

ECOCRITICAL HUES IN CHRISTY LEFTERI'S "SONGBIRDS": THE DISSOLUTION OF THE HUMAN/NONHUMAN DISTINCTION

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Abstract

The human/nonhuman distinction is a significant theme in ecocriticism, which tries to undermine this dichotomy and make us rethink the human relationship with nature and other creatures. This paper argues that Christy Lefteri's latest novel *Songbirds* (2021) dispels this hierarchical dualism through the portrayal of a golden mouflon ovis, a wild sheep native to the Caspian region and an extremely meaningful animal in the story: it comes to represent nature and eventually leads to the assimilation of the human and nonhuman spheres. By comparing the description of the mouflon ovis with the hedgehog in "The Mower" (1979) by Philip Larkin, I will attempt to bring to the foreground the similarities between both animal representations and the strong ecocritical hues in Lefteri's description. Furthermore, the paper aims to show how the author depicts an interspecies and inter-elemental community – in which not only the animate dimension, but also the inanimate sphere is given value and importance – through the representation of the mouflon ovis, the motif of gold and specific passages in the novel.

Keywords: Christy Lefteri, human/nonhuman, Philip Larkin, ecocriticism, community

Article history:

Received: 10 October 2022

Reviewed: 12 November 2022

Accepted: 16 November 2022

Published: 20 December 2022

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Citation: Mondo, C. (2022). Ecocritical Hues in Christy Lefteri's "Songbirds": The Dissolution of the Human/Nonhuman Distinction. *English Studies at NBU*, 8(2), 301-313.

<https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.22.2.9>

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*[...] a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man*
(Wordsworth, 2020, p. 48)

Ecocriticism has been engaged in rethinking the divide between human and nonhuman animals by proposing new definitions of humanity and by investigating the animal characteristics of humans themselves. While discussing ecofeminism, Iovino outlines Val Plumwood's list of antinomies, which bring to the foreground the discrepancy between those concepts that have been given primacy and those that have been overlooked, making them strong and weak poles, respectively (Iovino, 2020, p. 77). The entry human/nature (nonhuman) (Plumwood, 1993, as cited in Iovino, 2020, p. 77) is among Plumwood's strongest dualisms and reflects a particularly ossified distinction. As underlined by Boehrer (2020, p. 545), in early modern culture the closeness of human and nonhuman animals, both literal and figurative, triggered feelings of anxiety. However, the conceptual separation between the human and nonhuman spheres has recently become more pronounced.

As a reflection of thoughts and beliefs of numerous historical periods, literature cannot but mirror such a controversial antinomy. Yet, it has been justly pointed out that the post-Enlightenment view of animals is only a brief phase challenged by pre- and posthumanism (Wolfe, 2009, p. 564). One of the most prominent contemporary ecocritical writers, Amitav Ghosh discussed the importance of stories and maintained that in the past nonhuman creatures were considered gifted with agency and a kind of consciousness (PBS Books, 2019). In this regard, Greek mythology and classical culture are peppered with animal transformations: Jove metamorphoses into a swan to reach the beautiful Leda, whereas Arachne becomes a spider and Actaeon a stag, just to mention a few examples (Palazzi, 2010, pp. 52, 61, 79). Added to this, the inanimate dimension was not overlooked either; Jove reaches the imprisoned Danae as golden rain, the heart-broken and weeping Niobe is transformed into a rock (Palazzi, 2010, pp. 50, 73) and the nymph Arethusa into a spring of water (Britannica, n.d.). Stories recognising the agency of nonhuman creatures have been gradually dwindling (PBS Books, 2019), which increased the separation of the human and the nonhuman spheres. It is no wonder, then,

that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 9).

