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The Establishment and Development of the Mockingbird as the Nightingale's "American Rival"

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

Gabe Cameron

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Dr. Michael Cody, Chair

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Keywords: Appropriations, transatlanticism, John Keats, Walt Whitman, poetics, muse

ABSTRACT

The Establishment and Development of the Mockingbird as the Nightingale's "American Rival"

by

Gabe Cameron

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many British poets attempted to establish a universal poetic image in the European nightingale, often viewing it as a muse or contemporary artist. This use of the songster became so prevalent that it was adopted, along with other conventions, for use in the United States. Yet, despite the efforts of both British and American poets, this imperialized songbird would ultimately fail in America, as the nightingale is not indigenous to the United States. The failure of this nightingale image, I contend, is reflective of the growing need to establish a national identity in nineteenth-century American literature, separate from British convention. In this process of cultural exploration, I believe the northern mockingbird becomes the replacement for the nightingale, and is developed as a distinctly American image through the poetry of Maurice Thompson, Walt Whitman, and others, exemplifying traits of the country through its charismatic song and personality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the 63rd volume of the scientific journal *Philosophical Transactions* (1773), naturalist Daines Barrington made an observation on the relationship between the European nightingale and the American mockingbird: “It may not be improper here to consider, whether the nightingale may not have a very formidable competitor in the American mocking-bird. . . . his pipe comes nearest to our nightingale of any bird I have yet met with” (284-285). Barrington’s observation would go on to be quoted and discussed by American naturalists, such as Alexander Wilson, in his descriptions of the mockingbird and its relation to birds across the Atlantic. In 1805, Barrington’s words were republished, with brief introductory remarks, by American author and magazine editor Charles Brockden Brown, revealing an American literary man’s curiosity regarding the nightingale. In a 1904 work “Birds and Poets,” John Burroughs echoes the comparison that Barrington had made between the two birds, dubbing the American songster as the nightingale’s “American Rival” (10). Yet, despite the assessment of both Barrington and Burroughs, early scholarship around the similarities between the American mockingbird and the European nightingale remained mostly scientific, with a distinctive focus on biology and habits of the birds themselves, and less about their presence in the literary canon. Today, the scholarship remains in essentially the same place. While much has been written on the establishment of both the nightingale and mockingbird in literature, very little has focused on the distinctive relationship that they share.

Beginning at least as early as Homeric Greece, Europeans spent centuries exploring the literary possibilities of the nightingale’s melody and pathos, an exploration which culminated in British Romanticism, through which the self-reflexive viewpoint of Nature was often personified

in the poet's relationship to the bird. This perfected and artistic version of the nightingale became influential when used in the poetry of Charlotte Smith and John Keats, who specifically placed the nightingale in a guiding role and then attempted to learn from the songbird's indifference or beauty. This use of the nightingale as a source of inspiration led many writers, including American poets, to adopt the songbird trope for their own use. Yet, despite American fascination with British poetry and their use of the songster, the bird's application in the United States would ultimately fail, as the nightingale is not native to the region, causing American poets to mimic the idealized world of the British, rather than write about their own landscape.

This complication is a fundamental reason that the relationship between the nightingale and mockingbird in literature remains so important. In shaping the nightingale into an imperialized poetic figure, British Romantics created a trope that they thought universal, as it was difficult to imagine the bird's displacement outside of the British Empire. Yet, the American emulation of the nightingale, particularly as its habitation was in outdated traditions and verse forms, revealed that this line of thinking was inaccurate. American use of the nightingale in poetry complicated the Romantic idea of poetic responsibility. Rather than attempting to harness a true understanding of poetic imagination like Keats would do through the images and imaginings of the nightingale, American poets inadvertently disconnected themselves from the natural world through trying to do similar work with the bird. This use of the songster implied that the many nineteenth-century American poets who wrote nightingale poems were relying on an inauthentic narrative, including experiences that could not be replicated, and ones that were inherently fabricated. Charles Brockden Brown comments on this in his 1805 reframing of Barrington's observations, saying, "We Americans who have never passed the ocean, and many

of us, indeed, who have crossed it, are utter strangers to the nightingale, except in description” (Brown 417).

With this complicated landscape of nineteenth-century American poetry in mind, I aim to trace the development of the American muse-bird, the mockingbird, and how American poets used this, as a symbol, to connect with nature on more authentic level. For American poets, the establishment of a true songbird was an important step in developing their distinctive voice. Early adherence to British poetic conventions, including the nightingale trope, had created poetry in America that was unoriginal. By adhering to British conventions and forms, American poets were unconsciously impeding the new nation’s literary progression. Critics, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, insisted that American poetry would never be critically viable if it did not break free of these formalities (“American Scholar” 149). To be seen as worthwhile, American writers would have to take risks in form and expression, challenging what was expected and venerated in poetry.

I believe that it can and should be argued that the development of the mockingbird as the American muse-bird is at the forefront of this enterprise. Through the 1830s to the latter half of the century, the mockingbird became intertwined with American poetry, evolving, for example, as the figurehead of Southern American culture, a reflection of the heritage that was prominent in that landscape. Meanwhile, in the writings of Walt Whitman, the songbird would take on the role of “the American mimic,” exhibiting, through its many voices, the diverse and coalesced culture of the United States (“O Magnet-South” 17). Whitman’s mockingbird became an important part of establishing his own idealized America, where all people are given voice, despite their differences, faults, or statuses. The poetry of Whitman and other nineteenth-century writers

cemented the mockingbird's role in American iconography, elevating it to the cultural symbol that it has become today.

This thesis will cover the development of this symbol through different stages, including the British push to make the nightingale a universal poetic image, the unsuccessful nature of nightingale poetry in America, and the establishment and growth of the mockingbird as an American icon. This is important for many reasons but, at its core, the development of the mockingbird became synonymous with the evolution of a true American voice in literature, democratic and polyvocal, and represents further exploration into the broadening horizon of Romanticism in America. While it is possible that late American Romanticism could have functioned without the mockingbird, the foundation of the American songbird personifies the steps that American poets needed to take in order to make their literature something more than the fading echo at the conclusion of a foreign movement.

CHAPTER 2

BRITISH IMPERIALIZATION OF THE NIGHTINGALE IMAGE

Philomela and the Historical Nightingale

Despite nineteenth-century American fixation on more contemporary British writing, the use of the nightingale in literature did not start with British Romanticism. In fact, the nightingale had taken on a prominent role in European literature centuries earlier, once the works of the prominent Roman poet Ovid were popularized. In Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, readers are given the story of the daughters of the King of Athens: Procne and Philomela. In the original story, Philomela is married to the harsh and frightening character Tereus who, upon meeting Procne, is overcome with lust and rapes her, ultimately cutting out her tongue to silence her (Ovid 6.486-570). Yet Philomela is clever, and she is able to reveal the truth to her sister by weaving it into a cloth. Upon discovery of the truth, Procne murders the only child of her husband, feeding him the remains (6.619-652). When Procne and Philomela attempt to escape from Tereus's wrath, all three are magically transformed into birds: Tereus a hoopoe, Procne a nightingale, and Philomela a swallow (6.653-674). Much later, when the story was transcribed into Roman mythological texts, the roles of Procne and Philomela were reversed in an attempt to match the Latin word for nightingale. Philomela would go on to become a romanticized figure, consistently imagined as a weeping and broken woman, which made her a perfect character to be revisited throughout pathetic instances in literature (Young 181). In "Listening to the Nightingale," Thomas Alan Shippey discusses the role that Ovid's mythology took in society, even before the Romantics, stating that "one need only look at the stanzas of Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*, or the stanzas of delay in *The Kingis Quair*, where the narrator waits in suspense to know if the nightingale will forebode good or ill will for his new love" (48-49). This influence

also extended to writers such as William Shakespeare, as the description of Lavinia's rape and mutilation in *Titus Andronicus* takes heavy influence from Philomela's misfortune (West 63-64). In influencing artists like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, Ovid's work had taken its place as a new mythos, allowing it to become a reference point for more modern writers. Yet, despite the consistency in reference to Ovid, the thematic use of the nightingale varied throughout the ages. As Shippey argues, although the nightingale had more melancholic roots, poets like Chaucer linked the songbird to spring and new life, focusing on a more joyous image (47). However, regardless of its use, the nightingale always had emotional connotations for European writers.

Chaucer's attempts to juxtapose the darker nightingale history and his own brighter poetic imagery did not last for long before being adapted for a new generation of poets. Moving out of a medieval Europe, the nightingale still held its place in the literary canon, yet often harkened back to a more Ovid-like mythos, one in which the nightingale takes on a depressive, vehement role. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many poets wrote about the nightingale and its song, often either lamenting the pensive role of the bird or its relationship to literature and the canon. For example, one of the more popular examples of the nightingale's use in Europe was the short poem "The nightingale, so pleasant and gay" (1588) by the English writer and composer William Byrd. In this poem, the speaker juxtaposes the bird's "pleasant" and free nature with the speaker's own perceived imprisoning environment (1, 4). Although the bird has a beautiful voice, the speaker states that "in using his song [I] receiveth no comfort", which encapsulates the new role that the nightingale was taking in poetry (8). Where Byrd's speaker struggled to relate to the bird, other poets often used this role to link the bird as a bridging connection between nature and human emotion.

