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Curious to Know: John Clare's "The Nightingale's Nest" (1832)

Abstract: *This essay explores the difference between a modern, strongly scientific notion of objective knowledge as 'justified true belief' and literary modes of knowledge production which deliberately replace systematic detachment from with involvement in the objects under consideration. A contrastive case study of an 18th-century dictionary entry on the "Nightingale" and some of John Clare's Romantic bird poems exemplifies the difference between articulate and personal knowledge, between what Gilbert Ryle has distinguished as 'knowing that' and 'knowing how'. In contrast to the by then established textbook approach to natural history, Clare's bird poems and natural history letters engage in poetic, process-based forms of investigation that remain sensuously responsive to, and subject to be affected by, the matter they seek to know. Clare's texts enable readers to read an observer's experience in the making and to entertain ecological modes of thinking that challenge the anthropocentric mind.*

Epistemologically minded scholars, analytic philosophers in particular, usually insist that a belief or statement qualifies as knowledge only if it is justified in a way that proves, or demonstrates, it to be true to its subject-matter (cf. Williams 13–27). Thus defined, nothing that (explicitly or implicitly) claims to be knowledge has a right to this claim unless it identifies itself as more than 'mere' opinion, speculation, impression, or fanciful thought (cf. Herrnstein Smith 1–17). Whenever an idea or argument carries with it, more or less overtly, the allegation that it represents knowledge, it must therefore be prepared to answer the question of what justifies it to do so. Certainly, notions of knowledge can vary, and have varied, immensely, depending on the historical, cultural, and institutional circumstances in which they are, or were, pursued and applied. As the history of science has taught us, what in one context is likely to be dismissed as ill-founded speculation, might in another context well be acceptable as

valid and serious knowledge.¹ Johannes Kepler was profoundly interested in astrology, for instance, and Newton could still draw upon alchemical wisdom without having to fear losing his reputation as a natural philosopher (Morrisson 17). By the same token, ways and means of justification are subject to change too.

However, despite this relativity or context-dependency of what ‘knowledge’ means, it seems safe to say that, in the course of the 18th century, certified true belief became increasingly associated with a general or objective form that, though originating in first-person experience, is manifestly recognizable as dissociated from, and purified of, the contingent qualities supposed to be characteristic of the subjective mode (Levine 1–43; Daston and Galison 191–252). More precisely, this idea of knowledge as objective and pure arose along with, and is inseparably tied to, the modern concept of science and, based on it, a specifically scientific method that has since come to be entrusted with the social task of capturing and safeguarding what is and is not justified as true belief. In what follows, I shall therefore begin by expounding some implications of this modern concept of science and one of the literary forms concomitant to it, namely the encyclopedia. Subsequently, I turn to an analysis of John Clare’s bird poems, specifically “The Nightingale’s Nest” (1832). As I argue, Clare’s work exemplifies a mode of enquiry that is, in more than one sense, curiously involved with, rather than detached from, whatever it seeks to know.

1 Science, Encyclopedias, and Modern Knowledge

One of the most concise definitions of the modern concept of science was proposed by John Herschel in 1830. “Science,” Herschel writes in his *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*, “is the knowledge of many, orderly and methodically digested and arranged, so as to become attainable by one” (18). On this conception, science represents a general mode of knowledge that is abstracted from individual circumstances and points of view. Such knowledge is “*about*” its subject-matter “in the sense

1 Therefore, scholars of literature and culture often deliberately refuse to define the term ‘knowledge’ independently of the ways in which it is brought to matter in specific historical contexts, cf. Vogl (256–258).

in which 'about' is *away* from," as John Dewey and Arthur Bentley explain (282). For it is knowledge only by virtue of removing its referents from the multiple ways in which they can be perceived, so as to encapsulate them in an ideal, often mathematical shape "attainable by one."

