The Nightingale as Voice Object in H.C. Andersen's *Nattergalen*

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Abstract

Hans Christian Andersen's tale *Nattergalen* ('The Nightingale') has most often been understood in terms of Romanticism. Such a view, however, underestimates the ambiguity of the nightingale, especially its offer to become an imperial informant. This article takes as its point of departure the troubling inscrutability of the nightingale as located in its operations as voice. One of the ways this manifests itself in the tale is the constant tension between the nightingale's body as a material thing and its voice as a non-material object. Hence Jacques Lacan's theory of the voice as object cause becomes especially relevant in considering the disruptive effects the nightingale has on virtually all who come in contact with it. Furthermore, Lacan's theory of the voice object as tied to desire and loss is helpful in articulating the tensions that manifest themselves throughout the tale. In the conclusion, I argue for a closer association between Andersen's 1844 tale 'The Shadow' and 'The Nightingale' than one might initially suspect, given that both tales rest on a certain logic of spectrality.

Keywords

H.C. Andersen, 'The Nightingale', Jacques Lacan, voice object, desire, psychoanalysis

H.C. Andersen's *Nattergalen* ('The Nightingale') is certainly one of the most popular and well known of Andersen's tales. The tale is often anthologized along with the best of Andersen's fairy tale production, and Andersen himself considered it to be one of his best. *Nattergalen* was also part of the first collection of fairy tales that critics uniformly praised when it was first published in November of 1843. According to these reviews, this collection not only preserved the naive and childlike tone and the highly inventive fantasy world of Andersen's previous collections, but achieved something more sophisticated that appealed to an older audience as well. This complexity in the tale has given rise to various readings of the text, with most emphasizing the benevolent and transcendent power of the nightingale as a representation of Romantic *Naturpoesie*. Jacob Bøggild has in fact called this reading of Andersen's tale as Romanticism 'den dominerende opfattelse' (the dominant view)[1] (Bøggild 2000: 1).[2] The tensions that structure the tale indeed seem to be those of Romanticism itself – nature versus civilization, real versus copy, the transcendence of art versus a false and superficial art. To be sure, there have been a great many interpretations of the tale that have complicated the Romanticism of Andersen's tale, Elizabeth Oxfeldt's treatment in *Nordic Orientalism* (2005) being one of the more recent examples. Most, however, have remained either within the orbit of the cultural and historical moment of Romanticism or Andersen's biography. There are, however, good reasons for considering the tale, and especially the eponymous nightingale, in other ways. What has always perplexed me in Andersen's story is the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the nightingale itself. This is most evident in the conclusion wherein the nightingale seemingly challenges its own Romanticism and even appears to refuse any attempt to comprehend its motives.

The reader will remember that towards the end of *Nattergalen*, the nightingale, which was initially a point of obsessive interest for the Chinese court, had rather quickly been forgotten with the appearance of a mechanical replica of the bird. The real nightingale is ultimately banished from the court but returns at the end of the tale to the bedside of the Emperor who now lies in his chambers slowly dying. The nightingale lulls Death away through the beauty and seductive power

of its voice and saves the ailing Emperor. The return of the nightingale to the court and to the Emperor in particular represents something of a problem, since throughout the entire tale the nightingale has been most clearly identified not with the Emperor but with a kitchen maid, a fisherman, and a farmer - figures connected more to the Romantic pastoral than the cosmopolitan superficiality of the Chinese court. Furthermore, Andersen emphasizes that the nightingale's sympathy for the monarch is not only rooted in a personal attachment but also in the institution of the monarchy itself. After winning from Death the Emperor's sceptre, crown and sword, the nightingale tells the Emperor: '[J]eg elsker Dit Hjerte meer end Din Krone, og dog har Kronen en Duft af noget Helligt om sig!' (Andersen 2003: 278) ('I love your heart more than your crown, and yet the crown has a scent of something sacred about it.') (Andersen 2004: 141-2). One might well ask why the nightingale – the favorite trope of the Romantic poets and a figure that historically has been an anti-authoritarian and even subversive voice – is involved in the political interests of rule and law, seemingly aiding and abetting a despotic political system?

The problems, however, only begin there. Though the little bird initially refuses any compensation from the grateful Emperor for his life, the nightingale ostensibly rethinks this refusal of payment and enters into a curious quid pro quo: 'lad mig komme, naar jeg selv har Lyst, da vil jeg... synge om Ondt og Godt, der rundtom Dig holdes skjult!...men eet maa Du love mig!... fortæl Ingen, at Du har en lille Fugl, der siger Dig Alt, saa vil det gaae endnu bedre! (Andersen 2003: 278) 'let me come whenever I wish. I will sing about the evil and the good that is kept hidden from you....But one thing you must promise me.... Tell no one you have a little bird who tells you everything, and things will go even better.' (Andersen 2004: 141-2). After having reached such an agreement the nightingale flies away, ostensibly on its royal errand already, and the court enters the royal chambers to find to their surprise the Emperor not dead but in fact very much alive. How does one account for the shift from the nightingale being an object of beauty to what, to all intents and purposes, seems to be an imperial informant? Tied to these problems is the nightingale's own stipulation in the rather strange quid pro quo: that things will go better

if the Emperor tells no one he has a bird who reports on the goings-on in his empire. One might ask: what is it exactly that will work better? What does the nightingale have in mind?

The Voice as Object

In apparent acknowledgement of this curious turn at the end of the tale, critics like Bøggild counter any sense of rupture by reaffirming the Romantic trope of the nightingale and the Romantic insistence on the transcendent nature of art. Bøggild, for example, argues how the nightingale can at once stand outside the political interests of power and yet be complicit with that same power. If, for Bøggild, the tale is initially structured by Romantic binaries such as 'det naturlige over for det kunstlede og det gode over for det onde' (Bøggild 2000: 1) (nature over the artificial and the good over the bad), these binaries are transformed in the conclusion, such that:

> [d]et gode forbindes endvidere med en ide om retfærdighed, hvilket kommer klarest til udtryk ved fortællingens slutning, hvor nattergalen lover kejseren at holde ham a jour med, hvad der foregår i hans rige, saledes at han, må vi formode, bibringes de nødvendige forudsætninger for at regere retfærdigt. (Bøggild 2000: 1)
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> (The good is connected still further with the idea of justice, which is most clearly expressed in the conclusion of the story where the nightingale promises the Emperor to keep him informed of what happens in his kingdom, so that he, as we assume, provides the necessary conditions to rule justly.)