Charles Hinnant claims that poet and Countess of Winchilsea, Anne Finch, took this emotional conception of the nightingale even further in her poem “To the Nightingale,” in which she uses the bird as a muse figure, claiming that the speaker wants to create poetry that can match the beauty of the nightingale’s call (500). Through using the bird as a muse, Finch connects herself to the songbird, claiming “Free as thine shall be my song” (Finch 5). Yet, like Byrd, the nightingale’s place in the poem is still marked by sadness. Throughout “To the Nightingale,” Finch struggles to create art that can be compared to the beauty of the nightingale’s voice. She realizes that she cannot match the tune of the bird when she concedes that she can “change thy note”, but nothing seems to work (22). In the end, Finch is left with a myriad of emotions that are brought about by the process, and she ends the poem with the lines “Criticize, reform, or preach, / Or censure what we cannot reach,” showing the speaker’s disdain that is brought about through her own failure (34-35). In this, readers see one of the prominent instances of emphasis placed on aspects of the nightingale’s call that Romantic writers would soon use to create a muse-like figure for their poetry. The struggles that Finch’s speaker faced would also continue to be experienced in the work of writers such as John Keats.

Yet, it seems odd to place such a distinctive cultural importance on the nightingale. After all, there are many birds to admire in the European landscape and many of them have their own distinctive song. Why would the British and other Europeans latch on tightly to the nightingale image? Fred Alsop, an ornithologist and professor at East Tennessee State University, claims that the nightingale was especially known for its outbursts during the night, as it was one of the few birds that were active during this time. According to Alsop, the nightingale became a fixture of European and, specifically, British culture because of “the pure beauty of the song, and the variety of the song” (Alsop). In his ornithological text *A History of British Birds, Indigenous and*

Migratory, William MacGillivray discusses the nightingale's relationship to other songsters, stating, "It is probably the opinion of every person acquainted with the songs of birds, that the Nightingale surpasses every other songster in this country" (330). MacGillivray goes on to echo Alsop's statements and comment on the literary fascination with the bird:

Although the sweet strains of the Nightingale may be heard at several intervals through the day, they excite admiration when listened to in the quiet evenings, during which they are protracted to a later hour than those of any songster. . . . Most authors profess to be in raptures when describing the song of this far-famed bird. (335).

For poets, the nightingale's song was overpowering, and its preference for singing melodies at night created this reassuring, yet ominous mystery behind the bird, perhaps one that only mythology or poetry could solve.

The Contemporary Nightingale Artist in Romanticism

British poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pushed the nightingale into a role that seemed to garner more responsibility for the bird and its song. In "Romanticism's Singing Bird," Frank Doggett discusses the literary power invested in the nightingale: "A significant implication for the Romantic conception of the image of the singing bird was given when the bird was characterized not only as a poet in his own right, but master of a superior art that could inspire the human poet" (550). Readers see this ideology expressed in works like Percy Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry," in which he makes the claim that poets are symbolically related to nightingales: "A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (1171). Shelley alludes to nightingales in two comparative and interesting ways: as poet and as muse.

The nightingale could be seen as a poet in and of itself, creating its art through music, which also led to its having lasting impacts on the poets themselves. Shelley's comment on being "moved and softened" seems remarkably close to the same kind of inspirational feelings that poets get when interacting with a muse. While this relationship created a stronger bond between poet and poem, it also meant that the nightingale could become a figurehead in both poetry and nature, allowing Romantics to feel a greater connection to the natural world. In these pathetic connections, British poets began to reinforce a version of the nightingale that was universal and imperialized. In the time of the Romantics, the British Empire had a substantial grip on the world. When the British created art, it was not just for Britons, but also for the empire itself as an act of cultural and literary whitewashing. This created an ideology that seemed to believe that any poet could take the British nightingale image and apply it to himself or herself or use it as a source of inspiration. This creates complications, however, when the image is introduced to cultures that do not necessarily match this newly idealized British identity, which, as we will see in the later chapters, often caused problems for writers outside of the empire's grip. For British writers, there was hardly any reason to believe that poets outside the center of the empire would not be able to relate to the bird's image, as the British Empire's tremendous influence created an environment that made it nearly impossible to think otherwise.

One of the greater examples of the Romantic evocation of the nightingale comes from Charlotte Smith. According to Andrew Ashfield, Smith's influence was fairly considerable to the Romantic Movement:

By 1784, . . . she was in the debtors' gaol with her husband when her *Elegaic Sonnets, and Other Essays* were published. . . . The sonnets attracted considerable attention. . . .

The sonnets, with pervading themes of melancholy and isolation, possibly intensified by

her own confinement within an unhappy marriage and in the debtors' gaol, nevertheless reveal of a relish for natural description and attachment to landscape which extended the range of options open to the romantics. (33)

Smith's first evocation of the songster came in her sonnet "To a Nightingale." In this poem, Smith's speaker, like Byrd's, laments the melancholy image of the bird (1). Yet Smith takes the sentiment a bit further by describing a specific relationship between the poet and the songbird. According to the speaker, while the bird sits and "all night long / Tell'st to the Moon, thy tale of tender woe", the poet is listening intently (1-2). In the second stanza, the reader is given more detail regarding the poet's role:

Thy poet's musing fancy would translate
What mean the sounds that swell thy little breast,
When still at dewy eve thou leav'st thy nest,
Thus to the listening night to sing thy fate. (5-8)

According to Smith, the poet's position in this relationship is that of a translator, one who can somehow listen to the nightingale's song and relay its meaning to her audience. However, the bird and poet are still unevenly matched, as in the final stanza's couplet states, "Ah! Songstress sad!—that such my lot might be, / To sigh and sing at liberty—like thee! (13-4). In "To a Nightingale," the nightingale remains unmatched, and the poet is simply the mediator between the devastating power of nature and the reader. In other words, the poet requires the influence of the nightingale for her artistic expression and validity.

Alongside "To a Nightingale" Smith published another well-known sonnet titled "On the Departure of the Nightingale," the first line of which clashes with her original defined relationship between the nightingale and the poet, as she refers to the nightingale as a poet on its

own, as if the nightingale no longer requires some sort of interpreter to connect with the reader (“On the Departure of the Nightingale” 1). Smith calls upon the bird during its migratory phase, in a time when individuals were at a loss as to where birds would relocate for certain parts of the year, creating a sense of absence and mystery to the nightingale’s figure. James C. McKusick argues that Smith uses this poem to symbolize a loss of her own voice: “Wherever they might have gone, the nightingales have certainly departed, and their departure bears the pathos of the loss of poetic inspiration. Without the companionship of the nightingale, which is her muse, Smith can no longer sing” (37). This further complicates the relationship between singer and writer; that is, while the nightingale no longer requires the services of an amanuensis, the poet is left bewildered in the absence of her feathered muse. Although Smith’s speaker can say “adieu” to the bird and continue to write in the songster’s absence, the time until the bird comes back will feel “long” and “dull” (“On the Departure of the Nightingale” 1, 3-4). According to McKusick, Smith continually used the nightingale as a mentor figure in her poetry, and her use of the nightingale sonnet would become the inspiration for many other Romantic poets and writers (37). The previous generation of poets had spent tremendous amounts of time writing about the sadness in the bird’s song and, while Smith sometimes accentuates the melancholy nature of the bird, she made a point to focus on the more enlightened beauty that the bird’s call provided. The poet is made more complete by the nightingale’s presence.

While some sentiments of Smith’s poetry are echoed in a 1798 poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge called “The Nightingale,” Coleridge seems to disagree with Smith’s emotional assessment of the bird. In this poem, the speaker and a few friends sit outside during the night when, eventually, the distinctive call of the nightingale is heard. When the speaker considers the bird’s song, it becomes clear that this poem was Coleridge’s way of criticizing classical and

some contemporary nightingale poetry. In response to the quoted idea that the nightingale is a melancholy bird, the speaker directly contradicts Smith's proposals in "To a Nightingale" and says, "A melancholy Bird? O idle thought! / In nature there is nothing melancholy" (Coleridge 14-15). With this, Coleridge relocates the emotion to the subjective listener, who is, perhaps arguing against an emotional side of nature:

—But some night-wandering Man, whose heart was
 pierc'd
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper or neglected love,
(And so, poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrows) . . . (16-21)

In this moment, Coleridge begins arguing against the pensive use of the nightingale, insisting that the listener, whether a random individual or another poet, is simply projecting emotions onto the bird rather than hearing emotions from nature itself. Phil Cardinale argues that Coleridge's criticism is largely targeted at John Milton, and that Coleridge even uses this poem to poke fun at other aspects of contemporary poetry, like the poetic use of Edmund Burke's sublime, which was continually built on and manipulated by the Romantics (35). While Coleridge and Smith would disagree on the emotional implications of the nightingale's song, they could most likely agree that the nightingale could be seen as a way for poets to use their own poetic imagination to connect themselves with nature, treating the bird as if it were a contemporary in the arts. However, Coleridge would have qualms with using the nightingale's image as leverage to emotionally understand nature.

John Keats took this focus on poetic imagination to an entirely new level when he wrote “Ode to a Nightingale” in 1819. In this poem, the speaker, commonly understood to be Keats himself, listens to the sounds of the nightingale, and begins likening this feeling to that of intoxication (Keats 11-20). Helen Vendler, who wrote *The Odes of John Keats*, one of the most comprehensive books on Keats’s odes, comments on the importance that Keats places on the nightingale in the poem:

It has commonly been thought that the nightingale’s song represented to Keats the music of nature, to be contrasted with human art, whether verbal or musical. But most commentators have also felt, paradoxically, that Keats identifies himself as poet with the nightingale, and, by analogy with the human arts of Fancy, sees the nightingale’s song as a delusive enchantment. (Vendler 77)

According to critics like Vendler, Keats feels that this nightingale is somewhat of a contemporary in the artistic landscape, specifically through its music. Keats takes this experience as an opportunity to attempt to fully realize and understand the implications of poetic imagination, personified as a nightingale’s majestic flight through the night sky (Keats 31-33).

