality and species. This volume studies significant questions of language and nonhuman animals, contextualising not just the reading of poems but, more widely, language debates in the long nineteenth century. The reader is thus at ground level for the inception of ideas.

In the chapter 'The Science of Birdsong 1773-1871', bird-catchers are represented, not merely as cruel perpetrators of their trade, but as having something to offer practical scientific methods. The discussion of the growing ethical critique of this trade is fascinating. Darwin regarded birdsong as close to human language, suggesting that both birds and human infants have an 'an instinctive capacity to acquire an art' (qtd. in Mackenney 36). Darwin was pivotal in ushering in later research connecting language, the mind and their interaction. Mackenney proffers some delightful nuggets – theories that seem more poetic than scientific – for example that of Alexander von Humboldt's notions of 'primitive man' whom he described as 'a singing

creature, only associating thoughts with the tones' (qtd. in Mackenney 37). While so much of what passed for scientific thought might seem naïve to present day readers, Mackenney shows how certain ideas have led to fruitful research.

In Chapter Two, 'The Science of Language 1755-1873', the prevailing theory that sound came before sense and that poetry was more foundational than prose is examined via philosophers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and others. The cornerstone of anthropocentrism may, of course, be located in the belief that nonhuman animals lacked language and therefore reason, which justified their denigration and ill-treatment. Mackenney raises a central conundrum for writers and particularly for poets: while their medium is language it is often experienced as lacking, as poets struggle to verbalise thoughts and feelings. Wordsworth and Darwin both subscribed to the notion of a subvocal 'language of the mind' or 'mentalese' as it's now known. Mackenney traces this idea in other writers below.

This volume brings home the extraordinarily limited purview of the 'science of language' theorists and their descendants. The gothically-named Monboddo may seem appealing in his theory that humans and primates were indistinguishable (42) but rather than being farsighted, his ideas were undermined by prejudice and his celebration of a white male Western elite. Even evolutionary theorists like Spencer and Darwin who were interested in the origins of music, speech and language perpetuated judgmentalism. Darwin, for example, was sceptical about women's intellectual capabilities and against 'savages' and their 'hideous music' (qtd. in Mackenney 52). Yet he was affectionate about birds' appreciation of song and mating display, dismissing the view that animals lack mind or soul. At the same time, Mackenney juxtaposes such ideas and those of John Locke with recent studies of language and thought, such as those of Frans de Waal, and Stephen Pinker.

The chapter on Coleridge and the Wordsworths is a delight – and very informative. Coleridge may have been interested in philosophical matters pertaining to birdsong, speech and poetry, but he was sceptical about 'proto-evolutionary theory and cultural primitivism' (60). If Coleridge needed to locate his writing within current ideas, deploying nature merely as 'the reflection of the imagination's own shapings' (71), Dorothy Wordsworth's journals were grounded in the immediacy of the everyday, in her close observations, often about birdsong.

Tragically, her creativity never came publically to fruition. Mackenney's reading of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is a tour de force, turning on the term 'jargon' and its connection with the old French 'jargoun' for birdsong which renders 'sweet jargoning' ambiguous. Mackenney is particularly adept at delving into etymologies throughout her readings. The interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry, intertwining music, sound and birdsong suggests new ways of appreciating his oeuvre, with Romantic poetry shown to have much to offer ecologically.

The chapter on John Clare proffers a more balanced reading of his work. Mostly categorised as a 'peasant poet' preferring description to ideas, Clare was self-taught in natural history and science. Mackenney adds layers to the Clare debate, suggesting that he is well aware, poetically, of how his own perceptions influenced his responses to birdsong. Clare's nuanced sensitivities to the bird's subjectivity and dissembling capabilities in 'The Nightingale's Nest' are worlds away from Keats' emotional projections in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. (This latter poem will never be the same for me.) Clare's recognition of avian social behaviour contrasted with the reductive discourse in natural history of instinct as the basis for birdsong with the belief that only humans can have memory, and hence intelligence. Clare's poetry is also directly influenced by the song of birds. In attempting to render the song of the nightingale in words in a lengthy autobiographical poem, birdsong influences his rhythm and rhyme. He was interested in a 'quasi-linguistic form of communication: humming, muttering, seemingly on the verge of blabbing out the words and yet never quite doing so' (125).

The chapter on Thomas Hardy begins with some unnecessary repetition of earlier debates about language in human and nonhuman animals but soon moves on to the conflictual debates around theories of evolution and the New Philology in connection with language and the thinking mind. Hardy is presented as ecologically astute with an appreciation of what he called 'the whole conscious world collectively' (qtd. in Mackenney 138) and, like earlier poets here, he adheres to the idea of a way of thinking without words. The reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is masterly – in relation to Tess and birdsong, as well as the suffering of nonhuman animals and birds. Mackenney continues the discussion of what she calls 'a subvocal language of the mind' (160); Hardy depicts Tess responding on a subliminal level to certain forms of church music. In

his poetry, Hardy, like Clare, rather than idealising birds imagines them as embodied beings in ‘The Darkling Thrush’ and ‘The Bird Catcher’s Boy’ – the latter poem showing the putative demise of the trade.

Birdsong, Speech and Poetry is essential reading for anyone interested in the Romantics, in poetry, in conceptions of birdsong and the connected debates in the long nineteenth century. The fine, detailed history of the provenance of ideas about birds that are still extant is edifying but depressingly, the long nineteenth century debates that Mackenney elucidates are all too familiar in contemporary ideas about nonhuman animals. At least the then discussion about sympathy *for* birds is superseded by sympathy *with* them, a trait lacking in Cecil John Rhodes. As I write, a chaffinch sings in my Cape Town garden, the only species to survive Rhodes’ cruel transportation of two hundred English songbirds, including nightingales, to the Cape Colony in 1899. He missed English birdsong, but the caged migrant birds died, silent in a climate foreign to them. Mackenney would have something to say about the chaffinch’s presence, I’m sure, and about late nineteenth-century colonial tampering with birdsong and avian belonging.