But must we assume that the nightingale enables the Emperor to rule justly, the nightingale as an aide to the Emperor and the power politics of the Chinese court? One might even have to admit a certain chilling effect in Bøggild's phrasing in which the nightingale brings about the 'necessary conditions' to rule justly, the nightingale as the royal tattle-tale ready to facilitate any and all action necessary to maintain control

of the empire.

Elizabeth Oxfeldt, in her own excellent reading of the tale, draws on the aspects of Romanticism mentioned above, but takes Bøggild's assertions in a different direction by seeing the tale as an allegory of national identity and nation building. Oxfeldt reads the tale in the context of Denmark's relatively quiet transition from monarchy to parliamentary rule during the mid-nineteenth century, and sees the nightingale as both a figure of Romantic art but also an embodiment of the more democratic voice of the people. Thus what may initially appear to be the propping up of a despotic political system at the conclusion is instead to be understood as a recognition by the monarchy of the voice of the people and the emergence of a nascent democratic state in Denmark. Similar to Bøggild, Oxfeldt's reading also argues for a continuity that preserves rather than disrupts the connections between the nightingale, the people, and the Chinese Emperor. Where Bøggild's reading depends on the assumption that the nightingale is a benign and even beneficent creature ready to assist the Emperor in his 'just' rule, Oxfeldt also finds in Andersen's tale a preservation of aesthetic and political continuity in the midst of political transition. What is striking in Oxfeldt's formulation is, however, the sense of a displacement that has taken place in order to ensure such continuity. Oxfeldt explains that '[t]ogether with the natural bird, [the Emperor] will govern in accordance with the people's voice – which nevertheless remains represented through the voice of another' (Oxfeldt 2005: 95). Even if we are to assume that the nightingale is in fact a proponent of a democratic vox populi, which is none too clear to begin with, the very fact of such a substitution of one voice for another implicitly points toward the problem of the tale: can we assume such benevolence on the part of the nightingale? Is the nightingale simply a good creature with the political interests of the people at heart?

Most significant for my own argument is Oxfeldt's location of the displacement in the nightingale which she provocatively describes as the 'voice of another.' Such a description of the bird as the voice of another (of the Other?) seizes on the fact that not only are the political authority and power of the Emperor and the Chinese court rooted in the voice, but also implicitly that the perturbations and disruptions

in the fairytale may well emanate from the voice of the nightingale. In the following, then, my aim is to account for this ambiguity of the nightingale in terms of the voice as such and to read the tale in light of the strange collusion of power and authority with voice that takes place at the end of Andersen's tale.

To locate the indeterminacy of the nightingale in its voice is in one sense merely to follow the trope of the nightingale as it has developed historically. From its very inception, the trope has been inextricably linked to its voice, as contrasted with its unassuming and even drab appearance. One of the earliest commentaries on this disjunction is from Plutarch's *Moralia* in which a Spartan soldier, after plucking a nightingale but finding little meat, remarks 'you are just a voice and nothing more' (Plutarch 1949: 399).[3] If the nightingale is quite literally a voice and nothing more and thus a voice ambiguously situated in its body, the beauty of its voice is also marked by ambiguity. At least as far back as the myth of Philomela, Procne and Tereus, this voice of the nightingale, as Jeni Williams notes in her fine book on the subject, has revolved around a certain duality in the nature of its voice. Perceived as an 'innocuous figure, a solitary female voice singing unseen, bodiless' in the evening forest, the nightingale has also called to mind 'masculine fears of impotence' as well as fears of betrayal, victimization, violence, and murder (Williams 1997: 9). Thus Williams contends that the nightingale, far from being a univocal figure, has formed 'a kaleidoscope of conflicting meanings' (Williams 1997: 10).

Beyond the history of the nightingale trope as voice, the voice as a particular kind of object has enjoyed attention in twentieth-century theory as well. Central to my thinking on the nightingale as voice object, Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006) provides a broad critical engagement with the radical nature of the voice object, influenced significantly by the Lacanian *objet petit a*. Adriana Cavarero rethinks the voice in relation to politics by arguing that the embodied voice provides a counterhistory to the privileging of mind over body in her *For More than One Voice* (2005). Earlier, Jacques Derrida's critique of Husserlian phenomenology in *Voice and Phenomenon* from 1967 represents an early incursion into theorizing the voice, and contends that Western logocentrism is in fact phonal and is therefore based on

a conception of voice as fundamentally linked to the illusory presence of meaning. Thomas Docherty's *After Theory* (1997) describes the postmodern as moving beyond modernism's 'photological fascination' and turning 'towards a different sensuality, a different (non-visionary) imagination' (Docherty 1997: 172). Docherty's claims suggest that the soundful might function as a salutary resistance to the dominance of the visual. The twentieth-century fascination with the voice also coincides with emerging technologies such as the gramophone and cinema. Friedrich Kittler's work on such technologies has been attentive to the way machines and media have made the voice separable from the body, thus making the voice a free-floating signifier (see, for example, Kittler 1999). Film theory has also explored the ramifications of voice and sound, with Michel Chion's more psychoanalytically inspired readings investigating diegetic and non-diegetic voices within and without the film frame (Chion 1999).