In accordance with this idealizing tendency of modern science, whatever was regarded as objectively known came to be situated, by definition, above or beyond people's immediate perception of it. "Knowledge deports us, evicts us," as Steven Connor puts it. "In knowledge we take leave of our senses" (193). While this extraction of the ideal from the sensual, or of the sensual from the ideal, enabled observers to grasp the matters of their investigations in allegedly self-contained forms, it also, at least in theory, separated people's knowledge about the world from their experience of participating in it. Thus, the rise of scientific objectivity came to suggest that humans can only know the environment they inhabit by reconstructing it in a place outside of their immediate, sensuous engagement with it (cf. Ingold, *Making* 5). In this way, the modern concept of science, along with what Bruno Latour has called "the modern constitution" more generally (13–48), not only established a division between being and knowing, ontology and epistemology, concrete matter and ideal form, as well as subjective feelings and perceptions on the one hand and objective facts or data on the other. More importantly, this modern concept of science also implied that all knowledge is premised upon a translation of the subjective into the objective, or an extraction of the objective from the subjective. It stipulated that knowledge is to be attained by an act of subsuming changeable materials under ideal types, or of representing particular experiences in general terms. This explains, as John Dewey has pointed out, why science is inherently predisposed towards forms of classification and definition (*Experience* 152). Such forms are 'modern' in Latour's sense because they allow for knowledge to be categorized and contained, assigned to predefined places and stored in robust boxes, which seem to preserve it as if it were stable and complete, resistant to time.

The literary genre that perhaps corresponds most closely to this impetus to classify and define is the encyclopedic dictionary which, with its often alphabetically arrayed subject headings, has become emblematic of the modern attempt to define and inventory what is considered to be generally known about the world (see Yeo). It needs to be said, however, that

the editors of many Enlightenment dictionaries and encyclopedias, such as Denis Diderot or Ephraim Chambers, understood very well that the alphabetical order preferred by most of them imposed an abstract system upon people's experience of the world, cutting it up, according to an arbitrary logic, into a register of independent parts (Kilcher 203–29). Many encyclopedists knew, in other words, that the alphabetical arrangement ripped things and actions out of their accustomed contexts, placing subject-matters next to each other which, in the world of ordinary experience, are not akin while separating others that would usually be expected to belong together (see Erchinger 174–206). Seeking to compensate for this problem, editors therefore introduced the device of the cross-reference, allowing readers to return the knowledge assembled in the dictionary, to some extent, to a mode of existence that would be closer to their commonplace experience of the world. In the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1790–1798), for example, the alphabetical order seems to suggest that the wading bird called “snipe” is closely related to “snigging, a method of fishing for eels,” and “snoring,” these being the two entries that frame the fowl in the dictionary. But at the same time, the cross-reference integrates the snipe into an ornithological context of Linnean taxonomy on the one hand and of common hunting activity on the other, sending readers to “scolopax” and “shooting” respectively (Vol. 17, 562).

Thus, by means of the cross-reference, dictionaries not only exposed the contingency of the alphabetical order that characterized them; they also allowed for different types of learning or wisdom to coexist within one and the same framework of universal knowledge. Under “scolopax,” the bird reappears as the “*gallinago*, or common snipe” which, among other things, “weighs four ounces,” is “near 12 inches” long and “about 14” broad, its head being “divided lengthwise with two black lines, and three of red, one of the last passing over the middle of the head, and one above each eye” (Vol. 16, 715). And if one looks under “shooting,” one will learn, in addition, that “[t]he snipe is a bird of passage” that is “scarcely worth shooting till the frost commences. In the month of November they begin to grow fat” (Vol. 17, 443). While the first pieces of information are put forth in the mode of a disinterested description that is supposed to do no more than distinguish the common snipe from other kinds of fowl, the details associated with “shooting” represent the bird specifically as prey.

In both cases, however, the snipe is made known in a way that situates it away from, or above particular situations, sensations, and points of view. As with all other subjects, the snipe that one looks up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whether it is the one that is identified by the natural philosopher or the one that is known to be shot by the hunter, is a general or ideal one.