However, Keats is ultimately unable to completely harness the type of integral imagination that he wants to by the end of the poem. Morag Harris discusses the journey that Keats takes through “Ode to a Nightingale,” insisting that Keats attempts to personify himself as the nightingale because he feels he has to, not necessarily because he wants to: “We witness . . . how this strenuous attempt, experiment or journey for him was to be carried in language, was not the whim of an Egotist, but was his hope of salvation, of being lifted out of the dull vapours of the little world of self” (78). Keats is forced into this situation under the guise of a lack of inspiration, in which he is a poet that, Vendler argues, still feels that he is premature and has not

fully reached his own potential (104). Yet, in the poem's final lines, Keats still cannot embody true poetic imagination, struggling to decide if his experience was "a vision, or a waking dream" (79-80). Vendler analyzes these final moments:

In fact he has "seen" nothing of the nightingale; nothing has presented itself to him as a "vision" or, for that matter, as a dream with visual elements. . . . No propositional or historical "truths" are enunciated once Keats enters the tender night; instead, all is description and evocation, sensation and beauty. . . . The ode ends, then, as a poem inscribed to beauty rather than to truth, to sensation rather than to thought. (105-106)

Through this, readers can see that Keats's ode kept a focus on sensation, rather than making any sort of progress to a definitive goal. Keats gets extremely close to reaching the subliminal space of poetic imagination, but is unable to fully grasp the concept. As the nightingale makes its migration and debut in the American landscape, this type of thinking becomes more prevalent, and, despite the focus that nineteenth-century Americans placed on Keats's poem, this ideology of attempting to harness true poetic imagination becomes lost.

In this, it becomes clear that the British and Europeans placed literary importance on the nightingale as an image for poetry, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and why many American poets would see the necessity of utilizing these same stylistic and narrative choices overseas. It is of no argument that the poetry of both eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain had a lasting impact on American poetry. In the introduction to the 1900 *American Anthology*, Edmund Clarence Stedman uses Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as an easily discernable "masterpiece" beside which to compare and clarify the quality of the writing in his own anthology (xxxii). Yet, it seems that there was a lack of complete understanding of the point that Keats makes in his poem. As previously discussed, Keats's "Nightingale" becomes

reflective of his inability to completely reach true and fulfilling poetic imagination, regardless of how much he tries by listening to the nightingale. However, because of Keats's mastery of poetic diction, American authors seemed to believe that, in simply using the nightingale's song, poets could be completely inspired and reach a new level of their own comprehension of the craft.

CHAPTER 3

THE ABSENCE AND FAILURE OF THE NIGHTINGALE IN AMERICA

Philomel in Colonial America

The struggle with the American use of the nightingale began with the first known descriptions of the New World, long before the founding of the United States. In his February 1493 letter to the court official Luis De Santangel, Christopher Columbus describes his traversal of the Isla Juana, which is now known as Cuba. He provides vivid imagery of what he sees in both the general landscape and wildlife of the island, such as the trees and birds:

And I am told that they never lose their foliage, as I can understand, for I saw them as green and as lovely as they are in Spain in May, and some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit, and some in another stage, according to their nature. And the nightingale was singing and other birds of a thousand kinds in the month of November where I went.

(Columbus "From Letter to Luis De Santangel" 36)

Columbus's descriptions paint a beautiful picture of this new and exciting location, yet they become problematic once one realizes that his use of the nightingale is a complete fabrication. Columbus's use of the nightingale is suspect, due to the bird's absence in the Americas. The songbird is actually considered a European thrush and, while it is found in Europe, Asia, and occasionally in Africa, it is not indigenous to North and South America ("Luscinia megarhynchos"). This is not that surprising, as Columbus identified the New World as a place devoid of any type of culture. In the same letter, he discusses immediately taking the native people as "possession for their highnesses" upon arriving at the islands (Columbus "From Letter to Luis De Santangel" 35). Yet, much later, when he and his two brothers are taken hostage, he asks, "Who will believe that a poor foreigner could in such a place rise against Your Highnesses,

without cause and without the support of some other prince, and being alone among your vassals and natural subjects, and having all my children at your royal court?” (“From Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella” 37). Although these instances were similar in nature, the lack of customs that were adhered to in the latter situation baffled Columbus. Throughout his time in the New World, Columbus found it extremely difficult to recognize anything that was reminiscent of the culture that he was accustomed to in Europe or Spain. Due to this, it is not strange to see why, in an attempt to replicate the European values that he believed to be important, he embellished, whether it was conscious or unconscious, the nature that surrounded him. However, what he could not have known was that he was beginning a long-standing tradition of mistakenly identifying the nightingale as a western, American bird.

After Columbus’s misattribution of the nightingale, writers would continue to attempt to insert the nightingale into the American landscape, both before and after the American Revolution. While the nightingale poets of nineteenth-century America would be remembered for their flawed appropriation of and reliance on foreign romantic images, the use of the bird in colonial America was more complex. In Anne Bradstreet, for example, readers were given classically structured poems with a focus on Puritan values. Bradstreet spent eighteen years of her life in England before coming to the Massachusetts Bay Colony with her father and husband in 1630, and began writing poetry in America (Murphy 2). Bradstreet’s poems embodied the complicated views of the Puritans, yet remained honest when it came to her struggles with her religion (Murphy 6). In her poem “Contemplations,” the speaker overhears the song of the nightingale and considers their relationship:

While musing thus with contemplation fed,
And thousand fancies buzzing in my brain,

The sweet tongued Philomel perched o'er my head

And chanted forth a most melodious strain

Which rapt me so with wonder and delight,

I judged my hearing better than my sight,

And wished me wings with her a while to take my flight. (Bradstreet 176-182)

Considering these last two lines, this section of Bradstreet's poem is reminiscent of what readers will see in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" when it is published a century and a half later. Much like Keats, Bradstreet's speaker attempts to use poetic imagination to reflect on the self. Yet, as John Gatta notes, Bradstreet would not have heard the nightingale in Massachusetts:

Evidently, though, the bird she describes in stanzas 26-28 is a perching songbird, a migratory species that sings before dawn and may well belong to the thrush family, as does the nightingale. Which American bird, then, warbled so melodiously as to enrapture the poet "with wonder and delight"? It is impossible to say for sure. (45)

While it is impossible to determine the exact bird that Bradstreet was overhearing, it is likely that, because the bird is one that sings in both the day and night, this may be the some of the first uses of the mockingbird as a replacement to the nightingale. However, the mockingbird would not become truly formidable in the American literary canon for many years, and it is likely that Bradstreet did believe she was listening to the nightingale, granting that this encounter did occur. As the poem continues, the speaker focuses on the bird's freedom:

"O merry Bird," said I, "that fears no snares,

That neither toils nor hoards up in thy barn,

Feels no sad thoughts nor cruciating cares . . ." (Bradstreet 183-185)

The speaker identifies that the nightingale is free from all “cares” and has the ability to leave when life is difficult, which is reminiscent of Charlotte Smith’s later use of the songbird in “On the Departure of the Nightingale.” For the speaker, this applies to everything about conventional life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, such as the seasons: ““Then follow thee into a better region, / Where winter’s never felt by that sweet airy legion”” (195-196). As readers can see from this passage, the winters in Massachusetts were especially difficult, and the mobility to escape winter’s harsh landscape is something that Bradstreet’s speaker envies. For the speaker, the nightingale becomes a representation of what could be if the speaker were free from all conventional life in the Bay. However, she also realizes that she can never possess the freedom that the nightingale has, which is made more painful when she contemplates the human condition. As the speaker claims, people are “frail” and “ignorant”, which makes the already burdensome life in the Bay even more complicated, grounding the distance she sees between God and man (197-198). Although Bradstreet placed God as the most important part of her life, she did not shy away from the sometimes-unfulfilling problems that came along with being a Puritan (Murphy 7).

Much like Bradstreet, Edward Taylor spent his early life in England before immigrating to the colonies. Although he was unknown as a poet, he did own a copy of Bradstreet’s poetry, and his own work focused on many of the same religious themes (7-8). His poem “Upon a Spider Catching a Fly,” most likely written late in the seventeenth century, serves as a religious metaphor that utilizes imagery with a focus on nature, with a specific reference to the nightingale (Stanford xl). The poem offers a spider, a wasp, and a fly that take on roles that are representative of religious salvation. The spider takes the place of the devil, who weaves a web to catch unguarded Christians (Taylor 1-5). In the poem, the flies are representative of

individuals who have not given themselves to God, while Christians are somewhat like the wasp, whom the spider fears:

I saw a pettish wasp

Fall foule therein:

Whom yet thy Whorle pins did not clasp

Lest he should fling

His sting. (6-10)

Unlike the fly, who the spider attacks immediately, the wasp seems much more dangerous, as its “sting”, which could be God’s grace, is given almost weapon-like attributes (21-25). As the speaker later suggests, the wasp holds the “Grace to breake the Cord” (43). Upon the breaking of this “Cord”, the wasp (or Christians) can now pass through “Glorys Gate and State”, ultimately transforming into something out of the spider’s grasp: the nightingale (44-46). Here, the nightingale is representative of the Christian’s soul in Heaven, now untouchable. Far from the fly, spider, or wasp, the nightingale is protected “In Glories Cage” (48). Unlike the nightingale in Bradstreet’s poem, the bird here seems to be present in a plane of existence separate from the speaker or poet, which is given Heaven-like descriptors. With the nightingale’s being a British image, this could mean that Taylor’s subtext is suggesting an association of Heaven with England, implying a moral role for the mother country.

