

“Like Footsteps Upon Wool”: Philology, Ecology, and Tennyson’s Early Lyrics

Mimi McMillan

University of California, Davis

Advised by Elizabeth Carolyn Miller

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In the environmental humanities, critical approaches based in language and linguistics, particularly poststructuralism, have been described as inadequate to address the nonhuman environment and to contend with anthropogenic climate change. Critics argue that focusing on the discursive has the effect of centering the human and obscuring the materiality of the natural world.¹ But in the nineteenth century, theorists of language aligned language itself with matter and the natural world in multiple ways. Theorists of language, speaking mostly from the discipline of philology, proposed that language worked similarly to the inorganic and organic natural world and, later in the century, aligned the methods of studying language with the methods of studying the earth. For example, in his 1838 lecture “On Words,” theologian and scholar Frederick Denison Maurice states that “there is as much a vital principle in a word as in a tree or a flower” (52).² Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge similarly describes words as “living powers” in his 1825 *Aids to Reflection*, a popular book of aphorisms and commentary on philosophy and religion, and philologist Max Müller compares languages to geologic “strata” (Müller 20) in his 1868 lecture “On the Stratification of Language.”³ Writing in the midst of such philological speculation, Alfred Tennyson thoughtfully contended with philological theory in his poetry, as critics such as Linda Dowling, Donald Hair, and Richard Turley have shown. When read in this context, we can see that centering the discursive in Tennyson’s work does not

¹ For example, in *Material Feminisms* (2008), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue for attention to the “materiality of the human body and the natural world” (1); of feminism in an ecological context, they write, “While no one would deny the ongoing importance of discursive critique and rearticulation for feminist scholarship and feminist politics, the discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices.”

² “On Words” was published in Maurice’s *The Friendship of Books* (1886); Müller’s lecture was published as “On the Stratification of Language” (1868).

³ As Tristram Wolff notes, metaphors like these were philological “commonplaces” (622).

obscure materiality; instead, attention to language can further our understanding of how Tennyson engages with the natural world and its liveliness.

In this essay, I look at how language relates to the natural world in Tennyson's lyrics "Claribel," "Mariana," and "Oenone" from the first volume of his 1842 *Poems*. These poems depict the intersections of human death and the natural world, establishing an unstable sense of human presence and attributing animacy to nonhuman forces. In his 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, novelist and critic Amitav Ghosh examines which aspects of our culture prompt recognition, or prevent recognition, of the planet as dynamic and animate. Looking at contemporary literary fiction, he suggests that the literary forms that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly the realist novel, are not able to contend with the unpredictability and the animacy of the earth, and thus these forms remain, today, unable to represent the planet and climate change. The insufficient engagement with climate change in contemporary literary fiction, he posits, "derive[s] ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth" (7)—that is, from the nineteenth century. Yopie Prins and Devin Garofalo, among others, have made the opposite argument with respect to Victorian poetry. Prins suggests that the voice of Victorian poetry is where the human "is least certain" (46), and Garofalo, reading Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, sees the Victorian lyric "I" as "unsettl[ing] the normative, colonial, anthropocentric one" (756) which "coincides with the nineteenth-century emergence of modern 'man' as an imperial and planetary agent" (756), proposing "that Victorian lyric poetry might afford an old but pressing language for thinking and acting beyond the human" (756). I take up these claims to consider Tennyson's early lyric poems, so focused, as they are, on human death in

the context of the natural world. For Ghosh, failures of literary form are part of an “imaginative” (8) failure that “lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (8), an imaginative failure to recognize the animacy and unpredictability of nonhuman forces. In his early lyric poems, however, Tennyson suggests that by complicating the distinction between the discursive and material and by imagining a less human form of language, literature can reveal the animacy of nonhuman forces and challenge the hierarchical relationship between the human and nonhuman.

Nineteenth-Century Philology and the Earth

The study of language was primarily located within the field of philology in the nineteenth century, but it attracted theorists in other disciplines as well, such as poets, theologians, and politicians. Philologic thought was pervasive in this period, and as Richard Turley asserts, “philology was one of the most important forums of thought” (188). The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, a “monument” (Dowling 42) to the work of philology, was initiated during this time.⁴ New philological societies were founded as well, such as the London Philological Society in 1842. At the end of the century, as many scholars note, the number of theories on the origins of language had increased so substantially that both the London Philological Society and the Linguistic Society of Paris banned further speculation on the question of language’s origin. Nineteenth-century philologists, I will suggest in this section, used the natural world to understand language just as they used language to understand the natural world. In examining the ways in which philological thought engages with the earth, I describe how theories of language complicate the category of the human and the distinction between the

⁴ Philologist Richard Chenevix Trench, a peer of Tennyson's at Cambridge, prompted the construction of the *OED* with his 1857 lectures to the Philological Society titled and published as *On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries* (Marshall 3).

discursive and the material, a set of complications that also animate Tennyson's early lyric poems.

Philologists imagined language as similar in structure to both the living and nonliving natural world. In his 1825 popular study *Aids to Reflection*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes, "For if words are not things, they are living powers, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized" (26). While Coleridge was not the first to propose that words possessed a "life," his phrase was influential and taken up by other theorists of language. Trench expands on Coleridge's premise in his collection of philological lectures, *On the Study of Words* (1851), writing that words are "not merely arbitrary signs; but living powers." In his 1838 lecture "On Words" published in *The Friendship of Books* (1886), Frederick Denison Maurice sees this "life" in language as a kind of ecological life: "The point in debate is whether words are endued with this principle of life, the manifestations of which it is impossible in any way so truly to express as in the language of outward nature" (53).