In this sense, Christy Lefteri’s novel *Songbirds* is interesting in that it displays a new way of thinking about nature in which forms of life come to share “something far more deeply interfused” (Wordsworth, 2020, p. 48), to use Wordsworth’s words, since British romanticism was much appreciated by first-wave ecocritics (Buell, 2011, pp. 89, 95). Published in 2021, Lefteri’s latest novel shares the same sensitivity towards interspecies connections that can be found in ancient legends and stories. The London-born writer reads about weather and climate change (Lefteri, 2022) and is not new to ecocritical themes, which also surfaced in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. Published in 2019, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is concerned with the troubled and obstacle-riddled journey of two refugees making their way towards England. Bees play an important role in the novel, since the main character is a beekeeper and is fascinated by their community, which seems on equal footing with that of humans and, therefore, can undermine anthropocentric frames of understanding of the world. Once he discovers that bees communicate through a dance and learns to understand them, the main character admits that “the world around me never looked or sounded the same again” (Lefteri, 2020, p. 12). Similarly, Lefteri’s latest novel *Songbirds* is surprising in its portrayal of a golden mouflon ovis, which shows the wild sheep as a majestic animal, but could also hint at other meanings regarding the representation of nature through an animal, a trope particularly widespread in literature.

This paper aims to underline the ecocritical sensitivity shown by Christy Lefteri’s depiction of animals in *Songbirds*, in particular that of a golden mouflon ovis, by comparing their representation with a poem by Philip Larkin entitled “The Mower.” Published in 1979, Larkin’s poem has been chosen because of the similarities it shares with the representation of animals in *Songbirds*. In addition, it was written fairly recently but shortly before the birth of ecocriticism, which developed during the 1990s in America, despite the fact that Joseph Meeker’s influential work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* had already been published in 1972 (Iovino, 2020, pp. 15–16). I will attempt to show the similarities between the portrayals of the mouflon ovis in *Songbirds* and the hedgehog in Larkin’s poem, and underline the ecocritical hues underpinning Lefteri’s novel, which may be more far-reaching than those in “The Mower.”

Indeed, I claim that Lefteri's portrayal of the mouflon ovis possesses stronger ecocritical hues, inasmuch as it hints at an identification between man and animal, and alludes to the interconnection between animate beings and inanimate elements as well. Such interconnection is further emphasised by the motif of gold and interesting inclusive images that strengthen the theme of interspecies community.

Towards an Ecocritical Understanding of Community: The Mouflon Ovis, the Motif of Gold and Interspecies Images

Especially in Anglophone literature, representations of individual animals frequently act as symbols that come to embody nature and engender deep reflections on it. Some of these animal descriptions hint at a raging and wild nature which is celebrated in its beauty, dangerousness and untameability. To mention two examples by Amitav Ghosh that belong to contemporary ecocritical literature, the quasi-mythical tiger depicted in *The Hungry Tide* with a coat "of a colour that shone like gold in the sunlight" (Ghosh, 2005, p. 329) and the slithering cobra in *Gun Island* endowed with "shining black eyes" (Ghosh, 2020, p. 83) are worth citing, in that their presence in the plots exerts considerable gravity and the nonhuman creatures end up representing much more than how they appear at first sight.

At other times, the depicted animals are characterised by peacefulness, meekness and even a sort of resignation when faced with human cruelty. The soaring albatross in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" which "every day, for food or play,/ Came to the mariners' hollo!" (Coleridge, n.d.) is as famous as its senseless killing. Instead, Gervase's story concerned with the dolphin wounded by a javelin hurled by a sailor (Cohen, 2015, pos. 2665–2670) is less known, although the creature is as meek as Coleridge's albatross and is likewise harmed by humans. The mouflon ovis figuring in *Songbirds* could be placed in this second category of animal representations linked to nature, in that the majestic and meek animal is imbued with meanings that go beyond a naturalistic detail aimed at embellishing the plot. Unlike the story of the dolphin and Coleridge's albatross, the mouflon ovis is a product of contemporary literature and, arguably, of considerable ecocritical influence. To prove that environmental concerns were already present in 19th-century English literature, Taylor pointed out that many Victorianists had "been doing a form of ecocriticism without using the term" (2015, p.

879) well before the 1990s. Yet, the worsening climate change and rampant environmental crisis have recently honed ecocritical sensitivity and fuelled the development of ecocriticism, comprehensively. As a consequence, Lefteri's representation of a nature-associated animal is not only inserted in the tradition of Anglophone literature and similar to other animal descriptions by authors of the past, but it also acquires different and unique connotations.