The voice that I have in mind, as it relates to Andersen's tale, borrows from many of the aspects of voice above. Crucial to my understanding of the voice, however, is Mladen Dolar's characterization of the voice that lies between or beyond a conception of the voice as a mere vehicle for information and meaning or voice as an object of aesthetic veneration and worship. To pay attention to the nightingale as such a voice is to challenge the view of the nightingale as an object of fetishistic veneration or to attune oneself exclusively to what Roland Barthes (1977) might call 'the grain of the voice', with its distinctive and particular qualities. In doing so we encounter a reversal, a realization that the voice, according to Dolar, is based on a structural illusion. The voice,

> because it appears to mean more than mere words [...] becomes the bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning[...] It seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand, and on the other to transcend language, [...] it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns. This illusion of transcendence accompanied the long history of the voice as an agent of the sacred, and the highly acclaimed role of music was based on its

> ambiguous link with both nature and divinity. Thus the voice as the bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is in fact a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order. (Dolar 2006: 31)

Though Dolar is, of course, not talking about Andersen's nightingale as such, he seems to have captured here many of the attributes often associated with the nightingale and its singing: its being endowed with a profundity, a profundity that the Chinese court senses but indeed misses, the nightingale's connection to nature, its association with the divine, its transcendence of the empirical, etc. All of this, Dolar argues, is based on an illusion structural to the voice which for him is the fantasy that such a voice might heal the traumatic rupture suffered via the entry into the symbolic order. If what Dolar states here has any relevance to Andersen's tale, it is the idea that to attend to the voice of the nightingale as strictly of the order of the beautiful as the Chinese court does is to fall prey to a fantasy, a deception, that disavows or covers over the gap in the symbolic order that the voice in fact reveals.

In the following then, the project is to see the nightingale as voice or, in the parlance established above, as voice object, and to trace the bird's itinerary as such. In doing so, I see Andersen's tale as staging a confrontation between the Emperor-subject and the object cause of his desire. If the tale is to be read as the mise-en-scène of desire, it is the paradoxical nature of the voice object itself that 'eludes our grasp no matter what we do to attain it' (Žižek 1992: 4). Even as the Emperor and the Chinese court attempt to identify and locate the source of the voice, and to even bring it back to the palace and cage it, the paradoxical topology of the nightingale as voice object consistently refutes any such attempts. The relationship in the end between Emperor and nightingale may therefore not be best defined as the pursuit of political justice (Bøggild) nor the assistance in the emergence of a democratic state (Oxfeldt), but the recognition of the clandestine collusion between authority, power and the voice. As I shall develop it, the return of the real as figured in the return of the nightingale

to the bedchambers of the Emperor is predicated on a fundamental reversal of power and authority more reminiscent of Andersen's 1845 tale *Skyggen* (The Shadow) than a Romantic fusion of art and politics.

The Voice and *Nattergalen*

The very beginning of the tale makes clear that this voice is to be understood as something far different than simply beautiful. To be sure, the nightingale's song is described throughout as beautiful, but there are other and more individualized experiences of the nightingale's song that are not nor can they be circumscribed under such a description. Indeed, the bird elicits far more ambiguous and troubling responses from those that listen to its voice than only the aesthetic. As such, the voice of the nightingale functions more like a point of desire, a point that functions on the order of something like Barthes' notion of the *punctum*, the point that pricks or is poignant (Barthes 1981: 27).[4] This is to say that over and against the more abstracted, generalizable description of the nightingale's song as beautiful – a designation that because of its socio-cultural usefulness would then roughly correspond to Barthes' notion of the *studium* (1981: 2ff) – Andersen emphasizes the more particular and individual responses to the voice of the nightingale; those of the fisherman, the kitchen maid and the Emperor. Such strong emotional reactions are indicative of an experience that reaches some primal core of those who hear it. The first in the fairy tale to do so is the fisherman, and he is, to my mind, one of the more interesting. Andersen writes:

> og i disse [Grenene] boede der en Nattergal, der sang saa velsignet, at selv den fattige Fisker, der havde saa meget andet at passe, laae stille og lyttede, naar han om Natten var ude at trække Fiskegarnet op og da hørte Nattergalen. 'Herre Gud, hvor det er kjønt!' sagde han, men saa maatte han passe sine Ting og glemte Fuglen; dog næste Nat naar den igjen sang, og Fiskeren kom derud, sagde han det samme: »Herre Gud! hvor det dog er kjønt!' (Andersen 2003: 271)

> (among the branches lived a nightingale who sang so blissfully that even the poor fisherman, who had many other things to tend to, would lie still and listen whenever he heard the nightingale as he pulled in his fishing nets at night. 'Dear Lord, how beautiful she sounds!' he said. But then he had to go back to his work and forget about the bird. Yet the next night when she sang again and the fisherman appeared, he would say the same thing, 'Dear Lord, how beautiful she sounds!) (Andersen 2004: 133)

Certainly the description of the nightingale's song as beautiful is emphasized here, but what is even more curious is the aspect of repetition that is also introduced, the repetition of the same exact response on the part of the fisherman each time he hears the bird. The fisherman who has so many other things to worry about and can't apparently afford to spend the time listening to the nightingale is nevertheless seduced by the song, even against his will perhaps, and forgets his work for the moment, lies still and listens. But work is not all he forgets as he listens to the nightingale. Paradoxically, the fisherman forgets the nightingale as well and in some sort of cyclical compulsion, reminiscent of a repetition compulsion, the forgetting of work and the forgetting of the nightingale are repeated over and over again. Such repetition seemingly causes the fisherman to exclaim each time he hears the nightingale how beautiful it is, as if this was the first time he had heard the bird. Where Little Hans in the fort/da game he plays attempts to master the unpleasurable experience of his mother's leaving, the loss of the bird by the fisherman and its retrieval are enacted over and over again in a repeated deferral of the attainment of his desire. Thus the experience of hearing the nightingale does not produce the fantasy of absolute retrieval of what is lost but rather the opposite, the remaining in a state of desire, though unconscious, until the bird is found again. What seems to be operating in the fisherman's experience of the nightingale's song is almost a microcosm of the entire tale: the repeated loss of the object of desire and this missed encounter with the real. This lost object of desire must continually be refound, though following the logic of the lost object of desire it can never be definitively and absolutely found.