No doubt, then, the cross-reference inserts a flexible and dynamic element into the body of knowledge represented by the encyclopedia, for it suggests that its component parts are not as objective and self-contained as they may seem, but tend to branch out in different directions, forming a mesh of lines that can be followed in multiple, even serendipitous ways. Still, my point remains that there seems, in practice, no better place to look for knowledge in the modern sense than the subject headings in an encyclopedic dictionary. Take the entry on "nightingale," allegedly a species of *motacilla*, as one learns right at the beginning (Vol. 13, 66), including various wagtails or warblers which, together, are given a separate record. In this second article, under "motacilla," the nightingale, identified by its Latin name *luscinia*, is described as follows:

The bill is brown: the irides are hazel: the head and back pale tawny, dashed with olive: the tail is of a deep tawny red; the under parts pale ash-colour, growing white towards the vent: the quills are cinereous brown, with the outer margins reddish brown: the legs cinereous brown. The male and female are very similar. This bird, the most famed of the feathered tribe for the variety, length, and sweetness of its notes is migratory, and supposed to be an inhabitant of the Asiatic regions during such times as it is not to be found in Europe. [...] They are solitary birds, never uniting into even small flocks; and in respect to the nests, it is very seldom that two are found near each other. The female builds in some low bush or quickset hedge well covered with foliage, for such only this bird frequents; and lays four or five eggs of a greenish brown. The nest is composed of dry leaves on the outside, mixed with grass and fibres, lined with hair or down within, though not always alike. The female alone sits on and hatches the eggs, while the male not far off regales her with his delightful song; but as soon as the young are hatched, he commonly leaves off singing and joins with the female in the task of providing for and feeding them. (Vol. 12, 398)

In this account, the nightingale is placed before the reader as a body of information that is, as it were, dissected and decomposed, divided into segments and chunks: bill, irides, head and back, tail, under parts, quills, legs. Taken together, these components are supposed to constitute a whole, a positive, self-sufficient unit of knowledge, "this bird." And the typical

characteristics and behavior of this creature, both “the female” and “the male,” are then specified in a manner that is supposed to make them recognizable in any particular case.

As indicated, such encyclopedia entries constitute a terrain of certainty and familiarity, for their main function is, and has always been, to act as a source of reliable knowledge, a means of looking up facts about a certain subject that are assembled and saved in a relatively enduring frame.² In this way, encyclopedic knowledge is supposed to provide an authoritative ground on the basis of which individual assumptions about various subject-matters may be checked. Thus, whoever holds a specific belief about the appearance and behavior of, say, nightingales, about how they build their nests or perform their songs, can simply justify this belief by referring to the corresponding record in the dictionary. As a result, the dictionary, with its packaged and labelled subject-matters, suggests that knowledge can be grasped and possessed without, or outside, of any personal experience of that to which it refers. Indeed, one might argue that the practice of classifying and defining matters of fact has itself contributed to the modern division between being and knowing as well as, concomitantly, between two senses of knowledge which have since been described as personal and articulate knowledge, or “knowing how” and “knowing that” (Ryle).

These two senses of knowledge may be distinguished, again, by a look at the nightingale. While the dictionary article certainly informs people what the nightingale looks like, that it builds its nest with “dry leaves on the outside,” and that it lays “four or five eggs of a greenish brown,” it cannot make sure that they know how to tell this bird’s nest from that of a hedge sparrow, or even to identify a nightingale when they see or hear one. Rather, the nightingale conjured up by the book presents readers with no more than a schema that remains unfulfilled, unless it is realized in and through practical experiences of searching for, watching, and listening to, the respective bird (cf. Dewey, “Theory” 297–98). By means of such experiences, the knowledge of the nightingale’s ways may, over time, grow into people, and they into it, such that they are, so to speak, “at home” in

2 Nowadays, though, the nightingale seems to be more commonly assigned to the thrush (*Turdidae*) or flycatcher (*Muscicapidae*) varieties, rather than to the genus *motacilla*.

this subject-matter, knowing it inside out (Dewey, *Experience* 161). In this practical mode, what is known is no longer enshrined, as the dictionary entry, in a fixed and self-contained form outside of one's life. Rather, what is known in practice has become integrated into a person's existence, changing and developing along with it. Such knowledge is alive because it lives in and with the activities of those who use, maintain, extend, and transform it.