Interestingly, one of the main characters, Yiannis, comes across – or rather, is found by – a mouflon ovis while he is flagrantly in an illicit activity. The poacher is collecting, killing and throwing into a bucket those songbirds that have been lured in by lime sticks and got stuck to them. The first description of the mouflon ovis shows an animal that is far from ordinary, but has rather a beautiful, gilded coat:

The mouflon was calmly staring at me. It stood in the long shadows of the trees and it wasn't until the light shifted that I saw the most extraordinary thing: instead of the usual red and brown, its short-haired coat was gold; its curved horns, bronze. (Lefteri, 2021, p. 11)

Reminiscent of Jason's golden fleece or Artemis's hind, which was endowed with golden horns and copper hooves (Palazzi, 2010, p. 164), the golden mouflon ovis takes a step backward when Yiannis goes forward, but keeps holding a "straight and strong" posture (Lefteri, 2021, p. 11). Although it understandably utters no words for Yiannis to comprehend, the mouflon is articulate enough to ask him "A question of a single word" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 13) with a sound it makes. Since Yiannis has been caught red-handed poaching songbirds, it seems only too likely that the one-word question is "Why?" As if that were not enough, the creature aptly uses its gaze to clearly make explicit what it disapproves of: "For the first time, it broke its gaze. It seemed to rest its eyes on the bucket of birds beside me" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 13). In Iovino's view, the common ascendant process of transcendence spun from materiality to spirituality ought to be replaced by a more subversive concept that creates a horizontal level, thus allowing transcendence to escape the logics of anthropocentrism (2020, p. 91). In my opinion, the portrayal of the mouflon ovis is a perfect example of this new conception of transcendence: it focuses on an animal that refuses to be reduced to a symbol and that is at the same time brought to the foreground as, if not an image, at least a recipient or catalyst of nature's strength and disappointment at Yiannis's behaviour.

Let us now compare the depiction of the mouflon ovis in *Songbirds* with the hedgehog in "The Mower" (1979) by Philip Larkin, a poem which I consider particularly fit for comparison. To reiterate, "The Mower" was published fairly recently but in a period in which ecocriticism still had not yet officially gained ground; therefore, a comparison between a late 1970s representation of nature-associated animals and a contemporary one could prove fruitful to understand their similarities and differences. Indeed, ecocritical themes figure in some poems by Larkin as well: he has been considered a possible "eco-poet" and his poem "Going, Going" a "harbinger of the gloomy fate the earth might suffer" (Idrus & Mukahal, 2021, pp. 55, 50). By comparing "The Mower" and *Songbirds*, we may also observe how ecocritical sensitivity has shaped the representation of meaningful animals in literature, a trope that is rooted in the past and has illustrious representatives in Blake's "The Tyger" or Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

Larkin's poem opens with a more domestic situation than that of the appearance of the mouflon ovis in Lefteri's novel: "The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found/ A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,/ Killed. It had been in the long grass" (Larkin, n.d.). Rather than poaching songbirds, the speaker traumatically encounters the hedgehog while intent on mowing the grass, an absolutely simple and ordinary activity. But it is exactly this carefree and 'routinely' ordinariness that spurs reflections on the extent to which human action, albeit unintentionally, can have devastating consequences for nature and its creatures. Incidentally, it ought to be noted that poaching songbirds is part and parcel of Yiannis's routine as well. It is as if Larkin wanted to draw readers into the speaker's experience: in the brief first line, the punctuation forces readers to make pauses marked by the two commas and especially by the semi-colon which seems to part the line into hemistichs. The two hemistichs and the pauses almost force readers to reproduce the action of the mower that 'stalled, twice.'

The apparently innocent act of mowing the lawn causes the death of an animal as innocent as the songbirds poached by Yiannis: "Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world/ Unmendably. Burial was no help" (Larkin, n.d.). These two lines have interesting points of contact with the representation of animals in Lefteri's novel. Acknowledging the damage caused by the speaker – which results in the death of the hedgehog –, the first line shares noticeable similarities with the destiny of the mouflon ovis. The golden animal is then mercilessly shot by a more insensitive poacher who wants to take the creature as a prize.