Despite the nightingale’s absence in America, Bradstreet and Taylor’s use of the bird made sense, as they had experienced the natural habitat of the bird for years before emigrating from England, allowing the nightingale to be figuratively migrated with them. They also reveal a familiarity with the details and conventions of the literature of classical Rome and Greece through their poetry, and they allow other images from this familiar territory to enter into their

own landscape. Yet the nightingale's use in colonial and postcolonial America was not limited to those who had grown up in England. Jane Turell, who was born in Boston in 1708, lived all of her twenty-seven years in the New World. After her death, her husband published her poems, which included her interesting use of the nightingale image (May 21-22). In her poem "An Invitation Into the Country, in Imitation of Horace," Turell blurs the lines between her own witnessed landscape in Medford, Massachusetts, and the impressive mythology of the Roman poet Horace. The poem is separated into three distinct parts. It begins with the images of Medford, where Turell paints images of the "flowery vales" and "green retreats" (Turell 2). Yet, in the beginning of the second stanza, the poem breaks away from Medford and seems to travel across the globe and back in time toward Europe in the eyes of Horace, which we see with the mention of the "Canary's isle" and the diplomatic movement between Caesar and Augustus (25, 29-32). The poem ends with a shift back into the speaker's world in Medford, where all luxury of the Roman Empire has faded, and there are no Arabian perfumes or exotic tapestries (56-59). All that is left is Turell and her lover, and the singular image of the nightingale singing in the night (63-64). While it is true that the nightingale is not heard in Medford, it is possible that the songbird's image is simply a remnant of the landscape that Turell imagines through Horace's eyes. It could be that her use of the bird was just as mistaken as Columbus's, yet the poem's focus on European imagery opens up other potential avenues for interpretation.

Again, these types of emotional and spiritual connections to the nightingale were seen and felt on both sides of the Atlantic. What colonial uses of the nightingale show us is that the songbird's image seemed to fit securely in a colonized America. Despite Turell's being born in Boston, she was still a citizen of the British Empire, and felt a distinctive relationship between herself and her country, and the same can be said for both Bradstreet and Taylor. However,

postcolonial Americans had a larger problem when it came to the use of the songbird, stemming from newly founded and developing ideas of the United States of America.

Postcolonialism and the Struggle to Find America's Culture

The problem with many American poets of the nineteenth century was the constant focus on writing non-distinctive poetry. There were influxes of American poets who kept a rigid focus on the concepts of strict poetic diction and imperialized imagery, like the nightingale, and this created problems, as they would have trouble distinguishing themselves from British writers. For many of these poets, the use of the nightingale was a byproduct of a larger issue: if American writers cannot be discerned from British writers, then America seemingly has no literature of its own.

An example of an American writer like this can be found in poet and public official Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, who was born in Georgia in 1798 and spent most of his life as a politician in both Georgia and Texas, eventually becoming the second president of the Republic of Texas (Gambrell). Throughout his political career, however, he wrote quite a large amount of poetry, including several that mention nightingales. In his best-known poem, "The Daughter of Mendoza," he comments on the beauty of a young woman. The poem was written after he had become the United States Minister to Argentina, where he had been inspired by the beauty of a native girl (Knight 1342). Much like Bradstreet, Lamar creates issues in his poetry by referencing the nightingale's song directly:

O LEND to me, sweet nightingale,

Your music by the fountain,

And lend to me your cadences,

O river of the mountain! ("The Daughter of Mendoza" 1-4)

It can be inferred here that the speaker is in close enough proximity to hear the bird's call, which is problematic when considering Lamar's location. While his focus on Argentina was seemingly exotic, unfortunately for him, the nightingale is also not found in South America, which makes his calling on the nightingale much more unimportant. The poem has quite a bit of repetition, as he ends each stanza with a varying refrain in the form of "the daughter of Mendoza" (8, 16, 24, 32). The nightingale in this poem is largely used as a romantic device, which was quite common in Lamar's poetry. For Lamar, the nightingale's song was one of beauty, and he largely used it in comparison to grace of a lover.

In his poem "The Rose, the Moon, and Nightingale," Lamar goes through several comparative statements about a person that the speaker knows. In the first stanza, the speaker discusses the beauty of all flowers, yet claims they are unmatched when it comes to "Sharon's Rose" ("The Rose, the Moon, and Nightingale" 1-6). The speaker does the same thing with both the second and third stanzas, first with the light of the moon, and then with the song of the nightingale. The third stanza reads:

Many a bird may carol loud,
In sadness or in glee;
But none have reason to be proud,
Though sweet their music be—
For what can all their notes avail,
Compared with thine, sweet Nightingale? (13-18)

Again, readers are given a songster that is present alongside the speaker, despite the lack of nightingales in the United States. The poem goes on to reference this person as a lover, whom the speaker claims embodies all of the traits of the flower, moon, and nightingale (23-24).

Interestingly, Lamar seems to continue this poem's subject in the work that follows in *Verse Memorials*: "My Lily, Star, and Peaceful Dove. To the Pride of the Village, Richmond, Texas." However, Lamar makes different claims in this poem, asserting that, while all can see the beauty of the rose, moon, and nightingale, he personally identifies the lily, star, and dove as paramount alternatives ("My Lily, Star, and Peaceful Dove" 19-21). His stanza on the nightingale is as follows:

The nightingale may strain its throat,
Ambitious songs to pour;
But there's a bird of mournful note,
Whose pathos pleases more—
The bird that bore, o'er waters dark,
The welcome olive to the ark. (13-18)

The dove now replaces the nightingale, as Lamar's speaker identifies that its song is more emotional. This poem bears the implication of a much more personal relationship, where preference outweighs the general consensus of the previous poem. If we assume the speaker to be Lamar himself, it makes sense that he would identify the dove as a superior bird, as he possibly never heard the nightingale himself, and could only experience it second-hand. This could be an example of the movement away from the nightingale's use in American poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century, which will be revisited in the next chapter.

Poet Anne Reeve Aldrich continued this lackluster appropriation of the nightingale image in the latter 1800s. Aldrich was born in New York in 1866, and spent much of her life writing. She claimed that the main influences for her writing came from the British, which showed in her work (Hogg 213). One of her more formulaic attempts to create poetry like the British was her

poem “To a Nightingale,” in which the speaker carries on a conversation with the bird. Like many nightingale poets of the Romantic period, Aldrich refers to the songbird as her muse:

Sing for me, O my friend,
My music will not come,
For Love that urges thee to sing
Has made me dumb. (“To a Nightingale” 1-4)

These lines show that there is a kind of beauty in the world that causes the nightingale to sing, but simply leaves the speaker speechless. The speaker continues by suggesting that the bird must “Sing for us both” about the landscape that he or she finds so captivating. The poem attempts to echo the muse-bird sentiments of writers like Charlotte Smith, though it lacks the effectiveness and, due to its rigidity, feels like a weak imitation of British poetry. Aldrich uses the same inflated language in her other short nightingale poem, “A Song About Singing:”

O nightingale, the poet’s bird
A kinsman dear thou art,
Who never sings so well as when
The rose-thorns bruise his heart. (1-4)

In this poem, the speaker is again carrying on a conversation with the songbird, yet this time is specifically discussing the nightingale’s role in culture. In these lines, Aldrich attempts to echo the beliefs of the Romantics, calling the bird a “kinsman” in artistic expression, yet she also harkens back to the viewpoints of poets like Milton by specifically making references to a melancholy version of the nightingale. The second half of the poem reads:

But since thy agony can make
A listening world so blest,

Be sure it cares but little for

Thy wounded, bleeding breast! (5-8)

Now the speaker sees the irony of the nightingale's situation. As it harms itself, it creates this beautiful music that people utilize to make themselves feel better. Yet, the speaker seems to care little for the bird by the end of the poem, claiming that the bird should worry more about the state of the world than its own "bleeding" heart.

The same focus on the melancholy of the bird is found in a poem written by Richard Watson Gilder, who was most known for his poetry and work editing *The Century Magazine* from the 1880s up until his death in 1909 (Homans). His early nineteenth-century poem "Hast Thou Heard the Nightingale?" echoes the same sort of repetitive and formulaic writing that is attributed to the popular "Fireside Poets." The poem consists of three stanzas, all of which begin and end with the refrain "Yes, I have heard the nightingale" (Gilder 1, 8, 9, 16, 17, 24). The poem's itself appears to be a direct reference to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." In the first stanza, the speaker describes walking through the woods while hearing the nightingale's call emanating from the darkness:

As in dark woods I wandered,

And dreamed and pondered,

A voice passed by all fire

And passion and desire;

I rather felt than heard

The song of that lone bird:

Yes, I have heard the nightingale. (2-8)

The setting is fairly similar to that of Keats, and the pathetic image of having “rather felt than heard” the call of the songster echoes the imaginative narrative of “Ode to a Nightingale.” These allusions to Keats continue, as the second stanza progresses:

The warm night swallowed
This soul and body of mine,
As burning thirst takes wine . . . (11-13)

This same image of wine is used in Keats’s poem as well, an allusion to the intoxicated feeling of the nightingale’s call (Keats 11-21). The word “forlorn,” which is used at the climax of Keats’s poem, appears in the last stanza to describe a sudden shift in emotion brought about once the speaker finally reaches the nightingale’s location (Gilder 23). Gilder’s poem shows the inspiration he takes from both the unoriginal and repetitive writing of some early American poets and the romanticized nightingale figure from Keats’s ode; however, through its narrative and choice of language, bridges the gap between allusion and plagiarism.