The kitchen maid, who has also heard the nightingale, relates a very curious response to its song as well. During her evening return to her sick mother she often stops and rests, being so tired from her work. It is then she hears the nightingale's song. She describes her experience in this way: '[J]eg faaer Vandet i Øinene derved, det er ligesom om min Moder kyssede mig!' (Andersen 2003: 273) ('It makes my eyes fill with tears. It's as if my mother were kissing me', Andersen 2004: 133). Like the fisherman, the kitchen maid acknowledges the beauty of the nightingale's voice, but importantly here in relation to her sick mother. Similar to the fisherman's experience of the nightingale's song there is also the same experience of repetition. The kitchen maid returns home 'every' evening to feed her mother and, like the fisherman who is lulled away from his work, the kitchen maid is lulled away from her own errand by the voice of the nightingale. What also characterizes the mother here is not only that she is poor and sick but also that she is not present. The nightingale appears in the absence of the kitchen maid's mother ostensibly to comfort the kitchen maid and her efforts. Interestingly enough the effect of the nightingale's song on the kitchen maid is a fantasy of unification with her mother – 'it's as if my mother were kissing me' – but there is a crucial sense of loss here just as in the fisherman's experience. This sense of loss is underscored not only by the idea that her mother may well be dying but the mother herself. In Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mother's voice or the maternal voice is one of the primary losses suffered by the subject. Described by Mary Ann Doane as a 'sonorous envelope,' the maternal voice belongs to the earliest experiences of the child as surrounded by and immersed in the sonic world of the mother's voice (Doane 1980: 45). As Doane suggests, however, the maternal voice carries with it a 'premonition of difference, division' where the voice of the father effectively acts as 'an agent of separation.' This lost object of the maternal voice is suffered as the child matures and develops his or her own identity as distinct and separate. The nightingale's song seemingly calls to mind the maternal voice and not only the fantasy of reuniting with the mother but also the attendant sense of loss and separation.

What these two experiences have in common is this sense of a

punctum or of a primal wounding that the song of the nightingale recalls for each of them. Thus the song of the nightingale is not an abstract or generalized experience of beauty but more at an individualized and deeply ambivalent experience calling to mind a sense of loss concomitant with the emergence of desire. Barthes' notion of the *punctum*, both as point and also as a puncturing, gets at the unique topology of the nightingale as voice object as well. Though we are assured by the narrator as to the actual existence of the nightingale, the Lord Chamberlain's suspicions about its existence suggest the peculiar ontology characteristic of the nightingale, an ontology that is expressed neatly by the fact that the Emperor first becomes aware of the nightingale only through hearsay and rumour. The initial encounter with it as object is significantly on the order of a thing heard rather than seen. Its ontology is therefore in doubt and entertained, at least by the Lord Chamberlain, only as an elaborate fiction. Despite the Lord Chamberlain's resistance, the Emperor commands the court and the Lord Chamberlain to find the elusive voice and to have it brought back to the court so the Emperor can hear it sing. The voice, however, is problematically tied to the body. According to Dolar, the voice necessarily has 'a point of origin and emission in the body'. However, '[t]here must be a body to support it and assume it, its disembodied network must be pinned to a material source.... the voice pertains to the wrong body, or doesn't fit the body at all, or disjoints the body from which it emanates' (Dolar 2005: 59-60). Thus in approaching the question of the voice in *Nattergalen*, one might also read it as the problem of the voice's embodiment, the tenacious but tenuous material dimensions of the voice.

It is this unique topology of the voice which explains a great deal about the tensions that structure Andersen's tale. One becomes aware of, in the court's search for the nightingale, the difficulty of pinning the voice down to a source and the desire to much too readily link the voice with a body. This problem produces some rather humorous associations. The Chinese court first encounters the mooing of a cow and then the croaking of frogs which they mistakenly assume is the nightingale. Each time the kitchen maid patiently corrects them until they finally arrive at the little bird. Important here is the reaction of

the Lord Chamberlain when confronted with the nightingale and its singing. The Lord Chamberlain is immediately struck not by the beauty of the nightingale's song but its appearance, and in fact what he sees as the mismatch between body and voice. Searching for an explanation for the asymmetry between the body and the sound of the voice, the Lord Chamberlain can only lamely remark that the nightingale must have lost its color in the presence of such an important crowd. Critics have read the court's reaction to the nightingale and its song as well as the knee-jerk reactions to the other sounds as evidence of the court's ignorance and their lack of aesthetic judgement. What the court also enacts here is the problem of identifying the source of the voice in the first place, locating the voice in a particular body. If the voice always comes from somewhere, some place, it is also enigmatically related to that body at the same time. The awkwardness with which the nightingale's voice is situated in its body is what first strikes the court and the Lord Chamberlain.

The compulsion to arrest the voice, to locate it, embody it is also an attempt to arrest the transgressive dispersal of the voice. It is an attempt to contain its excess by placing it within the coordinates that make up the court and its epistemological boundaries and regimes of knowledge. In short, such a desire tries to fit the voice object within the symbolic order that is the court. The particular kinds of attentions and honorifics appended to the nightingale are not only themselves emblematic of containment, of enclosing the voice, but of the attempt to place the nightingale within the signifying systems that structure the court: it is caged and forced to submit to a schedule as well as to wear a silk band around its leg. Evident in the court's treatment of the nightingale is the almost desperate hold the court wishes to maintain on the nightingale's body, couched here in terms familiar to the court. The search for the nightingale, its being located, brought back to the Emperor, and then accessorized and augmented in this way with bells and slaves and royal cages can be seen as the initial effort on the part of the court to tame and dissipate the mystery of the nightingale as voice object. In attaching the voice to a body, however, the nightingale begins to lose its charismatic power.