2 John Clare's 'The Nightingale's Nest'

John Clare, "the peasant poet" (Bate 143) or "bard of the wild flowers" (Mahood 112), as he has been called, was a keen and passionate observer of animals, flowers, trees, and the rural environment of his native Helpstone (Northamptonshire) more generally. His writing has therefore, in recent years, inspired a growing body of work in the ecology of literature, to which my reading can also be seen to contribute.³ One of Clare's favorite subjects were birds, especially their ways of living and dwelling, with which he engaged in countless poems such as "The Moorehens Nest," "The Robins Nest," and "The Yellowhammers Nest" [sic], to name but a few.⁴ Inspired by Elizabeth Kent's *Flora Domestica* (1823) and, to a lesser extent, Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), he even made plans for a prose work on natural history, to be called *Biographys of Birds and Flowers*, drafting several letters, or fragments of letters, on various aspects of the local fauna and flora (Bate 269–88; Heyes). One of these natural history letters, as scholars have now come to call them, contains a characteristic passage in which Clare takes issue with what he calls "bookish" accounts of a bird, such as "the exact description of its head rump & wings the length of its tail & the breadth from the tips of the extended wings," which, as we have seen, is typically found in encyclopedias or other such manuals (*History* 38). In contrast to this textbook approach to natural history, Clare professes to practice a way of looking "on nature with a poetic feeling," as he puts it. "I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foliage & not to examine their carcasses in

3 See, for instance, McKusick (*Green Writing* 77–94), Rigby, and Poetzsch.

4 On Clare's notoriously idiosyncratic use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, see McKusick.

glass cases” (38). As this indicates, what Clare had in mind was a mode of knowing that allows investigators to remain sensuously responsive to, and subject to be affected by, the matter they seek to know. This “poetic” approach entails a process-based conception of knowledge that is entirely different from the static or “bookish” one described above. For, to know an organism or thing, by Clare’s account, does not mean to grasp it as (if it were) a dead, self-contained object confined to a glass case. Rather, in order to know a subject-matter, Clare suggests, one has to follow its changes and motions, to proceed with it along an open-ended path. “I feel as happy as they can in finding a new species of field flower or butter flye which I have not seen before,” as Clare himself explains this in an attempt to distinguish his method from that of other naturalists, “yet I have no desire further to dry the plant or torture the Butterflye by sticking it on a cork board with a pin” (*History* 38–39). All he wished, Clare goes on to say, was for “the fluttering butterflye to settle till I can come up with it to examine the powderd colours on its wings & then it may dance off from fancyd dangers and welcome” (39).

The aim of Clare’s method, then, is not to arrest the matter of his interest (such as a butterfly) in the form of a definite object so as to enable the investigator to gaze at and dissect it from an equally fixed position or point of view. Instead, Clare, as an observer, sought to remain, in all senses of the word, *alive* to the organisms he observed, just as he preferred these organisms, conversely, to remain alive to him. What Clare proposes, one might therefore say, is what Tim Ingold has called an “art of inquiry”, a mode of knowing that “moves forward in real time, along with the lives of those who are touched by it, and with the world to which both it and they belong” (*Making* 7). In this mode of enquiry, as Clare’s “The Nightingale’s Nest” may exemplify, knowledge comes to life through the practices and movements that form, and are informed by, it:

Up this green woodland ride lets softly rove
 And list the nightingale – she dwelleth here
 Hush let the wood gate softly clap – for fear
 The noise may drive her from her home of love (*Works* 213.1–4)⁵