Furthermore, in criticizing writer Samuel Johnson's and prominent philologist John Horne Tooke's methodologies, he compares words to plant life, arguing that if Johnson and Tooke understood "that there is as much a vital principle in a word as in a tree or a flower...they would not have consented so cruelly to tie up all its rich and luxuriant shoots" (52); in other words, they would be better able to understand the workings of words. Maurice implies that ecological understandings are crucial to linguistic understandings. Further proposing that the "shoots" could be "cruelly" constrained, he models a sense of consideration for nonhuman life and a widened conception of what constitutes "life" at all in the process of understanding and theorizing language.

Other thinkers suggested that language was similar to the nonliving world and geologic processes. Trench responds to American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson's assertion in his essay "The Poet" (1842-43) that "language is fossil poetry" writing, "just as in some fossil, curious and beautiful shapes of vegetable or animal life, the graceful fern or the finely vertebrated lizard...are permanently bound up within the stone, and rescued from the perishing" (5), words work similarly to preserve "the imagination" (5) and "thoughts and images" (5) of the past. Trench further explains that words are not just "fossil poetry" but "fossil ethics" (5) and "fossil history" (5). The fossil recalls a physical process that occurs over time, and thus, in this metaphor, both Emerson and Trench impose a sense of materiality on words. In his 1868 lecture "On the Stratification of Language," Müller develops this idea further. He proposes that because of eighteenth century geologic investigations, nineteenth-century theorists have the conceptual framework to think about languages. He writes, "I doubt whether even thus we should have arrived at a thorough understanding of the real antecedents of language, unless what happened in the study of the stratification of the earth" (40). In this way, Müller indicates that languages and the lithosphere are similar objects of study, and prompt similar forms of thought. Discussing nineteenth-century philology's metaphoric comparisons between "linguistic and geologic processes," Tristram Wolff states, "the comparison is haunted by the voice of stone itself" (121)—the material and the linguistic "mutually contaminate" each other (121). Similarly, when language is understood in inorganic and well as organic terms, the use of language becomes "haunted" by the nonhuman. By calling on these and other similar figures, philologic theory sets up a dialogue between the discursive and ecological.

Outside of figurative comparisons, philologists also conceptualized the closely-bound relationship between the discursive and material through origin theories of language. Some theories of language proposed that the sounds of languages were derived from the sounds of the natural world—these were prominent theories in the nineteenth century, as Max Müller notes in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861). As Müller adds, Johan Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was a significant influence in these arguments. In *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder posits that, “the human being invented language for himself! – from the sounds of living nature!” and that human language was initially formed through imitation of such sounds. In Herder’s vision, the natural world forms the discursive world, and yet this remains an anthropocentric vision of language formation. He writes that “the human being rules over nature [and] was the father of a living language” because humanity could “abstract” language from these sounds. Language, according to Herder's conception, is born of a nonarbitrary connection between word and object, where nature determines the word and human speech refers back to the natural world, and yet it still models human domination of nature through the process of abstraction.

Maurice, on the other hand, suggests that words can reveal our connection to matter while still affirming humans’ status as “spiritual being[s]” (50). He writes, “I think it is very important that [people] should understand, that words do indeed bear witness to man's connection with that which is earthly and material, because he *is* so connected, and because everything which he does and utters must proclaim this truth” (50), but, he adds, “[words] are also able to testify ... of man as a spiritual being” (50) which “all the materialism in the world” (50) cannot obscure.

Discussing materialist theories of language which posit that words were derived from the sensory

world, he asserts that language can “bear witness” to human connection to the “earthly and material.” In this way, he provides a model to consider how theories of language can play a role in thinking about human connection to earthly materiality.

Tennyson was immersed in this intellectual environment characterized by the exciting foment of linguistic theory. As Linda Dowling discusses, in the 1830s when the poems I focus on initially appeared, philological thought was changing in Britain as ideas from Germany were introduced and became prominent. At Trinity College, Cambridge in the late 1820s, Tennyson was associated with an undergraduate intellectual society called the Apostles, which was influenced by Coleridge and composed of members who became prominent in the study of language, such as Maurice and Trench (Dowling 52). Additionally, Hans Aarsleff notes, Trinity College became a center for philological thought in England when William Whewell was head of the college. Patrick Scott adds that Whewell was also a tutor of Tennyson's at Trinity College. Many critics note that the Apostles were in an unusual historical position: they were immersed in shifting theories of language but were able to navigate seemingly opposing ideas—“to sustain the belief...in the scientific study of language and their faith that language represented the spiritual part of man” (Dowling 61). Tennyson engaged with and participated in this moment in the history of philology where language was conceptualized in terms of the natural world and understood to be connected to matter. The language theories that surrounded him proposed that thinking with language is also thinking ecologically.