This process of the voice losing its power once it has been attached

to a body has in fact been given a name, and comes from the work of Michel Chion whose primary work has been on sound and film. Chion calls such a process a *disacousmatization*, in which the acousmatic voice – a voice whose source is not seen nor can be identified - is suddenly associated with a particular body. Chion reserves for the acousmatic voice a particular kind of being. 'When the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized - that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face – we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name acousmêtre' (Chion 1999: 23). The original meaning of the word *acousmêtre* refers to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their master speak from behind a screen or curtain. The purpose was to hide the master from the followers so they would not be distracted from the master's message. Chion borrows the term in order to investigate how offscreen voices function within and without the visual field of cinema and how they produce tension and ambiguity within the cinematic space. One of the most famous examples of such an acousmatic voice is the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. Before Toto tips over the screen, the booming, intimidating voice of the wizard causes everyone to cower in fear. When it is revealed who the wizard is by Toto tipping over the screen, the mystery and aura that was an effect of the acousmatic voice is now destroyed. While it may initially appear odd to invoke cinema and film theory in the context of Andersen's fairytale, as I will explore in greater depth in the next section on the mechanical nightingale, Andersen's interest in automata here prefigures many of the developing technologies found in the linking of sound with the visual image in film.

The Mechanical Nightingale

The dissipation of the mystery of the nightingale as voice object – its disacousmatization as Chion would call it – reaches its denouement when a mechanical bird is sent to the Chinese court by the Emperor of Japan. The mechanical bird, in stark contrast to the simple and unexciting appearance of the natural nightingale, is made of pure gold and encrusted with jewels. The immediate reaction of the court is to

be taken in by the bird's glittering exterior and then, in keeping with the court's penchant for bestowing titles, to designate the deliverer of the mechanical bird 'Supreme Imperial Nightingale Bringer.' The court's fascination with the spectacular exterior of the mechanical nightingale echoes the Lord Chamberlain's disappointment upon first encountering the live nightingale and seeing its rather drab and unexciting appearance. Here is a nightingale whose body is worthy of its voice.

The glittering surface of the mechanical nightingale, however, belies an interior that is even more significant than its exterior. The Music Master in fact determines the mechanical bird to be better than the real nightingale because 'hos Kunstfuglen er Alt bestemt!' (Andersen 2003: 275) ('with the mechanical bird everything is certain') (Andersen 2004: 138). The preference for the mechanical bird therefore lies not in its singing nor even in its golden shell but really in its mechanical innards, the fact that 'man kan gjøre rede for det, man kan sprætte den op og vise den menneskelige Tænkning, hvorledes Valserne ligge, hvorledes de gaae, og hvordan det ene følger af det andet - !'' (Andersen 2003: 275) ('You can explain it, you can open it up and demonstrate human reasoning, how the cylinders are arranged, how they operate, and how one turns the other') (Andersen 2004: 138). This ready intelligibility of the mechanical bird has given rise to many critiques of Andersen's tale as a tale about real art and false art.[5] While *Nattergalen* has been read persuasively in this way, such readings do overlook the mechanical nightingale as part of the fascination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with automata in general and more particularly the mechanical reproduction of voices and emerging sound recording technologies. Indeed, the Music Master's interest in the mechanical nightingale corresponds, interestingly enough, to Foucault's observations that the fascination with automata was to be found in 'the economy, the efficiency of its movements, their internal organization' and therefore the possibility of 'an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result' (Foucault 1995: 137).

Mechanical devices such as the one Andersen describes here were quite popular during the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth, the earliest of these technologies being music boxes, usually made

by artisan watchmakers. The Jaquet-Droz family from La Chaux-de-Fonds, for example, were famous for one such machine in the form of three sisters: one who played music, one who drew, and the other who wrote. This family is also credited with the first singing mechanical bird automata, produced in 1780. Andersen's mechanical bird no doubt owes something to these automata, but for the purposes of this article, the coincident emergence of machines designed to imitate the acoustic sounds of the human mouth are particularly relevant. The realization that machines could reproduce, record, copy and disseminate the sounds of animals and human beings is part of the story of the emergence of sound technologies in the modern age.

This ability to record voices and then play them back on machines was a significant leap, technically speaking, but was also quite unsettling to those who heard these 'talking machines.' This unsettling experience was rooted in the realization that voice which was conventionally understood to be a part of someone or something could now be dissociated from it, disembodied as it were. Tom Gunning sees the phonograph as belonging to other technological developments that challenged 'basic categories of experience – such as the locomotive's "annihilation of space and time," or the telephone's blurring of the categories of presence and absence' (Gunning 2004: 48). While Edison may have emphasized the almost miraculous preservation of the past in the phonograph through its 'preservation' of the voices of the dead for a future posterity, Gunning notes a deep ambivalence toward such technology. 'The preservation of distinctive human traits divorced from a living individual produced less an experience of immortality than a phantom, a bodiless, transparent, or even invisible, double, who haunts our imagination rather than re-assuring us' (Gunning 2004: 48). The voice, thus separated from the body it supposedly belongs to in such machines, thus becomes an experience that Gunning describes as the technological uncanny. Closer to Andersen's tale, the court's all too quick and willing embrace of the mechanical bird paradoxically suggests a troubled and complex relationship to the real nightingale than has been accounted for, a relationship which might be subsumed under Freud's notion of the uncanny.

The real nightingale as a voice object has in fact already flown off –

read repressed – and is officially banished from the realm. In another sense, however, the voice as object has already gone missing with the appearance of the mechanical nightingale, if not indeed before. The attempts by the court and more particularly the Music Master in their search for the locus of the voice, the lost voice object, culminate in the mechanical bird. This new bird not only satisfies the court's demand for finding the site of the voice because it sutures over the radical disjunction between body and voice; it also points in the direction of a fundamental disavowal. If the court is fascinated with the mechanical bird primarily because it corresponds to their regimes of knowledge and because they believe they can locate its voice within the body, the voice object can then presumably (according to them) be contained, its mystery dissipated. This little bit of psychoanalysis on the court, as Dolar would claim, fails to account for the 'uncanniness in the gap which enables a machine, by purely mechanical means, to produce something so uniquely human as voice and speech' (Dolar 2005: 7). While it is certainly true that the nightingale is not a human voice, though the nightingale is also not simply or only an animal voice either, any time a voice belongs or is attributed to one site or locus and is now found in another, especially that of a machine, the result is Gunning's technological uncanny. Dolar continues that the effect of this is as if the voice 'could emancipate itself from its mechanical origin, and start functioning as a surplus - indeed, as the ghost in the machine' (Dolar 2005: 8). This is the potential radical realization of the appearance of the mechanical nightingale at the Chinese court, one the court refuses to acknowledge. Or to put it another way, the court disavows such a possibility.