5 All references to this edition will be given by page and line numbers.

Here, in one of Clare's best-known poems, the act of speaking seems to take place right inside the dwelling area, "this green woodland ride," of the nightingale that we, the readers, are invited to "list," with "list" here meaning primarily "to listen to" but not entirely without the connotation of "to register," as well as "to identify," and "to locate" (OED). As indicated by the whispered request to move as quietly as possible ("lets softly rove," "Hush let the wood gate softly clap"), the muffled excitement of being so close to the famous singer is palpably mixed with, and tempered by, the "fear" of driving her away from her favorite haunt, her "home of love," which, as the subsequent lines suggest, is as familiar to the bird as it is to the speaker.

For here Ive heard her many a merry year
 At morn and eve nay all the live long day
 As though she lived on song – this very spot
 Just where that old mans beard all wildly trails
 Rude arbour's o'er the road and stops the way [...]
 There have I hunted like a very boy
 Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns
 To find her nest and see her feed her young
 And vainly did I many hours employ
 All seemed as hidden as a thought unborn
 And where these crimping fern leaves ramp among
 The hazels under boughs – Ive nestled down
 And watched her while she sung – and her renown
 Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird
 Should have no better dress than russet brown (213–14.5–21)

Instead of flying directly to the "famed" bird "on the viewless wings of Poesy," like the speaker of Keats's quite different "Ode to a Nightingale" (458.33), Clare's creative practice, as Hugh Haughton has pointed out, remains "firmly on the ground" (65), entangled with the ramping "fern-leaves" "among/The hazels under boughs." "Creeping," along with the former self of the speaker, "on hands and knees through matted thorns," Clare's imagination seems to inhabit the same environment as the creature that is its subject, rather than listening to, or looking at, it from a different (and distant) vantage or point of view.

Unlike Keats's nightingale, which remains entirely unseen, the songster "watched" in Clare's text is therefore not an ideal presence, a "Dryad of the trees," imagined to live in some "melodious plot/Of beechen green, and

shadows numberless,” to which the poet aspires too (458.7–9). Rather, Clare’s nightingale is visible as an empirical organism whose appearance makes the speaker “marvel” precisely because it is not as fanciful and extraordinary as the bird is commonly said to be. In Keats’s poem, the speaker repeatedly flirts, albeit tentatively and unsuccessfully, with the thought of escaping the fugacious, time-bound world of material existence, “[w]here youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (458.26), for an ideal being of eternal forgetfulness and delirious joy that he takes to be embodied by the singing nightingale: “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” (459.61). In Clare’s poem, by contrast, the “ecstasy” of the bird – a term used by both him and Keats – remains strictly dependent upon the bodily life and experience of the human observer. Indeed, such an observer is necessary, as the subsequent lines suggest, to bring the animal’s rapture into existence in the first place:

Her wings would tremble in her extacy,
 And feathers stand on end as twere with joy
 And mouth wide open to release her heart
 Of its out sobbing songs – the happiest part
 Of summers fame she shared – for so to me
 Did happy fancies shapen her employ (214.22–27)

While Clare’s text pays careful attention to the physical manifestations of the bird’s supposed “extacy” – her trembling wings, erect feathers, and “wide open” mouth – it also, by means of the conditional form (“as twere”), highlights the difference between the bird’s exertions and the way they are perceived by the lyrical I. The creature’s apparent delight is not only the result of its singing endeavors. It is also a product of the speaker’s “happy fancies” that shape the nightingale’s song “so to” him that it becomes an ingredient, “the happiest part” of the blissful summertime scene evoked by the poem. In short, the happiness intimated here originates neither in the singing of the nightingale nor in the sensation-based imagination of the observer. It emerges from the meeting of both. As the rhyme pattern suggests, the nightingale’s “employ” and the “joy” the speaker experiences upon observing it are both separate from and intimately related to each other.