Ecological Animacy and the Lyric: “Claribel”

Tennyson's “Claribel,” subtitled “A Melody,” prefaces *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and, in the revised version I look at here, *Poems* (1842). Although critics have often overlooked

“Claribel,” deeming it simplistic, in this poem Tennyson introduces a theory of the lyric that conceptualizes his poetic project more broadly. Tennyson engages philological thought that understood the animate and organic character of language to propose a theory of the lyric. The “melody” in this poem's title, I will argue, refers to the lyric. In “Claribel,” Tennyson describes the landscape of Claribel's gravesite, focusing on its sound. The setting of Claribel's grave, a site that marks the integration of the human into the ground, creates an ambiguous sense of human presence. In this context, Tennyson shifts from language motivated by the human to present the language of the lyric as organically derived, living, and dynamic as he describes the linguistic and musical qualities of the landscape's organic and inorganic entities. The poem suggests how genre reflects a certain imagination of language by depicting a lyric poem composed through the sounds of its environment. Here, ecological conceptions of language are in dialogue with poetic form. Tennyson's conception of the lyric complicates the distinction between the discursive and material, destabilizing human presence, conveying nonhuman animacy, and questioning the role of the human in lyric composition. Yet even as he considers the relationship between lyric poetry and the sounds of the natural world, he depicts the tension between the anthropocentric composition of the lyric and lyric as a composition organized by ecological relationships and imbued with the animacy of the natural world.

“Claribel” explores the human relationship to the earth after death, prompting the reader to imagine the body's relationship to the material world. Tennyson writes, describing Claribel's impact on the landscape after death, “Where Claribel low-leith/The breezes pause and die,/Letting the rose-leaves fall” (ll.1-3) and continues, “But the solemn oak-tree sigheth,/Thick-leaved, ambrosial” (ll. 4-5). This space embodies contrast—the “breezes” lack life but the tree is animate; the “rose-leaves fall,” but the tree is “thick-leaved, ambrosial.” The line “Where

Claribel low-leith,” which Tennyson repeats at the end of this stanza and the end of the poem, recalls Claribel's burial, alluding to a material relationship to this place, where the human decays and could become incorporated into the matter of this environment. As he depicts her influence over this place, he imaginatively alludes to her integration in the matter of the earth in bodily decomposition.

In the context of this unusual place, Tennyson shows how the composition of lyric is itself centered around ecological relationships and earthly temporality. He presents the activities and relationships of the natural world that exist outside of humans, while still retaining a sense of human presence through the gravesite. Describing the musicality of the landscape, Tennyson writes:

At eve the beetle boometh
 Athwart the thicket lone:
 At noon the wild bee hummeth
 About the moss'd headstone:
 At midnight the moon cometh,
 And looketh down alone. (ll. 9-14)

He describes how each sound is formed through the spatial and temporal habits of these earthly, and celestial, beings. Although the moon does not produce sound, Tennyson shows how it is incorporated into the song by the way it punctuates the song with silence. As he describes the moon as part of the poetic structure, he calls it into relation with the other parts of the landscape. Referring to these discrete times and places, Tennyson constructs an idea of melody composed through the multiple and dispersed sounds of an ecosystem—a lyric similar to how Garofalo understands the lyric subject as “emphatically plural and distributed” (756) in *In Memoriam*.

Tennyson continues to describe the physical features of the landscape: “The slumbrous wave outwelleth,” (l.18), “The babbling runnel crispeth” (l.19), and “The hollow grot replieth” (l.20). Describing the echo of the cave formation, “the hollow grot,” at the end of the poem, Tennyson shows how a geologic figure, the “grot” or cave, is animated through the “melody.” He implies how sound, in the context of lyric composition, can animate entities that are considered inert and unalive, like moons and caves, and draw them into relation. Similarly, the word “replieth” to describe the echo attributes a vocal quality to the cave, implying that it, too, becomes animated through its interactions within these sounds, and therefore, through its role in the lyric. “Claribel” is a lyric that exemplifies Garofalo's idea of the Victorian lyric as “emphatically plural and distributed, vulnerable to and permeated by external—and distinctly nonhuman—beings and energies” (756), for it is a lyric composed of the nonhuman earthly entities in this location, and without a subject. Yet while Garofalo sees Tennyson’s lyric “I” in *In Memoriam* as “disfigur[ing] the human as we know it” (757), “Claribel” uses no lyric “I.” But he also literally, centers the human – the dead human – reflecting an anthropocentric vision of the natural world through lyric composition: the “moon” directs its gaze at Claribel, the bees buzz “about the moss’d headstone” (l.12), encircling it, and this place, “Where Claribel low-leith,” is defined by her.

Even as Tennyson centers Claribel, he creates a simultaneous sense of the instability of her presence by depicting language as material. The “moss’d headstone,” which alludes to Claribel’s name inscribed in stone, for example, stands in for a material conceptualization of language. Richard Turley points to an instance of inscription in tree bark in another early poem of Tennyson's, arguing that the poet is attentive to “the vulnerability of language — even that which it inscribed — to forces of erosion” (166). In this way, “Claribel,” represents on a small

scale and quite literally, the often noted nineteenth-century imagination of language's propensity to decay or disintegrate. Tennyson's poems, more generally, are filled with images of the gravestone. Referring to *In Memoriam*, Garofalo describes how the yew tree interacts with gravestones to decenter the human. She writes that a "moment of lyric dissociation" (763) for the poem's speaker "is compounded by the yew's covering over of the very thing—the name—by which human persons are designated as persons. '[G]rasp[ing] at the stones / That name the underlying dead' (2.1–2), the plant actively obscures the name of the individual and, by extension, the category of the human" (763). The "moss'd headstone" in "Claribel" could then be read like Garofalo argues to similarly decenter the human. Nineteenth-century philologic theory adds to this consideration. Philologists, comparing words to the natural world, posited that words could decay, like the words on "moss'd headstone" or *In Memoriam's* gravestones. Therefore, as Garofalo describes, words written on gravestones make the name subject to natural forces; and thus, Tennyson's conceptualizations of language enable the instability of the human presence in "Claribel." In this way, the poem describes a natural world that works "actively" and outside of human influence through its representations of language.