In the classical Freudian sense of disavowal, the psyche maintains two contradictory positions. On the one hand, the court grants the powerful efficacy and mystery of the voice - its declaration of the voice as beautiful - while on the other hand it attempts to deprive the voice of its efficacy and mystery through its attempts to locate and arrest the voice. The mechanical nightingale thus may well function as a fetish object, the function of which is to deflect dangerous psychic energy even as it serves as an unconscious reminder of the same. The attempted disacousmatization of the voice performed by the Music

Master and the court illustrates the classical formulation of disavowal: I know very well that the voice is not located in the pegs and and cogs of the mechanical nightingale but nevertheless... . The mechanical nightingale therefore becomes a way for the court to disavow the uncanniness of the nightingale's voice that no longer pertains to the body or to a particular body or is, at the bare minimum, separable from the body. In an important sense, then, the mechanical nightingale functions as the screen in Chion's notion of the *acousmêtre*, hiding the uncanny voice paradoxically in the mechanical bird.

The Return of the Real

I began with the idea that though the nightingale has been most often seen as a Romantic figure, embodying characteristics often associated with Romanticism, the nightingale can be understood as a much more ambiguous figure. This ambiguity I have attempted to describe in terms of the nightingale as voice object. The conclusion of Andersen's tale provides perhaps the most persuasive reasons for considering the nightingale as a Romantic figure, especially in terms of the redemptive possibilities found in Romanticism's notion of art. At the same time, the conclusion also presents the most significant challenges to such Romanticism.

After having been banished from the palace, the nightingale returns one evening having heard about the Emperor's sickness and pending death. If the soundscape of Andersen's tale was all about noise in the beginning, it is all about silence now. 'Rundtom i alle Sale og Gange var lagt Klæde, for at man ikke skulde høre Nogen gaae, og derfor var der saa stille, saa stille' (Andersen 2003: 277) ('All around in the halls and corridors cloth had been laid down so that no one's footsteps could be heard. That's why it was so quiet, so quiet') (Andersen: 2004: 140). This silence is echoed (if silence can indeed be echoed) by the broken mechanical bird who refuses to, or cannot, sing despite the desperate pleas from the Emperor to drown out the whisperings of 'peculiar heads' sticking out from the curtains and calling the Emperor to remember his good and bad deeds. In this deathly silence, the nightingale appears like a saviour. The little bird sings away the guilty

conscience of the Emperor figured in the peculiar heads in between the curtains of the bedchamber and trades with Death a song for each of the three symbols of the Emperor's power: the golden crown, a gold sword, and the royal banner. So captivating is the nightingale's song that even Death – apparently against his will and in spite of the very purpose for which he has come to the Emperor's bedchamber – is compelled to listen and submit to the nightingale's singing. Similar to what was sung to the fisherman and the kitchen-maid, the nightingale sings to Death memories of the past and nostalgia for what has been lost as well as fantasies of unification. In the case of Death it is the longing for the graveyard where Death makes its home that compels it to leave the Emperor. Such nostalgia makes Death 'svæve [...] som en kold, hvid Taage, ud af Vinduet' (Andersen 2003: 278) ('float [...] out like a cold white fog, out the window') (Andersen 2004:141).

While this may well have been a suitable conclusion to the tale, Andersen does not end here. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the tale continues with the little bird being offered a reward by the Emperor. The nightingale refuses, claiming that the tears of the Emperor are reward enough. After the Emperor rests, however, the nightingale negotiates a rather curious agreement with the Emperor. Initially the Emperor demands that the nightingale stay with him forever, to which the nightingale responds:

> '[J]eg kan ikke bygge og boe paa Slottet, men lad mig komme, naar jeg selv har Lyst, da vil jeg om Aftenen sidde paa Grenen der ved Vinduet og synge for Dig, at Du kan blive glad og tankefuld tillige! jeg skal synge om de Lykkelige, og om dem, som lide! jeg skal synge om Ondt og Godt, der rundtom Dig holdes skjult! den lille Sangfugl flyver vidt omkring til den fattige Fisker, til Bondemandens Tag, til hver, der er langt fra Dig og Dit Hof! jeg elsker Dit Hjerte meer end Din Krone, og dog har Kronen en Duft af noget Helligt om sig! - jeg kommer, jeg synger for Dig! - men eet maa Du love mig!' - - 'Alt!' sagde Keiseren [...] 'Eet beder jeg Dig om! fortæl Ingen, at Du har en lille Fugl, der siger Dig Alt, saa vil det gaae endnu bedre. Og da fløi Nattergalen bort. (Andersen 2003: 278-9)

> ('I can't live in the palace, but let me come whenever I wish. Then in the evening I will sit on the branch by your window and sing for you, to make you both joyous and pensive. I will sing about those who are happy and those who suffer. I will sing about the evil and the good that is kept hidden from you. The little songbird flies far and wide, to the poor fisherman, to the farmer's rooftop, to everyone who is far from you and your court. I love your heart more than your crown, and yet the crown has something sacred about it. I will come, I will sing for you. But one thing you must promise me.' 'Anything!' said the Emperor [...] 'One thing I ask of you. Tell no one you have a little bird who tells you everything, and things will go even better.' And then the nightingale flew off. (Andersen 2004: 141-2)