Bird and boy, singer and listener, then, seem affectively caught up in their mutual presence, responding to and becoming with each other.⁶ In this manner, their co-existence may be sustained for a certain amount of time. "But if I touched a bush or scarcely stirred/All in a moment stopt – I watched in vain/The timid bird had left the hazel bush/And at a distance hid to sing again" (214.28–31). As these lines indicate, Clare's writing makes no attempt to conserve the nightingale, neither as an eternal source of inspiration and aesthetic delight (as which it appears in Keats's poem), nor as an object of scientific curiosity. The text does not, and seems hardly tempted to, turn the nightingale into an ideal bird. Instead, it keeps her alive as a being of the material world, capable of escaping the observer's attempt to know her ways. Thus, in the second part, the poem returns to the present tense and the concomitant mood of immediacy with which it has begun, seeming to pursue the bird almost "in real time," to repeat Ingold's phrase. "– Hark there she is" (214.42), the speaker cries out, apparently interrupting his own lyrical musings about the bird's music as an integral component of "summers life" (214.38).

– Hark there she is as usual lets be hush
 For in this black thorn clump if rightly guest
 Her curious house is hidden – part aside
 These hazle branches in a gentle way
 And stoop right cautious neath the rustling boughs
 For we will have another search to day
 And hunt this fern strown thorn clump round and round
 And where this seeded wood grass idly bows
 Well wade right through – it is a likely nook
 In such like spots and often on the ground
 Theyll build where rude boys never think to look (214.42–52)

Again, the poem does not teach us, textbook style, about the nightingale as a predefined object, but invites us to join the speaker in a "search" for what is "curious" about the bird's life and "hidden." As we read, we are asked to pass beneath "rustling boughs," "part aside these hazle branches," and "wade right through" the "seeded wood grass" seeming to obstruct our

6 The idea of being as a mode of becoming with others, including other species, has been adopted from Haraway (3–42). "To be one," Haraway notes, "is always to *become with many*" (4).

way. Like an expert field guide, the voice of the poem takes us deep into the animal's habitat, showing us how to identify the kinds of "nook" in which her nest is "likely" to be found. Even the grammar of these lines appears as straggling and uncultivated as the area through which they make us pass.

Finally, the text seems to offer a general piece of knowledge about the behavior of nightingales: "In such like spots and often on the ground/Theyll build." But this, as the next passage clarifies, is not an abstract proposition but an insight that is animated by the speaker's personal life, having been gained through practical exercise and experience. "Aye as I live her secret nest is here/Upon this white thorn stulp – Ive searched about/For hours in vain" (214.53–55). The speaker's ornithological knowledge is not only premised upon repeated, often unsuccessful trial. More importantly, it is embodied and alive, subsisting in the practices through which it is enacted. Therefore, whatever knowledge Clare's poem contains is continuous with the personal feelings and emotions that it expresses, rather than made to terminate in an impersonal object, formula, or proposition.

What the text enables us to read, then, is an experience in the making that, even in an apparently accomplished form, remains open to be affected and corrected by unexpected or recalcitrant events. Having almost reached the bird's nest, for instance, the speaker notices a "plaintive note of danger nigh" followed by a sudden stillness reminiscent of "choaking fear" (214.58/60). What is more, this experience seems to move the poetic voice to stop short of going any further, and to "leave the nest as we found it – safetys guard/Of pathless solitude shall keep it still", as the speaker puts it, before inviting us to take another look:

See there shes sitting on the old oak bough
 Mute in her fears our presence doth retard
 Her joys and doubt turns all her rapture chill
 Sing on sweet bird may no worse hap befall
 Thy visions then the fear that now decieves
 We will not plunder music of its dower
 Nor turn this spot of happiness to thrall
 For melody seems hid in every flower
 That blossoms near thy home (215.64–72)