Tennyson never describes Claribel's body decaying, but as he describes the growth of the moss obscuring her name over time, he alludes to such decay. John MacNeill Miller has argued that Tennyson's *In Memoriam* exemplifies how aesthetic modes conceal decay, a process that he sees as significant to ecological engagement. In "Claribel," Tennyson's construction of a "distributed" (Garofalo 756) or a disintegrated lyric voice where the "melody" is "separate[d] into its component parts or particles" ("disintegrate," v.) reflects the human relationship to the earth and conveys how poetic composition simultaneously centers and destabilizes the human. Therefore, in "Claribel," Tennyson's material and ecological theory of the lyric at this earlier

point in his career enables him to feature and represent such disintegration. Tennyson provides a model for how aesthetic representations of decay, haunted by theories of language that imagine language materially, can center the processes of decay aesthetically.

Tennyson's composition of a lyric formed through the interactions and relationalities within Claribel's gravesite evokes a sense of nonhuman sentience. Carol Christ proposes that Tennyson's poems about female figures and landscape work as a “kind of transformation, replacing their subjects with landscape” (390). Though she does not read “Claribel” in relation to theories of language and lyric, her suggestion that these poems equate their central figure to “landscape” indicates a process that mirrors the way Tennyson “replace[s]” the lyric speaker with the language of the “landscape.” Katherine Duncan-Jones relates the sounds in “Claribel” to human “sentience,” writing, “The sounds described by the poet are perhaps only those which [Claribel] would hear if she were sentient; he may be imaginatively exploring a place where there is no sentience” (350). Because Claribel, the human, is dead, she suggests there may not be any “sentience” in this natural setting. Equating human life to sentience, she ignores the multiplicity of nonhuman forms of sentience in the lyric. Duncan-Jones also relates “Claribel” to John Keats's portrayal of buried humans in his 1818 *Isabella*; she notes that while Keats depicts the buried Lorenzo hearing and “chant[ing]” (qtd. in Duncan-Jones, ll. 308), Tennyson does not imagine Claribel as able to receive communication or speak after burial. Yet there is “sentience” in this landscape: Tennyson most explicitly alludes to it through the poem's anthropomorphization, such as “the solemn oak-tree sigheth”—but he also describes “wild bee[s],” songbirds, “babbling runnel[s]” and how the lyric brings them into relationship. Central to the poem, then, is a type of nonhuman “sentience” that surpasses the anthropomorphic emotions and human-centered modes that Tennyson sometimes uses to describe these sounds.

Here “sentience” is based on relationships, animacy, and the composition of poetry as an organic phenomenon.

While the sounds described in this poem could be read as the sounds of the nonhuman environment, and not as poetic, Tennyson connects this “melody” to poetic voice more directly by referring to the songbird, placing the sounds of the natural world into the context of poetic language. Tennyson's references to the songbird—“lintwhite” (l.16), “mavis” (l.17), and “throstle” (l.18)—invoke the poetic tradition of alluding to poetic voice through the figure of the songbird. Perhaps more unusually, the earthly rhythms he describes—the cyclical nature of animal sounds at “noon” (l.9) and “eve” (l.11)—are repetitions reflective of rhyme and meter in poetry and suggest that poetry takes its rhythms, as well as its voice, from the natural world. As the “hollow grot” echoes the sounds it receives, Tennyson parallels the repetition of lines and words in structured poetry, structuring the rhythms of poetry through ecological relations.

“Claribel” imagines what the lyric can be without human presence and what language is when it is understood as material and ecological. Tennyson recalls theories of language that conceive of the matter of poetry ecologically, with a special focus on the idea that words written materially are subject to decay. His lyric is composed from words conceptualized in Coleridge's theory as “living powers” or in Maurice's interpretation as the “principle of life” (52) best expressed in “the language of outward nature” (52)—a composition where words are agent beings of their own, like the “wild bee,” “beetle,” and “grot” who compose this lyric. As the rock formation of the “grot” illustrates, Tennyson's lyric has the capacity to draw both living and nonliving parts of an environment into relation and animacy, or recall their existent animacy, qualities in this genre which are – or should be – central to Ghosh's discussion. In Tennyson's

lyric, language and poetics become interdependent with the understanding of the earth and its agencies.