The nightingale's interest in the Emperor's accoutrements of power and apparently the power and authority they metonymically represent is particularly strange, and does not seem to accord with the nightingale tradition at all.[6] Secondly, while Andersen does sometimes moralize at the conclusion of his fairytales, and *Nattergalen* may certainly fall into this tradition, the shift from an emphasis on the nightingale as a figure of beauty and aesthetic veneration to one that now 'polices the ethical dimension of human actions' (Tartar 2008: 97) is decidedly odd. The bird's desire to remain concealed and hidden as the source of secret information and to cover up the source of information by declaring 'a little bird told me,' further raises questions as to the purposes and designs of the nightingale. Such emphasis on secrecy, and the fact that all of this happens behind closed doors without the rest of the court being privy to this exchange between the nightingale and the Emperor, only underscores the possibility of some secreting of authority and power away from the purview of at least the court if not the Emperor himself. If we are to follow Oxfeldt's line of argument about the transition from monarchy to parliamentary democracy, what may be preserved in the conclusion is not an ordered transition from monarch to parliamentary democracy but a secret complicity between power and knowledge in the Foucauldian sense. In addition, it is not altogether clear from the text itself what it is that will actually 'go

better' nor is it clear why whatever these purposes may be best served by such secrecy. These problems are seemingly all brought to the fore when the servants who come to tend to their dead Emperor discover him not dead but very much alive. What happens now? the tale seems to ask.

In opposition to a reading of the tale's conclusion in which the disjunction is too readily resolved into a Romantic view or a biographical one, my reading attempts to understand the conclusion by continuing to follow the itinerary of the nightingale as voice object. In doing so I wish to work against the idea that the nightingale simply colludes with the Emperor in becoming an imperial informant. The return of the nightingale at the end to the Emperor's bedchamber in its disavowal as voice object suggests a troubling persistence on the part of the nightingale, something that while one wishes it would go away, does not. This persistence is structured like the return of the repressed or, in the Lacanian reformulation, the return of the real. Following the logic of the Lacanian *objet petit a* the nightingale as lost object cause has been disavowed and suppressed from time to time but it has never been really lost or gone. In Bruce Fink's analysis of the Lacanian voice object, such objects while ontologically difficult to pin down necessarily 'have a Thing-like quality, requiring the subject to come back to them over and over again' (Fink 1995: 92). This persistence of the voice object as what was lost or disavowed, tied as it is to the inescapability of the subject's origin as well as its inextricable tie to the other, is precisely figured in the return of the nightingale to the Emperor's palace. The spatial relationship of interior and exterior which were initially part of establishing the nightingale and its relationship to the Emperor and the court are once again called to mind in the conclusion of the tale: here, the nightingale which was outside the palace and outside the inner workings of power is now that which is precisely inside. This inability to finally and definitively keep what is inside away from what is outside underscores the uncanny topology of the nightingale as voice object.

Andersen's tale however ultimately cannot be reconciled with a straightforward notion of the return of the real. As Slavoj Žižek has noted 'we encounter [...] an increase in the libidinal impact of an object whenever attempts are made to diminish and destroy it' (Žižek

1992: 6). The banishment and exile of the nightingale necessitates not just the repetition or return of the voice object but an increase in its libidinal impact upon its return, the return of the real with a vengeance, as it were. Indeed compared to the more passive nightingale in the first part of the tale, the nightingale, upon its return, is a much more authoritative, demanding figure. Rather than just an object of aesthetic interest, the nightingale in the end appears to have an agency that it did not have in the first part or at least that it did not exercise. Previously in no position of authority or power to determine its comings and goings, the nightingale now dictates to the Emperor the conditions and circumstances of not only its own existence but even intrudes into affairs of state. The question that persists, to my mind, in the conclusion is: what does the nightingale want?

The Bedchamber and the Balcony

To discover what it is the nightingale wants, I return to the notion of the nightingale as voice object and especially to Michel Chion's notion of the *acousmêtre*. Chion ascribes four characteristics to the *acousmêtre*: 'ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence' (Chion 1999: 24). If we take seriously the nightingale as voice object, these four characteristics of the *acousmêtre* are arrived at in the figure of the nightingale to potentially chilling effect at the conclusion of the tale. Most obviously, these characteristics of the *acousmêtre* are evident in the offer of the nightingale to report to the Emperor on all that occurs in his empire - of those who are happy and those who suffer, the evil and the good. As the all-seeing and the all-knowing, the nightingale now imposes the condition that it remain anonymous and invisible, thus fulfilling the final aspect of Chion's *acousmêtre*: the voice's separation from the body. If the Chinese court carried out a project of dis-acousmatization by locating the nightingale and bringing it back to the palace, keeping it in a cage, etc., we can say that what the nightingale achieves in the conclusion is precisely its re-acousmatization, its emancipation from its own body. The curtain has once again been drawn and the screen put back in place.

The consequences of the above for Andersen's tale now appear more

ominous than ever. As a now more or less disembodied voice, and one that is panoptic and omniscient, does not the nightingale assume a figure of spectrality as it flies over the Chinese landscape reporting on all that comes within earshot and view? Furthermore, given its connection to the Emperor, does the nightingale also become, quite literally as it were, a 'ghost in the machine' of empire? This 'theology' of the acousmatic voice - Chion claims that 'the greatest Acousmêtre is God -- and even farther back, for every one of us, the Mother' (Chion 1999: 27) -- is thus also tied to the politics of the Chinese empire and indeed history (as Oxfeldt claims). Returning to the idea of the automaton, the first of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' recounts a story in which

> an automaton [is] constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a winning countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire [interesting here given Oxfeldt's orientalist reading of Andersen's tale, NK] and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight. (Benjamin 1968: 253)

While I won't attempt to offer a more detailed analysis of this passage, Benjamin's figure of 'historical materialism' enlisting the services of theology as a chess-playing automaton might serve as an important illustration of what I am suggesting by the spectral voice of the nightingale as *acousmêtre*.