"Fears," "joys," "doubt," and "rapture" turned "chill": Once again, the nightingale's reaction is described as if it were human. And yet, Clare's

mode of anthropomorphism does not simply appropriate the bird's noises and motions for human purposes, aesthetic or otherwise. Rather, it draws attention to the difference between the nightingale's actual life in its environment, which has now receded into the background, and the human perception that has come to intrude into, and impose itself upon, it. As Clare's syntax intimates, it is "our presence" that is at the heart of "her joys" as well as "her fears." The bird's emotions do not exist without, or independently of, the human thoughts and (speech) acts that bring them about. Thus, while the poem suggests that "we do not live with" animals, to put it in Heidegger's terms, "if living means: *being* in an animal kind of way," it still insists that "we *are with* them nonetheless" (210). In this manner, the poem's use of *anthropomorphism* fosters an ecological mode of thinking and awareness that exposes the *anthropocentrism* inherent in the proposition that nightingales and other animals are, by definition, other to, and outside of, the human (see Ryan, 22–49).

3 Being Curious

In summary, one can say that Clare's text neither separates the nightingale's ways of life from the world of human signification, nor does it fully accommodate them to it. In other words, the poem presents the animal's habits as deeply familiar to the speaker while still letting them be what is repeatedly called "curious":

How curious is the nest no other bird
 Uses such loose materials or weaves
 Their dwellings in such spots – dead oaken leaves
 Are placed without and velvet moss within
 And little scraps of grass – and scant and spare
 Of what seems scarce materials down and hair
 For from mans haunts she seemeth nought to win (215.76–82)

Returning the reader from passionate evocation to relatively dispassionate description, these lines represent the nightingale's dwelling as a matter of facts, composed of "loose" and "scarce materials": "leaves," "scraps of grass," "down and hair." The result is what appears to be a comparatively objective account of the bird's nest (cf. Johanne Clare 182). Yet, the animal's construction, by virtue of the curious quality ascribed to it, also remains, at least partly, strange to human ways of building and life ("from mans haunts

she seemeth nought to win"). However familiar the nightingale's behavior may be to the speaker, the poem still grants it an element of peculiarity that may, at any moment, turn into a source of wonder and astonishment, as the final lines reassert once more:

The nest is made an hermits mossy cell
 Snug lie her curious eggs in number five
 Of deadened green or rather olive brown
 And the old prickly thorn bush guards them well
 And here well leave them still unknown to wrong
 As the old woodlands legacy of song (215.88–93)

Being "still unknown to wrong," the nightingale's eggs are ultimately left to exist in their own right, as a mode of existence that remains a "curious" phenomenon, even though it may already be well defined in propositional terms (as above: "the female [...] lays four or five eggs of a greenish brown").

It might in fact not be a coincidence that the adjective "curious" can describe an investigating person as well as the matter it investigates. For, Clare's poetic discourse, despite the evident ornithological expertise of its speaker, seems to stay as curious as the bird that it sets out, and invites us, to "list." The text's mode of presentation, this is to say, corresponds to a kind of knowledge that is not about its subject-matter "in the sense in which 'about' is *away* from," to return to Dewey's phrase. Instead, the poem enacts a way of "knowing from the inside," if I may use another of Ingold's terms (*Making* 1), that remains in close contact with the creature it studies, caring about and moving along with it. In this mode of participant observation, as Clare's poem vividly illustrates, curiosity and care have not (yet) been disengaged ("Science" 19). Indeed, one might argue, along the lines of Ingold, that Clare's speaker cares about the nightingale's life and safety because he regards her, to some degree, as curious, being curious about her at the same time. Conversely, the text seems to be curious about the nightingale because it cares about her life. Clare's poem, in short, suggests that "curiosity" is "a way of caring" ("Science" 19). Whatever knowledge it conveys can therefore not be objective in the modern sense because that would presuppose a division between the personal feelings and tastes of the researcher and the condition of the matter to be understood. According to the modern concept of science, what is objectively known, needs no longer to be cared about. It is finished and filed, such that whatever may have been

curious about it has been transformed into manageable data or spelled out in general, propositional terms (Ingold, "Science" 19–20).