A Less Human Language: “Mariana”

While “Claribel” imagines the natural world as a “distributed” and collaborative lyric speaker, “Mariana,” first published in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and revised for both *Poems* (1832) and the first volume of *Poems* (1842), depicts human speech alongside the sounds of the natural world. Tennyson begins with the epigraph “‘*Mariana in the Moated Grange*’” from Shakespeare's early-seventeenth-century play, *Measure for Measure*, positioning the poem in a relational literary context. As with “Claribel,” “Mariana,” alludes to human death and the process of decomposition and decay to consider the relationship between humans and nonhumans, and the animacy and agency of the natural world. Tennyson sets the poem in an environment where the roof of the country house turns to grass, “flower-plots” (l.1) are “thickly crusted” (l.2) the “pear” (l.4) falls from “the gable-wall” (l.4), and the “marish-mosses cre[ep]” (l.40). Mariana repeatedly calls out a refrain as she longs for a man who she knows will not arrive and listens to her surroundings. While “Claribel” calls upon ecological imaginations of language to conceptualize the lyric, in “Mariana” Tennyson puts pressure on the boundaries of sound and language to imagine language as a less human form. This differently defined language can, as Tennyson shows, reimagine hierarchies between humans and animals, and between humans and the planet.

As Tennyson describes Mariana's refrain, he depicts speech as called into motion by planetary forces, which in turn, reveals the agency of these forces. He shows how the act of using language, of speaking, of exclaiming, connects humans to the larger motions of the Earth. Dwelling in “the lonely moated grange” (l.8), Mariana calls out a refrain at the end of every

stanza. Her refrain does not have much content and repeats itself with little variation. This has prompted critics to note that her speech is ineffective. Tennyson writes in the first instance of her refrain:

She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!" (ll.9-12)

The first line is then replaced with "The night is dreary" (ll.23) and "The day is dreary" (ll.34). Tennyson repeats the sequence "my life," "the night," "the day." The structure of the poem and the cyclical repetitions that shift from "night" to "day" invoke the cyclical rhythms of the earth. She speaks these exclamations according to the time of day. The stanza formations structure her speech evenly, working with the cycles of day and night, and she becomes something similar to an automaton, although not animated by mechanical but by planetary forces. The planet animating Mariana creates a reversal of actors. Instead of traditional figures of poetic animation, like apostrophe, where the lyric speaker animates, in Barbara Johnson's definition, "the absent, dead, or inanimate" (28), the planet's movement prompts her to speak. This idea changes the poem's representation of how language works, who has control over it, and who it conveys as alive. As Ghosh describes, climate change makes it impossible to continue to believe "that planets and asteroids are inert" (3); Tennyson's poem resonates with Ghosh's assertion that the

planet is a “protagonist” (6), an understanding obscured over the past two or three hundred years. Here, Tennyson, with Ghosh, describes how the planet acts on us.⁵

Tennyson draws a parallel between human speech and the sounds of other animals by describing their vocalization as similarly connected to earthly temporality. Destabilizing the boundaries of language in this way, he refigures the imposed hierarchy between humans and other animals. His comparison between human speech and animal sounds draws upon understandings of language where the linguistic and ecological are much more ambiguous. For example, Tennyson describes the sounds of animals Mariana hears in the middle of the night:

Upon the middle of the night,
 Waking she heard the night-fowl crow:
 The cock sung out an hour ere light:
 From the dark fen the oxen's low
 Came to her (ll.25-29)

The term “night-fowl” defines the bird through its relationship to a time of day. When Mariana hears the “night-fowl crow,” Tennyson implies through its name that it “crow[s]” periodically with the time of day. He indicates how the animal is defined by its relationship to earthly

⁵ In “Claribel” and “Mariana,” and “Oenone,” Tennyson associates women with the earth, and in “Mariana” with animals, recalling a long history of conventional gender roles. Such poems can be read as a dehumanization of women, both by associating them with the natural world and by representing them in near-death states, and I agree with this reading in many ways. Yet, this association of women and nature, points to where humans more generally could be recognized as a part of the natural world – not just women, but all humans. Additionally, this ambiguous sense of humanity is not only apparent in Tennyson's poems about women; for example, as Garofalo explores in *In Memoriam*, the voice of the male lyric speaker here is “interpenetrated” (753) with “nonhuman agencies” (753). Similarly, in “Tithonus,” Tennyson alludes to the mythical figure Tithonus who is immortalized while his body “wither[s]” (l.6). At other moments in the poem, Tennyson also disrupts a straightforward equation of Mariana with natural patterns when he writes, “Her tears fell with the dews at even;/Her tears fell ere the dews were dried” (ll.13-14), pointing to a moment where her expression is not connected to the earth. While not negating these considerations of a less than human female figure in these poems, I focus on them here because these poems have intriguing interests in language which refigure its separation from the ecological.

rhythms. Similarly, the line, “cock sung out an hour ere light,” associates another bird's vocalization with a temporal rhythm. Tennyson describes patterns of vocalization where the act of vocalization is associated with the rhythms of the night, constructing a parallel to the structure of Mariana's exclamation. This presents a conception of language, specifically the act of speech, as based on a patterning related to the planet instead of content. This description presents these patterns of vocalization as something that humans and nonhuman animals share. Furthermore, both humans and other animals, who cohabit the planet, are similarly subject to its animating forces.