In reference to automatons we probably would think first of the mechanical nightingale, but given what I have proposed above, is it possible to think of the Emperor as the puppet at the chessboard with

the nightingale at the strings of the empire? What Benjamin's image does not explicitly entertain, though it may well be implied by the reference to theology as well as the use of the automaton, is the operation of an acousmatic voice. Both theology as well as the political depend on just such a voice, the *vox regis* and the *vox dei.* In keeping with the notion of the voice object, we might envision a new kind of automaton at the end of Andersen's tale: the Emperor as the puppet and the nightingale as the ventriloquist, who now speaks not just to the Emperor but through the Emperor. 'The voice,' Žižek writes, 'displays a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always a minimum of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks 'by itself,' through him' (Žižek 1991: 58). Is it therefore possible to think of the nightingale ventriloquizing through the Emperor, the little bird whispering into the ear of the Emperor and the information passed along as if it were the Emperor's own? Following Benjamin's own image of the automaton, then, the Emperor may now become the automaton given instructions and acting via the bird and its voice.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is more of this kind of thinking in Andersen's own work. Few readers, of course, would draw connections between Andersen's 1843 fairy tale *Nattergalen* and the 1845 *Skyggen*, the latter written a two scant years after the former. Indeed the two tales, if they were in fact compared, appear to be almost antithetical to one another. However, if, as I have proposed above, there is something uncanny not only about the mechanical nightingale but indeed the real one, might there not then be a connection between the two tales?[7] The source of the uncanniness, as I have argued above, is that the voice without a body is precisely the source of such uncanniness. Is this also not the logic that structures Andersen's *Skyggen*? The shadow in its uncanny division from the learned man itself assumes a spectral figure, flitting in and out of people's homes and businesses, within and without conversations, listening and spying and storing this information for later benefit. The tenuous hold on corporeality of the voice, as described by Dolar, is once again suggestive of the relationship the shadow has to its former body, that of the learned man: 'like the

corpse one cannot dispose of. There is no voice without a body, but yet again this relation is full of pitfalls: it seems that the voice pertains to the wrong body, or doesn't fit the body at all, or disjoints the body from which it emanates' (Dolar 2005: 60). This disjointed body of the shadow, a product of the realization of the voice as object, is not just the corpse that cannot be disposed of, it is the corpse necessary for the shadow to realize his ambitions: to marry the princess and rule the kingdom. In *Nattergalen*, this same logic may well apply, with the nightingale ventriloquizing through the Emperor. The fact that the nightingale returns not to its home but precisely to the heart of the empire, the royal chambers of the Emperor in order to whisper into the ear of the Emperor in secret all that transpires is enough to suggest in its stricter Freudian formulation the *Unheimlichkeit* of the natural or real nightingale.

When *Nattergalen* is looked at in this way, we also notice that both *Nattergalen* and *Skyggen* end at a very similar moment, one in the bedchamber and the other on the balcony. And we as readers are given a look behind the curtain, or the screen if you will, where the voice object is unmasked in its naked relationship to power. In *Skyggen*, both the shadow and the princess stand on the balcony waving to their subjects, the adventure tale having come to its fitting close with the hero marrying the princess and getting the kingdom. We as readers alone remain to witness the fact that the hero is in fact the shadow who has to all intents and purposes accomplished a complete and total subversion of not just the learned man but the very power structure of the kingdom. Is there not also something very similar that takes place in *Nattergalen*, this time not on the balcony but in the bedchamber? As the Emperor stands up from his deathbed and welcomes the court attendants into his chambers, the Emperor who was on the verge of death now stands before them, obviously healthy and ready to resume his duties as Chinese Emperor. We as readers alone know that the nightingale has returned to the bedchambers of the Emperor and to all intents and purposes resurrected (or is it reanimated?) the all-but-dead ruler. The bird, unseen and invisible to all, except for the readers, communicates its will - whatever that might be - through the Emperor, the power structure of the Chinese court having fallen prey to

another shadow, the nightingale as spectral voice. With the nightingale whispering unseen in the ear of the Emperor and the shadow standing side by side with his princess bride to rule the kingdom, perhaps Andersen's *Nattergalen* and *Skyggen* are not so far from one another after all.

Endnotes

Translations from Danish, other than those for Andersen's tales, are mine.

[2] Of course, there have been other kinds of readings than just those of the Romantic variety. A biographical/historical reading was common early on in the reception of the tale and continues to be popular. Such a reading sees Andersen himself as the nightingale (Andersen as a child was known as the 'nightingale of Fyn' for his beautiful voice) or Jenny Lind, who was known as the Swedish Nightingale. One version of the biographical/historical reading sees the tale as an opposition between the more Romantic creativity of Andersen versus the more reflective and sophisticated aesthetics of Copenhagen's cultural and literary arbiter of taste J.L. Heiberg. See Leif Nedergaard's approach to this reading (1984). Various readings have also emphasized elements of Andersen's sexual frustration and longing. Arne Duve's reading (1967) is an early example of this kind of psycho-biographical reading. It should be noted that even in these other kinds of readings, their remains a strong emphasis on the Romantic.

[3] The translation I am using is actually Mladen Dolar's reworking of Babbitt's.

[4] Barthes' categories of *punctum* and *studium* are drawn from his essay on photography, *Camera Lucida*. At one level, this may appear strange to be invoking other senses such as sight in relation to the voice. However, as I have already suggested, the gaze is itself one of Lacan's *objet petit a*. Furthermore, the relationship between voice and the eye is well-established, especially in Andersen's tale, and though I do not have space to develop this relationship, issues of visibility and invisibility run throughout my argument.

[5] Among these, Villy Sørensen's 'Efterskrift' offers a nice discussion of this point as well as Jørgen Bonde Jensen's 'Den dobbelte nattergal.'

[6] Andersen may well be superimposing onto the nightingale of Romanticism a different trope altogether, that of the popular phrase (popular and well known in Denmark during Andersen's time) 'a little bird told me.' The origins of the phrase are unknown though some attribute its earliest occurrence to Ecclesiastes 10:20 'Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.'

[7] Oxfeldt says no. 'Unlike *Skyggen*, for example, *Nattergalen* is not a tale of uncanny resemblance. Just as Copenhagen and Isphahan are easily kept apart in Aladdin, and Copenhagen is not confused with Tivoli, the natural and artificial nightingales operate along very clear lines of distinction' distinction' (Oxfeldt 2005: 94).

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