On the surface, the poems of Lamar, Aldrich, and Gilder are uninspired. Yet, their faults highlight the true problem behind writing about the imperialized nightingale in America: its nonexistence. American writers in the mid to late 1800s would have never heard the song of the nightingale, unless they had the opportunity to travel overseas, which was arduous, expensive, and time-consuming. However, it is difficult to blame these poets, as it is entirely possible that this was an unconscious decision. For American poets, the nightingale existed as part of a normalized poetic atmosphere, no different from rhyme schemes or diction. These conventional elements were brought about through America’s British history. To many of these poets, British poetry was the only thing that poetry was ever expected to be, as it was simply what they were used to. This was why the imperialization of the nightingale image was such a problem. British

writing had created a poetic atmosphere of unwanted experimentation. Although these poets existed in a postcolonial era, culture does not change overnight, and it would take some time for American writers to develop their own identity through poetic expression. To reiterate an earlier point, if American poetry was hard to differentiate from British poetry, America is left with no poetry of its own.

This seems to be why the few effective nightingale poems written or published in nineteenth-century America had a central focus on British themes without creating insincere narratives. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was an extremely popular poet for his time, was responsible for bringing the nightingale overseas in a more interesting fashion. Although Longfellow was an accomplished poet in America and other parts of the world, he was also well regarded for his ability to translate other works and poems.¹ While Longfellow did not write any poems about the songbird himself, he translated a variety of European poems, including a few with references to nightingales. Although some of the poems, like “The Hemlock Tree,” were simple lyric poems about the countryside, poems like “The Boy and the Brook” provided more Romantic imagery, where the natural world speaks through the rivers and brooks, as the nightingale sings its song to the wilderness (Longfellow, “The Boy and the Brook” 16-20). These poems may have not been complex or written by Longfellow himself, but the fact that they were translated from European poems allowed them to retain their authenticity in America. Writing a substantial and successful nightingale poem in America was much harder to do in the postcolonial atmosphere.

Yet, it was not impossible. An example of an effective American nightingale poem was “All Overgrown by Cunning Moss,” written by Emily Dickinson around 1860. The poem begins:

¹ Longfellow had such an effect on the translated word that in the 1990s Harvard established the Longfellow Institute, which focuses on writing in language other than English (Irmsher 21).

All overgrown by cunning moss

All interspersed with weed,

The little cage of “Curren Bell”

In quiet “Haworth” laid. (Dickinson, “All Overgrown by Cunning Moss” 1-4)

This stanza makes references to the British writer Charlotte Brontë, which can be seen through the use of the phrases “Curren Bell” and “Haworth,” the former being the pseudonym of Brontë, the latter being where she was buried. The speaker, most likely Dickinson herself, alludes to Brontë’s taking on the form of the nightingale:

This Bird – observing others

When frosts too sharp became

Retire to other latitudes –

Quietly did the same – (5-8)

Here Brontë is given the role of the watcher, most likely a reference to her observations that she would use to bolster her creativity, but is forced to suddenly leave, much like the nightingale who needs to migrate south during the winter. Yet, the Brontë-bird did not return, and her voice was ultimately lost to the speaker (9). Due to Dickinson’s focus on a British novelist and poet, the nightingale fits the aesthetic of the poem. Dickinson also cleverly plays off of her own disconnect from the nightingale, as the last two lines refer to the lack of nightingales in the United States: “Yet not in all the nests I meet – / Can Nightingale be seen –” (11-12). This could represent the distance Dickinson feels between herself and Brontë artistically, or it could simply be to showcase the lack of a writer like Brontë in the United States—or anywhere—after her death.

Despite the complicated nature of the nightingale image, it was still used in America after 1900. A notable use of the nightingale shortly after the turn of the century was by Josephine Preston Peabody. Peabody, who was born in 1874, wrote a truly interesting poem called “The Nightingale Unheard” for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1910 (“Josephine P. Peabody, Noted Author, Dies at 45”). While Peabody was an American poet from New York, the poem is set in Italy. The poem begins, interestingly, by doing the opposite of what most nightingale poems do: disconnecting the speaker from the bird (Peabody 1-8). Due to connections between herself and the speaker, it can be assumed that the speaker in this poem is Peabody. One of the most interesting aspects about her poem is that this speaker, no matter how hard she tries, is never able to hear the nightingale’s song. The first stanza reads:

Yes, Nightingale, through all the summer-time
 We followed on, from moon to golden moon;
 From where Salerno day-dreams in the noon,
And the far rose Pæstum once did climb.
 All white way beside the girdling blue,
Through sun-shrill vines and campanile chime,
 We listened;—from the old year to the new.

Brown bird, and where were you? (1-8)

In this stanza, the speaker explains that she has been spending both days and nights searching for a nightingale, in the hopes of hearing the bird’s call. This traversal of Italy’s landscape continues throughout the next several stanzas, and she travels to places such as Ravello, Assisi, and Minori, with no luck in hearing the nightingale’s song. For the speaker, the nightingale’s voice seems to

represent some greater understanding of life itself. She refers to the bird as “God’s own singer” that carries a “speech toward which all hearts do ache” (15, 31).

As the poem continues, readers reach a turn toward the end of stanza eight, where the speaker begins to realize what is happening:

O Nightingale unheard!—Unheard alone,
Throughout that woven music of the days
From the faint sea-rim to the market-place,
And ring of hammers on cathedral stone
So be it, better so: that there should fail
For sun-filled ones, one blessèd thing unknown.
To them, be hid forever,—and all hail!
Sing never, Nightingale. (57-64)

In this stanza, the speaker concludes that she, along with the perceived other members of this community, have not heard the nightingale because they are not meant to. She believes that the nightingale’s song is so beautiful that is only meant for specific people, which she begins to catalogue in the next several verses, ranging from lonely people looking through windows to people that have lost all hope (65-96). The nightingale in this poem is comparable to the perceived concept of the artist’s need to suffer. Much like a good amount of great art is created through pain, the beauty of the nightingale is only experienced through sadness and heavy waves of emotion.

However, I believe that there is an underlying complexity to Peabody’s poem that extends past this darker theme. Despite the poem’s setting in Europe, Peabody’s relationship to the nightingale is still disconnected through her American heritage. As previously stated, the

speaker in the poem is most likely a representative of Peabody herself, as she had taken her own tour through Europe during her life, which contrasts her with the earlier poets. During this trip, she found Italy fascinating, as she wrote many poems and plays in that setting (“Josephine Preston Peabody”). Yet, in the poem, the speaker struggles to hear the nightingale’s call, even when traversing its natural habitat. This is why Peabody’s American connection is so important. Due to her status as an American writer and poet, Peabody is inherently disconnected from the concept of the nightingale. The poem describes the nightingale in many different clichés and archaic forms, which represent her struggle to relate to the bird’s image. As an American writer, she is limited in her experience of the nightingale and her ability to write about it without commodifying the cultural implications of the bird. Peabody’s understanding of the bird is intangible, and she is ultimately unable to truly experience or relate to the nightingale and its impact. Rather than the image’s being something both beautiful and historical, it becomes a tourist attraction, riddled with unrealistic expectations.

The “Nature Fakers” of American Poetry

Yet, what many of these nightingale poems struggled with was the creation of somewhat artificial boundaries between the poets and the natural world, because it implied that these poets wrote about situations they could not experience and of which they had no direct knowledge. While it was entirely possible that British Romantics, including Smith, Coleridge, and Keats, could have simply fabricated their interactions with the nightingale, their experiences remained much more genuine than those of the American writers, just because they had the actual ability to hear and bask in the song of the bird. More often than not, the only experience that Americans actually had with the nightingale was through engrossing themselves in overseas literature. In this, several American poets were creating a disconnect between themselves and artistic liability,

taking on the poetic role of nature writing's "nature fakers," who were criticized throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for their fictitious embezzlement of the natural world (Roosevelt 258-259). After reading an American nightingale poem, an individual could not go outside and emulate the author's experience, because that experience was fabricated. By developing poetry that implied the American poets' hearing and being inspired by the nightingale's call, poets had created a world that did not exist for their readers and, by extension, poetry that was unable to represent the growing culture of the United States. The irony in adhering to these British conventions was that it did not present the opportunity for American poets to experiment and rework the nation's writing, creating an almost reversed cultural appropriation.

This is something that garnered quite a bit of criticism for American writing. To many scholars in the nineteenth century, American poetry had become predictable and unoriginal. In the introduction to his 1836 essay "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed questions regarding America's place in both the world and literature when he asks, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?" (1). He would go on to expand on these ideas in a speech given at Harvard in 1837, insisting that poetry was the background of a new, idealized America:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in

the constellation Harp which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years? (“American Scholar” 149)

For critics like Emerson, it was important for American poets to begin drifting from the deepened roots of British Romanticism and the most important aspect of this was to develop a more present and consistent voice for American poetry. This meant that more writing needed to be created that focused on the American landscape rather than a foreign one, along with developing poetry that challenged the fundamentals of the genre. Although it does not mention the nightingale specifically, Emerson’s poem “Each and All” touches on how this use of the conventional nightingale image was problematic:

I though the sparrow’s note from heaven,
Singing at dawn on the alder bough;
I brought him home in his nest at even;—
He sings the song, but it pleases not now;
For I did not bring home the river and sky;
He sang to my ear; they sang to my eye. (14-19)

The speaker takes the sparrow home and puts it in a cage, yet he or she notices that the sparrow’s song has now changed. Due to the bird not being in its proper place, the song it sings no longer carries the same natural quality that it once possessed. Rather than the bird singing about its own environment, it is now forced to perform. This image is very similar to that of the nightingale, which had been moved to an environment that it simply did not fit into and, because of this, its song was no longer as pleasing as it once was.