By bringing sound into closer conversation with language, Tennyson expands our conceptions of what language is to incorporate the interpretation of nonlinguistic sound. Throughout the poem Tennyson repeatedly describes the sounds of Mariana's environment, and at the end of the poem, he explores the meaning in these forms of sound. Tennyson describes Mariana in her house as she hears the sounds that surround her:

The sparrow's chirrup on the roof,
 The slow clock ticking, and the sound
 Which to the wooing wind aloof
 The poplar made, did all confound
 Her sense (ll. 73-77)

He recalls the conjunction of multiple forms of sound—the bird's song, the clock, and “the sound” that the “poplar ma[kes]” in the “wind.” Mariana receives this set of nonlinguistic sounds to both “sense” perceptually and to make “sense” of. The sound the “slow clock” makes implies an instance where patterned sound signifies, rather directly, meaning related to time. This

meaning follows from the context of the narrative where Mariana waits, hopes to die, and longs for a man who “will not come” (l.82). Therefore, when Tennyson writes that these sounds “did all confound/Her sense,” he implies that Mariana interprets their temporal meaning. These instances, a “clock” and sound perceived through the “roof,” point not just to “natural” sound, but also show how nonlinguistic communication can carry meaning as well. Most directly here, the word “sense” recalls the understanding of sense as sensory reception, but the word “sense” has other definitions that relate it to the interpretation of language. For example, “sense” can also mean, “The meaning of a more or less extended sequence of written or spoken words” (“sense,” n.1.a), “The meaning intended or conveyed by a writer or speaker,” (“sense,” n.3), and “A meaning of a word, compound, or phrase identified by and recorded in a dictionary” (“sense,” n.4.b).⁶ Using the word “sense” in this context confuses and complicates its multiple definitions. It alludes to linguistic interpretation and it recalls sensory reception—which alludes to the possible meaning in sound, and thus to language. This destabilizes the differences between sound and language.

The possibility for nonlinguistic sound to be associated with language also indicates how different forms of language prompt different modes of reception. These sounds “confound” Mariana's “sense,” and in the act of sonic reception, Tennyson points to the material and bodily as a mode of interpretation of nonlinguistic sound, a response to such sonic effects as rhyme and rhythm. Here he alludes to the meaning of sense as “The bodily senses considered as a single

⁶ As these definitions indicate, “sense” itself is part of the philological project. The definitions of “sense” discuss the process of interpreting the language of a text and allude to defining and differentiating word meanings, like the project of the *OED*. Mariana's interpretation of this nonlinguistic communication then, too, reflects the project of philology.

faculty in contrast to intellect, reason, will” (“sense,” n.12.b). But furthermore, he implies that nonlinguistic sounds do not operate entirely like language normally does—his descriptions of sound also bring language into the “sense,” thus expanding both the meaning of sound and of language.

Tennyson dissolves the difference between the sonic and the linguistic when he utilizes words which imitate nonlinguistic sounds, onomatopoeia, to describe Mariana's environment. These words place the sounds of the environment into the context of language, just as Tennyson does in his descriptions of sound and language in the poem. He uses a multiplicity of imitative words in the poem when he writes the “clinking latch” (l. 6), “The sparrow's chirrup,” “the wooing wind,” the “door” (l.61) that “creak'd” (l.61), and “the mouse” who “shriek'd” (l.64).⁷ Multiple origin theories of language proposed nonarbitrary relationships between a word and what it represents, but Tennyson's diction here recalls the theory that human language arose from the sounds of the natural world. Herder's origin theory, although written before Tennyson's time, as Müller notes, was still prevalent in the nineteenth century. Herder imagines humans in their primordial days, imitating the sounds of their environment to talk about their environment. This theory imagines the natural world as the initiator of linguistic formation. Herder imagines, “When the leaves of the tree rustle down coolness for the poor lonely one, when the stream that murmurs past rocks him to sleep, and the west wind whistling in fans his cheeks” then the human will “name them in his soul,” and “The tree will be called the rustler, the west wind the whistler, the spring the trickler.”⁸ Tennyson draws upon the sounds of the natural world and points to the

⁷ Donald Hair argues that Tennyson's onomatopoeia in “Mariana” is an “inconsiderable part” (74) of how Tennyson strives to “articulate” (74) the “voice” (74) of the natural world. But I suggest that Tennyson's project in this poem is not representation but a refiguring of the category of language.

⁸ In Herder's explanation, this theory is an exploitative practice of abstraction in language formation. He implies that this process of language formation is anthropocentric in multiple ways. First, he states that humans only abstract words from the sounds of their surroundings that serve them; second, he sees the process of “abstraction” as drawing

human process of turning nonhuman sounds into language as he composes the poem. This implies that nonlinguistic sounds can be language, adding significance to Tennyson's descriptions of nonlinguistic communication. Tennyson's poem enacts the complication between language and sound, and the discursive and ecological, within the language of the poem, contextualizing the author's previous descriptions of environmental sonics.