By contrast, what Clare's poetry carries with it is a form of knowledge that is essentially in process, or under construction, having no place outside of the activities through which it is brought to matter and put to use. "Knowledge," as Clare himself puts this in a short but suggestive note, "is not confined to Halls or colledges or forum[s]." Rather "like Socrates," she "accompanys us in our walks in the fields and attends on us at our homes," being "every where with us ready to instruct and assist us in our enquireys" (*Works* 482). Thus conceived, knowledge does not take people out of their senses but enables them to maintain a close personal relationship with whatever they study. Knowledge, in Clare's sense, is what allows you to be at home with a subject-matter without ceasing to care (and, indeed, wonder) about its curiosity. Many of Clare's bird poems are ways of registering and enacting this kind of knowledge that "is not confined to Halls or colledges" or, one might add, encyclopedias, but that comes to matter in, and emerges from, the experience of being with the things and organisms one explores.⁷

Take, to conclude with a final example, the remarkable stanzas "To the Snipe" (1832),⁸ a "Lover of swamps," as it is addressed, that inhabits a "quagmire overgrown/With hassock tufts of sedge" (*Works* 205.1–3),⁹ an "untrodden" area of "marshy flats" and "stagnant floods" almost inaccessible to human beings (206.31, 34). Here, "where fear encamps/Around thy home alone", the text continues,

The trembling grass
Quakes from the human foot
Nor bears the weight of man to let him pass
Where he alone and mute
Sitteth at rest

7 Thus Clare's writing might even be seen to perform the kind of "sweet" enquiry that Amanda Jo Goldstein has identified as a specifically Romantic way of conducting scientific investigation through poetic work. Goldstein does not deal with Clare, though.

8 This poem, apparently composed in 1832, was not published during Clare's lifetime. Further details on its place within Clare's oeuvre can be found in Gorji (99–121).

9 All references to this poem are given by page and line numbers.

In safety neath the clump
 Of huge flag-forrest that thy haunts invest
 Or some old sallow stump (205.3–12)

Again, Clare's poem evidently cares about the safety of the snipe, placing its "haunts" in close relation to encroaching human hunters, "[f]ree booters [...] Intent to kill and slay" (207.65–66), who might become a threat to the bird's life. The use of "the human foot," in the manner of *pars pro toto*, for the human race as well as the description of the hassocks as a "huge flag-forrest," suggests that the poetic speech assumes a perspective close to that of the bird sitting underneath a "clump" of reed grass or "some old sallow stump." At the same time, the speaker presents the snipe's way of existence as a strange and, indeed, most curious one. "Thriving on seams/ That tiney islands swell/Just hilling from the mud and rancid streams," the snipe, unlike the nightingale, appears to be a rather unusual subject-matter for poetry or fine art (205.13–15).

Whereas, in other Romantic poems, notably Percy B. Shelley's "To a Sky-Lark" (1820), birds sometimes inspire the imagination to soar upwards, towards the loftier regions of the ideal, Clare's snipe, equipped with a "bill [...] Of rude unseemly length," is shown to "delve and drill/The gelid mass for food" (205.17–20). Unlike the nightingale, he does not even sing, and his "mystic nest," the speaker suspects, is entirely hidden in "The moors rude desolate and spungy lap" (205.23–24). There is not much that is ideal about this snipe. Rather, as in the nightingale poem, the act of speaking *about* the creature to be known remains deeply entwined with, and alive to, the experience of being, more or less intimately, *with* it. Epistemology has not (yet) been divorced from ontology (cf. Barad 183–85). Clare's writing, notwithstanding the obvious general knowledge it displays, still allows its subjects to exist for their own sake, in the particular conditions to which they are so curiously well "[s]juited" (205.18), as is the snipe's nest to the watery land; "Mystic indeed" (205.25).

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