This passage shows us why a less conventional American poetry was required. The nightingale’s lack of existence in North America meant that writing about the most important

bird in poetry was difficult. In fitting with historical narratives, it was time for Americans to break away from British traditions and writing styles to create work that was focused on American sensibilities, in the form of poetry that was relatable, applicable, and even challenging for American readers. Through the countless adaptations of the nightingale in nineteenth-century American literature, it becomes clear that the romanticized figure that was developed and utilized by British poets was not completely universal. With this newly developed poetry that relied on disingenuous versions of the American landscape, readers were left with writing that contained little artistic substance, that was not relatable or applicable to their own idealized version of America. Despite the nightingale's somewhat failed use in the American literary canon, it is not hard to imagine why poets like Lamar, Gilder, and Aldrich believed that the use of strict poetic diction and references to British poetry were the only means to create the best poetry possible. While the writings of John Keats and Charlotte Smith had their lasting impact on American literature, it became clear that the best way to progress artistically was to develop a more coherent and authentic voice for American writing, whether that be through nature writing, poetry, or fiction.

CHAPTER 4

FOUNDATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SONGBIRD

Scientific Beginnings

As we have seen, the failure of the American nightingale was not entirely due to a scientific misunderstanding of birds and their habitats. The nightingale simply had become a representation of the struggles that American writers were finding in writing for their newly established culture. In a matter of no more than a decade, colonists had become part of a new, counter-cultural experience. What did it mean to be American? French-American writer J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur tackled this question in his 1782 work *Letters from an American Farmer*:

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. –This is an American. (56)

With the foundation of a new nation, new ideals needed to be established. This is why, regardless of intention, the nightingale failed. British writing and tropes were not applicable to the new American and, due to this, they could not survive. This growing culture was pushing American writers to stop reflecting what had been written before, and to start creating literature that was much more suitable for their newly founded and unique audience.

In looking to expand their culture, Americans explored their landscape. Hoping to find the answer to the American identity, writers and researchers looked to nature. In the decades following the turn of the century, writing with a focus on America's countryside had become much more popular, as it let individuals explore the almost never-ending American landscape

and write about their own experience. While this type of writing had existed for years in differing formats across the globe, the eighteenth century marked the passing of the Age of Enlightenment, which continued into the nineteenth century. This began a growth of general scientific understanding, as well as the reworking of the scientific method through deductive observation (Achinstein 1-5). This meant that Americans had the unique experience of discovery through modern examination, and they had a larger laboratory than other countries had at their disposal. The American frontier still remained largely unexplored by the arrival of the nineteenth century, which provided a unique opportunity for researchers to observe and catalogue this new landscape. This curiosity gratified through scientific observation granted American writers a better understanding of the bustling natural world that existed around them, which created a burgeoning sense of national pride through this growing understanding of American nature.

A popular version of nature writing in the nineteenth century focused on the activity of “birding,” where individuals would seek out and analyze the habits and personalities of many new and different types of American birds, all while reporting their findings to the nation. From 1826 to 1838, John James Audubon published his large and detailed portraits of American birds. The Audubon Society, an American ecological organization aimed at conserving the habitats of indigenous birds in the United States, claims that Audubon’s work was well received in America: “His life-size, highly dramatic bird portraits, along with his embellished descriptions of wilderness life, hit just the right note at the height of the Continent’s Romantic era” (“History: John James Audubon”). Around the same time, Alexander Wilson published his book *American Ornithology: or, The Natural History of the Birds of the United States* (1828), which delved deeply into the types of birds that existed throughout the country. In this book, he provides some

of the first well-known American comparative statements between the nightingale and the only American bird to which he thought it could be compared: the mockingbird (Wilson 100).

In this text, Wilson quotes Daines Barrington, distinguished naturalist and vice-president of England's Royal Society. Barrington had also been studied by other American writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, who had wanted to use the texts of Barrington to better understand the nightingale and its relation to America (Brown 417). Wilson takes from Barrington's remarks in the 63rd volume of the scientific journal *Philosophical Transactions* (1773), in which Barrington listened to the sounds of an imported mockingbird, claiming that the song of the mockingbird was the only thing that could ever come close to the sounds of the nightingale:

It may not be improper here to consider, whether the nightingale may not have a very formidable competitor in the American mocking-bird...During the space of a minute, he imitated the woodlark, chaffinch, blackbird, thrush, and sparrow. I was told also, that he would bark like a dog; so that the bird seems to have no choice in his imitations, though his pipe comes nearest to our nightingale of any bird I have yet met with. (Barrington 284-285)

Barrington was not the only naturalist writer to feel this way, however. In fact, it is fairly commonplace to find ornithological writing that mentions the mockingbird and nightingale together. In a 1904 work "Birds and Poets," American naturalist John Burroughs echoes the comparison that Barrington had made between the two birds, but claims that the talent of the mockingbird exceeds that of the nightingale, and he refers to it as the nightingale's "American Rival" (Burroughs 10). In this talent, Burroughs is referring to the mockingbird's natural inclination to mimic other birdcalls. However, while the bird was able to mimic the calls and songs of other birds in such a successful manner, naturalists like Wilson Flagg insisted that the

bird still had its own distinctive voice, which may have led many poets to begin using it in place of the nightingale in American poetry (Flagg 203). Fred Alsop explains how the mockingbird uses distinctive mimicry to develop its own powerful voice:

The mockingbird, like a number of other species, . . . mimics a lot of other voices. It picks up other voices and other sounds, some of them not other bird sounds, like the backing up signals of a truck, for example, or a police whistle. The pattern that it incorporates is distinctly mockingbird...I teach my students to listen for the pattern. Mockingbirds say things in threes, fours, and fives and then they change...No matter what it's mimicking, it's the pattern of the song that becomes important. (Alsop)

According to Alsop, while the mockingbird is a mimic-bird, it utilizes a patterned call to stand out from birds both of its own and of other species. The bird uses its mimicry to its advantage in developing the best song.

For poets, it also seemed as if the mockingbird wanted to be featured as a prominent part of American culture. Unlike the nightingale, which often had to be sought out in the forest typically at night, the mockingbird was more prone to live in domestic environments, often bellowing its song while resting on rooftops in more urban areas and cities (Wilson 94-95). According to Alsop, the mockingbird has developed the reputation of being an “urban” bird, and this impacts how the bird fits into American culture:

Observing the behavior of the mockingbird too, it's an outgoing bird. It's a bird that displays in open areas. It puts a lot of effort into its displays, so it will often not just sit on the perch and sing, but it will fly up into the air, summersault back down, and be vocalizing the whole time...I can see someone looking at this bird and getting excited about the apparent energy that goes in to doing what it does and then trying to associate

your own being with that. It's more a bird of the doorstep for a lot of folks because it can survive in habitats that are altered by man. It likes more open areas, so the planning that we have done, like the opening up of woodlots to put our houses in suburbia, have created good habitats. It's a bird that everybody knows. It's familiar. (Alsop)

The mockingbird was a social bird, making it incredibly hard to go unnoticed. Wherever human settlements found themselves in America, the mockingbird would soon be, setting itself apart from other birds with its boisterous voice and presence after dark. These characteristics of the mockingbird were noted as far back as 1705 when historian Robert Beverly Jr. published his text *The History and Present State of Virginia, in Four Parts*:

...the merry Birds too, join their pleasing Notes to this rural Consort, especially the Mock-birds, who love Society so well, that whenever they see Mankind, they will perch upon a Twigg very near them, and sing the sweetest wild Airs in the World: But what is most remarkable in these Melodious Animals, they will frequently fly at small distances before a Traveller, warbling out their Notes several Miles an end, and by their Musick, make a Man forget the Fatigues of his Journey. (61-62)

This attitude and charisma made the mockingbird a much more accessible bird for writers and poets, which led to the bird's becoming intertwined with American poetry, even as early as 1730 in the poetry of Richard Lewis:

But what is *He*, who perch'd above the rest,
Pours out such various Musick from his Breast!
His Breast, whose Plumes a cheerful White display.
His quiv'ring Wings are dress'd in sober Grey.
Sure all the *Muses*, this their Bird inspire!

And he, alone, is equal to the Choir
Of warbling Songsters who around him play,
While, Echo like, *He* answers ev'ry Lay. (74-81).

This poem, titled “A Journey from Patapsco in Maryland to Annapolis, April 4, 1730,” lends credence to the mockingbird’s place as a worthwhile songster. As Lewis’s speaker notes, while other songbirds exist, the mockingbird’s mimicry creates the unique situation of being a “copy”, but also an “original” bird (91). In this section of the poem, Lewis even claims the superiority of the mockingbird over the nightingale: “Oh sweet Musician, thou dost far excel / The soothing Song of pleasing *Philomel!*” (86-87). Lewis echoes the arguments of Barrington and Burroughs, that, while the nightingale’s song is “sweet”, the mockingbird is not confined to the same consistent notes, giving it the freedom to break perceived boundaries (88-90).

When Everybody Knows Your Name

As it has been noted, the largest difference between the mockingbird and nightingale is the mockingbird’s instinctive mimicry. As a songster, the mockingbird uses this quality to comprise the noises around it to create music to attract potential mates. Interestingly, this seems to have also been one of the most effective ways of attracting the interests of poets. An example of this is seen in poet and politician Richard Henry Wilde’s “To the Mocking-Bird.”² Although the poem’s classic sonnet structure and language leave more to be desired, Wilde does create an interesting commentary on the mockingbird’s song. He opens the poem with a call to the songbird, hoping to better understand for whom the bird is voicing its song (Wilde 1-2).

However, he goes on to describe the mockingbird in a more interesting manner than expected:

Thine ever ready notes of ridicule

² Though Wilde’s poem was ultimately published in Stedman’s anthology, I have found no original publication. As Wilde died in 1847, it is likely that the poem was published at some point in the 1820s or 30s.

Pursue thy fellows still with jest and gibe.