Pastoral and Prophecy: "Oenone"

In both "Claribel" and "Mariana," Tennyson presents a language based more in the sounds of the environment, and less in human agency and linguistic tradition. "Oenone," in its allusion to mythology, complicates such a concept of language by depicting figures who are not fully human or nonhuman. The poem alludes to many mythical and literary sources, as critics have noted, especially Oenone's letter to Paris in Ovid's *Heroides*, a collection of epistolary poems, and Theocritus's pastoral *Idylls*. Oenone, a "fountain-nymph" (Ovid), dwells on Mount Ida, and she calls out to the mountain to tell her story. In the narrative of Oenone, Oenone falls in love with Paris in the hills of the mountain, but he leaves her for Helen, a choice which initiates the Trojan war depicted in the *Iliad*. Christopher Abram sees myth as a mode where, "Rather than thinking of Nature as existing no longer, we can imagine it as a dream that the West is just now waking up from" (30). He continues, "Premodern ecologies may provide salutary examples of how to live not in harmony with Nature, ironically, but in the absence of Nature as a category of being" (30). "Oenone" both recalls this complicated historical separation of "nature" and

upon the natural world to serve human interest. But, as the context of the poem indicates, Tennyson understands this process differently. His use of imitative language indicates an interest in how natural sounds relate to language and an interest in environmental surroundings themselves. Therefore, when he uses these imitative theories, they represent a human connection to the natural environment and suggest the author's interest in imagining a language that conveys the animacy of the nonhuman and challenges hierarchies, not one that models human domination their environments.

“human,” apparent in mythology, and further complicates it. The poem points to the implications of listening to less human forms of language, suggesting that listening to them can convey information about the environment and prophesy the future.

As Oenone repeats her refrain to Mount Ida with the imperative to be heard, she centers the reception of communication and sound in the poem. In the first iteration of her refrain, Oenone states, “O mother Ida, many-fountain'd Ida,/Dear mother Ida, harken ere I die” (ll. 22-23). “Harken” is similar to “hear,” which Oenone uses later in the poem, but is defined as “To apply the ears to hear; to listen, give ear” (“hearken,” v.1). The poem refers to multiple ideas of hearing and listening in ways that extend what attending to sound is. There is a difference between hearing and “apply[ing] the ears” which suggests that the act of listening is changed, an idea that makes sense in the context calling to a mountain. These conceptions of listening, thus, respond to ideas of language and the earth. In this way, Tennyson suggests that language is a different substance itself, something able to be received differently.

We have seen how in “Mariana,” Tennyson establishes a relationship where the planet animates human speech to present language as a nonhuman phenomenon; in “Oenone” he uses apostrophe, a conventional poetic address of animation. But, neither Oenone or Ida are either fully human or fully nonhuman—Oenone is a fountain nymph, the “daughter of a River-God” (ll.38) and Mount Ida recalls Homeric myth and older myths of mother goddesses. Oenone calls both to the anthropomorphic “mother Ida” (l.22) and to the elements of the mountain, which could be understood as inanimate entities outside of the context of myth when she states, “Hear me, O Earth, hear me, O Hills, O Caves/That house the cold crown'd snake! O mountain/brooks” (ll.35-37). If apostrophe is a figure that turns “the absent, dead, or inanimate” (Johnson 28) into the “present, animate, and anthropomorphic” (Johnson 28), then Tennyson

complicates animacy in apostrophe as Oenone calls simultaneously to the divine and to entities traditionally seen as inanimate, such as the mythical Mount Ida. Garofalo suggests that apostrophe, as a poetic figure that draws entities into relation, is ecological. She writes of “an apostrophic ecology which asserts that to be human is not simply to grapple with entanglement but to actually *be* ‘tangle’—to *be*...‘a confused network’ of beings and agencies” (766) which, then, “renegotiates the boundaries of taxonomic form and personhood” (766). In this poem, neither a speaker or an addressee are fully human, thus, Tennyson's apostrophe exemplifies how mythical narratives reflect “the absence of Nature as a category of being.” Tennyson quotes Oenone's speech implying that she uses the figure of apostrophe aloud, as opposed to the traditional speaker of a lyric poem operating without the frame of quoted, spoken address. This implies that hearing, and speaking aloud to be heard, is important to the poem, and it points specifically to the act of using poetic language aloud.

In this poem about being heard by the earth, Tennyson also describes how through nonlinguistic sound, Oenone's environment produces what lies on the border of sound and language. Tennyson implies that we can listen to this sound to understand environmental changes, such as deforestation. Daniel Williams discusses “ecological perception” (127), a term that refers to how humans perceive “the givens or potentialities of our environments” (127). He argues that Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Binsey Poplars” (1879), “assert[s] that ecological damage is also perceptual threat” (134), in other words, he argues that Hopkins's poem depicts ecological loss, deforestation, in terms of the “loss” (137) of human perceptual ability. In “Oenone,” Tennyson focuses on perception of the environment, but is less interested in presenting human perception as tied to the environment. In the beginning of the poem, Tennyson describes the pine trees, referring to them as “whispering tuft of oldest pine” (1.86). The word “whispering” refers

to a type of human speech to describe the sound of the trees, referring to an ambiguous distinction between language and sound. At the end of the poem, after Oenone has narrated the events prefacing the Trojan war, she states, "They came, they cut away my tallest pines,/my tall dark pines, that plumed the craggy ledge" (ll.204-205). The "they" refers to the men of Troy who cut trees from Mount Ida to build ships to be used in war.⁹ In her sadness at the falling of the trees, Oenone recalls how she previously could sense how they interacted with other beings to modify sound. Referring to the "pines," Oenone describes when, "from beneath/Whose thick mysterious boughs in the dark morn/The panther's roar came muffled" (ll.209-210). She describes that she will "never more" (ll.211) experience the valley with the trees, indicating how this loss changes the soundscape of the mountain.