Wit, sophist, songster, Yorick of thy tribe,

Thou sportive satirist of Nature's school . . . (3-6)

Describing the bird as a satirist and equating it with Shakespeare's jester places strong emphasis on the bird's mimicry. For Wilde's speaker, this juxtaposes against the bird's more "soft, sweet, pensive, [and] solemn" nighttime song, which is comparable to the well-known characteristics that people see in the nightingale (10). Yet, nothing has changed in the bird's song from day to night. Wilde's speaker is simply, as Coleridge complained, adding his or her own emotion to the mockingbird's call, assuming the bird's emotional implications.³

Another poem that accents the mimicry of the mockingbird is Sidney Lanier's 1877 sonnet "The Mocking Bird." Like Wilde, Lanier uses the bird in many of the same ways that British poets would use the nightingale, at one point describing the bird as a "Shakespeare" of the trees, echoing the romantic theme of the nightingale as an artist ("The Mocking Bird" 14). Lanier's speaker claims that the mockingbird becomes a sort of spokesperson for the natural world. While other birds are scavenging for food or looking for mates, the mockingbird transcribes their efforts into songs for its listeners:

He summ'd the woods in song; or typic drew

The watch of hungry hawks, the lone dismay

Of languid doves when long their lovers stray,

And all birds' passion-plays that sprinkle dew

At morn in brake or bosky avenue.

Whate'er birds did or dreamed, this bird could say. (3-8)

³ Interestingly, John Burroughs mentioned Wilde's use of the mockingbird as "admirable" and placed it contemporary to Walt Whitman's use in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (Burroughs 11).

Through its placement as transcriber of the forest, the mockingbird becomes somewhat of an enigma for Lanier's speaker. In watching the bird consume an insect, the speaker becomes confused at the stark differences between the bird's beautiful voice and nature's cruelty (12-4). This sentiment is echoed in Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk," where the speaker sees a bird, which one could presume to be a mockingbird, viciously eating a worm (1-4). The same issues arise, as the speaker is now slightly afraid of the bird: "Like one in danger, Cautious, / I offered him a Crumb" (13-14). This fear is diluted once the bird leaps away to fly:

And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home –

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, plashless as they swim. (15-20)

As the speaker notes, despite the bird's harshness toward the worm, its presence and flight are still a beautiful thing to witness, which creates conflicting emotions. If we assume that the bird in Dickinson's poem is a mockingbird like Lanier's, the mockingbird then becomes an astonishing reminder of the fascinating harshness of the world.

Lanier's love of mockingbirds bled into his personal life and poetry again a year later when he published his poem "To Our Mocking-Bird." The odd nature of the mockingbird's artistry and wildness is commented on again here, as Lanier had taken in an injured mockingbird around the time of writing this poem and had named him Bob, which seemed representative of the bird's continued straddling the line between beauty and untamed savagery (*Bob* 1-6).

According to Lanier, Bob was talented enough that he could have easily been named after William Shakespeare and was formidable enough that he also could have taken on the name of Cervantes's Don Quixote (1). Although the poem that was written in memory of Bob is a slightly humorous account of the bird's death at the hands of a cat, Lanier does seem to feel some connection to the bird through artistry:

My bird—with, songs, and all—thy richest freight

Since that fell time when in some wink of fate

Thy yellow claws unsheathed and stretched, and cast

Sharp hold on Keats, and dragged him slow away... ("To Our Mocking-Bird" 21-23).

Here, Lanier replaces the nightingale in Keats's famous ode with the mockingbird, further cementing their connection through poetry. At the end of this stanza, he even refers to the mockingbird as Keats himself, again echoing the romantic use of the bird as a contemporary artist (28). Now that the bird has died, the world has lost another one of nature's talented poets, and Lanier can do nothing but mourn, though with tongue in cheek.

Yet, one of the more interesting uses of the mockingbird as mimic comes from the poet Albert Pike who, like Lanier, was a southerner who enlisted in the Confederate Army. In his 1832 poem "Ode to the Mocking-Bird," the bird takes on the role of "mockers of the world" (Boyden 27 and Pike 1). Unlike Lanier and Wilde's mockingbirds, Pike's does not just reflect its own environment, but also places that have long since been forgotten. As Pike's speaker explains:

...Over the sphered tombs

Of vanished nations rolls thy music tide;

No light from History's starlit page illumines

The memory of these nations; they have died:

None care for them but thou... (Pike 5-9)

This mockingbird is carrying the emotional implications of all that has come before it in time, and sings the songs of history. Where Lanier's mockingbird was simply a transcriber of the woods, Pike's becomes a great historian through its many voices. In the second stanza, Pike's speaker explains that the mockingbird resides in its own plane of existence. While the real world can be dark and horrid, the bird only seems to attract happiness, changing the hearts of men through its song (20-23). The speaker even recalls journeying into the woods as a child just to hear the bird's songs, which resonated in his mind like truly great forms of poetry (36-42). However, Pike's mockingbird is just slightly out of reach, as he says he would "live with thee" if he could, but he is forced to "struggle with the stormy sea / Of human life until existence fades / Into death's darkness", mirroring the same issues brought about in Bradstreet's "Contemplations" (45, 48-50). Yet, through the bird's song, Pike is able to see the beauty in the world around him, and he notes that, even in death, the bird will still sing its song, changing the hearts of any who continue to listen (56-66).

Pike's use of the mockingbird, like the other mockingbird poets, seems to echo many of the same techniques that European writers would use when writing about the nightingale. Although these poems set the mockingbird apart from other birds with its use of mimicry, the use of strict poetic diction creates an inflated language and writing that seem focused too much on the works of British writers. Unfortunately, this also causes the mockingbird poems of Wilde, Lanier, and Pike to be forgotten as American literature evolves, regardless of their popularity during the nineteenth century (Williams 51). Yet, despite this poetry's still balancing on derivative ideas, it was the foundation of the important process of finding the American

songbird. They had found a way to embrace the mockingbird's natural inclination to mimic to create a balance between references to earlier Romanticism and developing American literature, while also finding a songbird that could connect to the poet's voice in the same way that the nightingale could. Though it was not the new American literature that writers like Emerson were waiting for, it was pushing American poetry in the right direction.

However, the comparative use of the mockingbird and nightingale was still something to be explored. One of the most compelling pieces on the similarities and differences between the two birds was published in 1892 by Maurice Thompson, titled "To an English Nightingale." The poem is written from the perspective of the American mockingbird challenging the European nightingale on the quality of their songs (Thompson, stanza 1). Thompson captures the bombastic attitude of the bird by equating the mockingbird's ability to mimic with the harnessing of knowledge. Through mimicry, the bird has the ability to cling on to all notes and songs that it hears and repeat them back verbatim, which encompasses all things from Chaucer to Ronsard (stanza 2). In Thompson's narrative, the mockingbird has already surpassed all American birds in its challenge and has only one final opponent: the nightingale (stanzas 3-8). In besting all other American birds, the mockingbird becomes a mascot for the new nation:

Mine is the voice of Spring,
My home is the land of the new,
And every note I sing
Is fresh as the morning dew;
For I am Freedom's bird
Whom the Pilgrim Father's heard,
In their dreams of liberty,

Calling them to the dark wild woods across the

Western sea! (stanza 9)

Here, the bird begins to sing a greater purpose for itself, arguing that its call was the inspiration for the founding of the United States. In the next stanza, the bird dismisses all claims that it is a “mere mimic” and begins to argue against the nightingale (stanza 10). The nightingale here is seen as weak and diminished through its history, and is limited by the roles it has been placed in by poets throughout the centuries. On the other hand, the mockingbird is described as “the voice of the young and strong” and “the soul of the brave and the free” (stanza 11). Thompson’s poem then becomes a commentary on the mockingbird’s voice in literature. Unlike the nightingale, whose rigid place in the canon has only become muddy and complicated as time has gone on, the mockingbird exists as a malleable image. Due to the mockingbird’s knowledge through mimicry, Thompson argues, the bird’s voice will only grow and become more complex as it takes on new roles. As the bird notes in the poem, it cannot be “caged” (stanza 14). The nightingale then becomes the voice of the past, while the mockingbird takes its place as the poet of the future (stanza 16). Thompson’s poem truly encapsulates the future of the mockingbird in America. Where American poets had clung desperately to the nightingale image, they would find new hope in the American mimic, allowing them to push poetry to new frontiers.

Whitman’s Idealized America

In his essay “The Poet,” Emerson, through his use of prophetic language, describes a new style of poet that needs to exist for poetry to move forward in America. Without this person, American poetry will continue to stand still rather than evolve. In the essay, he claims that this new poet must be a transcriber of the universe, and must develop a new science in the creation of poetry:

By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary...America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. ("The Poet" 190, 198)

As we have seen, Emerson was the figurehead of a new era in American writing, and he used his status to create this call to action. As Jay Parini describes this, Emerson used his eloquence to "incite a national literature into being" (Parini xxxi). Emerson echoed these sentiments in his poem "Merlin I," in which he claimed, in reference to the unoriginality of American poetry, that "Thy trivial harp will never please / Or fill my craving ear" (1-2). In "Merlin I," Emerson makes it clear that it was the poet's job to reinvent not only the thematic presence of a culture's poetry, but also the way it is written. He claims, "Great be the manners, of the bard. / He shall not his brain encumber / With the coil of rhythm and number", dismissing the accepted and seemingly required poetic diction that was still a byproduct of foreign cultural influence, arguing that a great bard would find ways to exude excellence outside of the expected norms (28-30).

Fortunately for Emerson, this new era of American poetry was on the horizon, as less than a decade after "Merlin I" was written, a book of American free verse poems was published, and Emerson's romanticized ideals would soon become a reality in Walt Whitman. Whitman echoed Emerson's idea of America-as-poem in his preface to the 1855 version of his magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (616). Like Emerson, Whitman claimed that the new poet should be innovative:

For such the expression of the American poet is to transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their ears and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. Here comes one among the well beloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms. (619)

As Whitman describes, the beauty of American literature is its lack of convention. For American poets, the task was to use this new identity to create something new and worthwhile, and “let the age and wars of other nations” be left to non-American poets. Without convention, the “forms” of the future are not “solid,” meaning that the future of American poetry lacks predictability. This creates a new age of American literature that is both exciting and malleable.

Whitman was the answer to everything Emerson had wanted. When Whitman claims that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” in his poem “Song of Myself,” he is highlighting the importance of the democratic process, where every person has access to the same physical and metaphysical opportunities (“Song of Myself” 1-3). For Whitman, American democracy takes on a role separate from a political context. The soul becomes a part of this democratic system, where all people hold an immense amount of power when it comes to their ideas on faith and their viewpoint of the world. Fitting Emerson’s idea of a poet-creator, Whitman writes America as a glorified place where all people are given the same chance to live and experience their world in ways that would be unheard of in other parts of the planet. It now seems pertinent to revisit J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*.

As Crèvecoeur notes (albeit through a farfetched example), it can be hard to distinctly determine that which makes someone American:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. (54)

America was not only a new nation, but also one of a new and diverse people. The American experience was one unlike any other.

Whitman's poetry takes on the pressure of defining this new American experience, and he does this by probing readers with questions as to how they have approached learning and reading in the past, and pushes them to learn not only through history, but also through individual thought and discovery:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor
look through the eyes of the dead nor feed on the
spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (33-38)

Whitman places an immense importance on the individual, arguing that it is up to the reader to access the world as it is meant to be seen, which echoes the sentiments of Emerson. While

Whitman inevitably takes the role of guide several times in “Song of Myself,” he tells the reader that “not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself” (1210-1211). Due to this, Whitman’s concept of what it means to be American is rooted in the prospect that one should think and act for oneself, and that this is the only way to experience the world in the way he does. While one should see the importance in literature and the thoughts of others, true genius is found only through individual existence. In this, Whitman’s idealized America becomes rooted in developing images and themes that are unique to the American experience. Rather than focusing on a previous generation’s literature and history, individuals and poets should forge their own. This struggle for identity and fight for an American purpose becomes layered into Whitman’s mockingbird, and it is why his use of the bird had such a great impact. In fact, in “Song of Myself” Whitman seems to adopt the role of a mockingbird-like character, taking the voices of many and transcribing them:

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the
current and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
.....

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d. (504-506, 516-518)

In other words, Whitman speaks for all people in this poem, whether they are “prisoners”, “slaves”, or other disenfranchised people (508-509). As Fred Alsop explains, the mixed environment of American culture was perfect for the poetical implications of the mockingbird:

I think that if you're making an analogy between the immigrants to this country, where there have been open doors . . . that the variety has added to our vitality as a nation. I think you see a step by some writers and some poets, in particular, to the mockingbird incorporating all of these different songs from different species as an analogy to the mixing pot that the United States has become. (Alsop)

This idea of containing multiple voices gives Whitman the power like that of the mockingbird, and he appears to have a pathetic relationship with these people in the same way that the mockingbird does with other birds in nature and with poets in literature.

Arguably, his most interesting use of the mockingbird is found in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The poem, originally published in the 1860s but not finalized until 1881, follows the speaker paradoxically as both child and adult watching two mockingbirds on the beach, up until the moment when the female bird disappears ("Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" 41-45). Whitman presents a semi-confessional narrative that uses a connection to nature to gain inspiration for something greater, which may be poetry. He reflects on how, as a child, he would hear the cries of the mockingbird and translate the bird's language: "I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair, / Listen'd long and long. / Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes" (67-70). Unlike other poets that had written mockingbird poems, Whitman uses this translation to give both the speaker and the bird distinctive voices; where the speaker's narration is more nostalgic and inquisitive, the bird takes on a more lamenting singsong role. This poem becomes suggestive of the power behind the mockingbird's call and the speaker cites this moment with the bird as important to their entire existence as a writer and as a person:

Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,)

Is it indeed toward your mate that you sing? or is it really to me?

For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have
heard you,

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake . . . (144-145)

Through listening to the mockingbird's voice, Whitman has learned his true purpose: poetry. The pathos of the bird has brought him to an emotional halt, and he must now ask the world for one word, a word that he claims needs to be "superior to all" (161). He utilizes these translations as a communication with nature, and through his intense focus on both the mockingbird's call and the crashing waves of the ocean, he is able to hear the sea's answer, which is simply the word "death" in repetition (168-169). The speaker then identifies that this is the moment when he matured, when nature taught him what it would mean to be a poet, and the importance of an understanding in death.

Florence MacDermid Chace believed that Whitman used the ornithological text *The Birds of Long Island* by J. P. Giraud, Jr., as the frame for understanding the traits and qualities of the mockingbird, again showing the importance that nature writing might have taken in American literature (Chace 93). However, it is entirely possible that Whitman's understanding of mockingbirds came from his own endeavors. Whitman wrote quite a few poems that showcased the mockingbird as a definitive part of American culture in *Leaves of Grass*. While it is hard to say whether or not Whitman read Giraud's text, it is clear that he took some influence from nature writing. Whitman presented much of his poetry through cataloguing, often listing out the specific things that he would see while taking a walk through the town or woods. One of the better examples of his travel poetry is "O Magnet-South." The poem, which is a love poem to a romanticized southern landscape, follows Whitman on his sight-seeing tour of an idealized South, where he points out everything that he sees, no matter how insignificant it may seem to

the reader (“O Magnet-South” 11-19). This poem also makes mention of the mockingbird: “The mocking-bird, the American mimic, singing all the / forenoon, singing through the moon-lit night” (17-18). His calling the mockingbird “the American mimic” is another attempt to cement the relationship between the songbird and American exceptionalism. As previously discussed, the many voices of the mockingbird make it stronger, and the many cultures of the United States make the country more robust and interesting, as Whitman identifies in both this poem and “Song of Myself.” This importance of the mockingbird is also an echo of his earlier poem “Starting from Paumanok.” The purpose of this poem was for Whitman to travel both literally and metaphorically to experience all that America has to offer. The first section begins with the speaker, presumably Whitman, travelling out of Long Island into both the physical and metaphysical world:

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born,
Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother,
After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,
.....
Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the
mountain-hawk,
And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from
the swamp-ceders,
Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World. (“Starting from Paumanok 1-3,
12-14)

In this section, Whitman again creates a list, this time cataloguing the most important aspects of what needs to be understood to reach the ultimate American experience. As “Starting from

Paumanok” becomes a journey of self-discovery for Whitman, it also becomes a way for him to again detail his idealized America. While he does not directly take on the role of mockingbird in this poem, he does once again show the importance of many voices in America:

Americanos! conquerors! marches humanitarian!

Foremost! century marches! Libertad! masses!

For you a programme of chants.

Chants of the prairies,

Chants of the long-running Mississippi, and down to the

Mexican sea,

Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and

Minnesota,

Chants going forth from the centre from Kansas, and thence

equidistant,

Shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all. (37-44)

While the focus of this passage is placed largely on the states themselves, Whitman still places a strong importance on togetherness, and the idealization of the American “melting pot.” With his identifying the mockingbird as distinctly American in its ability to mimic, it is not hard to imagine why he also used these images of a borrowed culture in both “Starting from Paumanok” and “Song of Myself.” To reiterate the earlier comments of Fred Alsop, the mockingbird was a unmistakable representative of this “mixing pot” of cultures, and its clearly one of the major reasons that Whitman felt that the mockingbird was so integral to American culture.

Through Whitman's ideological vision, the mockingbird becomes as much a part of America as the grass in "Song of Myself": a "uniform hieroglyphic" which is accessible to everyone, regardless of race, gender, or status (106). The mockingbird is an icon that can be called upon or listened to, interpreted as anything from a satirical mimic to a childhood mentor. Whitman created a version of the mockingbird that was, at its core, a cultural symbol in American iconography. He even took on the role of mockingbird in "Song of Myself," utilizing the many voices of the American landscape to create an overtly American poem. His use of the songster makes it clear that, for Whitman and poets like him, the mockingbird was a part of American life and culture that needed to be written about and better understood. With the foundation of an American symbol, the strict reliance on poetry of the past was ending, and a new era of modern American poetry was about to begin.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In these final thoughts, I would like to call attention to one of the best summations of the mockingbird's importance in literature, appearing in Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1913 poem "The Lesson":

But e'en as I listened the mock-bird's song,
A thought stole into my saddened heart,
And I said, "I can cheer some other soul
By a carol's simple art."

.....
So I sang a lay for a brother's ear
In a strain to soothe his bleeding heart,
And he smiled at the sound of my voice and lyre,
Though mine was a feeble art.

But at his smile I smiled in turn,
And into my soul there came a ray:
In trying to soothe another's woes
Mine own had passed away. (9-12, 17-24)

For the aforementioned poets and Dunbar, the mockingbird was, much like the nightingale, a source of creative inspiration. Unlike the nightingale, however, the mockingbird was a present and truly influential voice for American poets. Unlike the nightingale, the American songster was not tied to a previous generation's conventional framework. Its malleability as a new figure

in American culture led to its placement as the official bird of five different southern states, and its literary importance would be revisited in the twentieth century in works such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Throughout its development, the mockingbird very much existed as a free and formidable ally for the writer, and its intrepid confidence created a lasting impact on American culture.

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