At the end of the poem, Tennyson expands on a discussion of nonlinguistic sonic perception when he describes how Oenone perceives the future by listening to her surroundings. As Richard Cronin notes, Tennyson shifts to the future tense at the end of "Oenone":

I will not die alone, for fiery thoughts
 Do shape themselves within me, more and more,
 Whereof I catch the issue, as I hear
 Dead sounds at night come from the inmost hills,
 Like footsteps upon wool (ll.42-46)

Richard Cronin writes that Oenone "ends with her ears pricked for the approach of the future" (231). This future will be perceived through "her ears,"¹⁰ and furthermore, it will be heard from

⁹ Ovid conveys this more directly when he writes, "The firs were felled, the timbers hewn; your fleet was ready, and the deep-blue wave received the waxèd crafts."

¹⁰ His choice of "her ears pricked" as opposed to "heard" is interesting in the context of this poem. It does not imply the act of hearing (similar to the question of whether Mount Ida hears Oenone), and it is like Oenone's call to "hearken," recalling its definition of "to apply the ears to hear. "

the “hills.” But what she listens for are “dead sounds at night” which are “like footsteps upon wool,” implying their silence. The future is the Trojan war, which occurs in this area, as Cronin suggests when he writes that Oenone may listen for “a muffled army advancing for a surprise attack” (231). Oenone states, “I will rise and go/Down into Troy, and ere the stars come forth/Talk with the wild Cassandra” (ll.259-260). This associates Oenone with Cassandra, who has the capacity for prophesy, but this conjunction of the future, myth, and sound is strange. It sets up the simultaneous temporality of “hearing,” which occurs in the present, and silent sounds which convey to Oenone a future event. The idea that she could hear the future suggests that the sounds are not occurring, but that listening is a way to prophesy them or that these actions are occurring in the distance and thus tell her of the future. As Oenone perceives something perceptible through the temporality of prophesy, within a mythical context where the future is sensible, Tennyson offers a new temporal imaginary for how language can be received and interpreted.

With his memorable simile “like footsteps upon wool,” Tennyson uses the language of poetry, specifically the pastoral, to find something which to compare this strange temporality. He theorizes, in other words, a particularly poetic capacity to imagine the future. Paul Turner argues that the line, “like footsteps upon wool,” alludes to Theocritus's *Idyll V*, in which a goatherd and a shepherd recite poetry in a contest. Specifically, as Turner notes, this allusion refers to the context in the idyll where a goatherd and shepherd argue, each suggesting that their location in the hills, where they place their “wool” rugs to sit upon as they recite their poetic compositions, will be the more favorable environment for composing poetry. In this way, Tennyson’s allusion refers, symbolically, to poetic composition. This points us to the concept of lyric poetry's association with sonic perception, recalling the linguistic and natural imaginary of “Claribel.”

Tennyson implies that the language of the lyric is like listening to the future and can be heard by listening to the sound of the “hills”— and seeing these sounds as not so different from language.

Conclusion

“Claribel,” “Mariana,” and “Oenone” emerged at a historical moment in philology where the discursive and the ecological were intertwined. The ecological and discursive were seen as interdependent both literally, as in origin theories that looked at whether human language was derived from the sounds of the environment, and figuratively, where words were envisioned as “luxuriant shoots” (Maurice 38) and “fossil[s]” (Trench 5) and languages as were compared to geologic “strata” (Müller 20). Thus, when Tennyson complicates the discursive and material in his poems, he engages with the cutting edge of philological thought in his day, but while these early lyric poems can be said to emerge from these ideas, they also go further to redefine language itself. These poems demonstrate how reimagining language can redefine human and nonhuman relationships and reveal earthly animacy.

The animacy and agency of the natural world and the borders and hierarchies between the human and nonhuman, as Ghosh implies, are some of what need to be reimagined and rethought in order to contend with climate change. At the end of “Stories” from *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh addresses the position of language in relation to literary genre and posits that “the last, but perhaps the most intransigent way the Anthropocene resists literary fiction lies ultimately in its resistance to language itself” (84). He recalls “patterns of communication that are not linguistic; as, for example...when we listen to patterns of birdcalls; or when we try to figure out what exactly is portended by a sudden change in the sound of the wind as it blows through the trees” (82), such sounds as which Tennyson reinterprets as similar to language. Ghosh writes, “We do

all these things all the time ... yet we don't think of them as communicative acts" (82).

"[Perhaps]," Ghosh posits, this is "because the shadow of language interposes itself, preventing us from doing so?" (82). As "Claribel," "Mariana," and "Oenone" suggest, Tennyson's project addresses this "shadow." Tennyson reimagines language by showing how it is entwined with the sounds of the natural world, and that lyric poetry can be similar in structure to relationships in an ecosystem. Furthermore, he proposes by describing habits of speaking, that speech may not be entirely driven by human agency. Instead, it can reveal the animate force of the planet itself—the planet as a "protagonist."

As seen in "Oenone," Tennyson also redefines the act of listening to these reimagined forms of language. He shows how attention to or the act of recognizing the complicated boundary between sound and language as something meaningful allows us to understand changes in the environment and see, or rather, hear, the future. The concept of recognition is central to Ghosh's argument. For Ghosh, "a moment of recognition" (6) is not "an initial introduction" (6), but a moment where we remember again, a moment which "harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge" (4). Tennyson's early lyrics help us to recognize that the planet and its nonhuman life are not inert and prompt us to do so through their reimaginings of language.

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