In a similar vein, the hedgehog has been killed as well, although in different circumstances. The adjective ‘unobtrusive,’ referring to the hedgehog’s life, is particularly meaningful too. Indeed, aside from their ill fate, both animals share an aura of quietness and silence that hovers over them. The life of the hedgehog was ‘unobtrusive’ and, therefore, low-key, silent and barely perceptible to the speaker. In a way akin to this, the mouflon draws near Yiannis very silently and produces only a cracking sound of leaves that are crushed under its hooves. The creature is so quiet in its approach, that at first Yiannis has the impression that a human being – very likely a policeman or a ranger – has come to arrest him. This happens twice: the first time the animal lives, but the second time Yiannis is with another poacher and the animal dies. The quietness of nature can be backed up against the human-induced noise of the mower in Larkin’s poem and of Yiannis’s own loud voice in *Songbirds*, which is almost redolent of Leo Marx’s “startling shriek of the train whistle” (Marx, 1964, p. 15): “‘I won’t hurt you,’ I said, and realised suddenly how loud my voice was in the woods, how it disturbed the peace” (Lefteri, 2021, p. 13).

Larkin’s above-quoted second line focuses on the feelings of the speaker and concisely expresses the pangs of guilt elicited by the discovery of the dead hedgehog. It concludes by sombrely saying that “Burial was no help” (Larkin, n.d.). Rather than to the mouflon ovis, these words could perfectly apply to an owlet that Yiannis finds in his bin bag filled to the brim with dead songbirds and other birds which he has to sift through: “I wondered if it had flown into the net while following his mother on a night hunt. Its oversized opaque black eyes in its pale, heart-shaped face looked up at me without seeing” (Lefteri, 2021, p. 193). The small, feathery creature cannot be brought back to life, which triggers sorrow and provokes feelings of regret in the wavering poacher: “I took a spade and buried the owlet in the soft soil beneath the orange tree. I buried it deep so that cats and wild animals could not get to it” (Lefteri, 2021, p. 200). Even in this case, ‘Burial was no help,’ one is tempted to say.

Up to this point, the representation of the hedgehog and the mouflon ovis share thought-provoking similarities: both animals are meek, lead a silent life and are killed by humans, one by accident, the other purposefully. In both cases, their death spurs reflections and invests the animals with another meaning, inasmuch as they come to embody nature. Nevertheless, a more important element shared by both literary works ought to be emphasised, namely the transition from a nonhuman to a human dimension,

which implies connection. Although it is concerned with the death of a hedgehog, Larkin's poem ends with considerations that deal with humans: "[...] we should be careful/ Of each other, we should be kind/ While there is still time" (Larkin, n.d.). At a second glance, these lines and the words 'each other' may actually apply to both human and nonhuman animals. They might refer to the fact that humans ought to care for and be merciful towards animals, or they may encourage humans to express their kindness towards others before it is too late. Read from an ecocritical perspective, these lines become extremely interesting because they might allude to similarities and associations between human and nonhuman animals.

In a similar vein, Yiannis cannot help but observe that the mouflon ovis shares something special with his beloved Nisha. He had already encountered another mouflon ovis when he was in her company on a trip and had marvelled at Nisha's unique connection with the animal: "There was a flash in her eyes, as if the colours of the forest shone through them, as if some secret energy, some nimble animal hiding amongst the trees, had suddenly come to life" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 12). Upon observing Nisha approaching the creature, Yiannis realises that "I felt such a distance from her and the animal, like they shared something I couldn't understand" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 13). As Iovino highlighted, exploitation of resources originates social unease and vice versa, and destruction of environments often goes hand in hand with the destruction of cultures conceived of as marginal (2020, p. 48). In light of this conception, the connection between the mouflon and Nisha, from which Yiannis is cut off, might hint at the fact that both are marginalised in human society: one because of its animality, the other due to her being a woman, a foreigner and the invisibility which accompanies her. Indeed, a recurring theme in the novel is the invisibility of female domestic workers to people in general, their employers included. The invisibility oppressively experienced by foreigners brings to mind an excerpt from Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty*; the main character, an illegal immigrant in Sydney, ironically says: "Easiest thing in the world, becoming invisible to white people, who don't see you anyway" (Adiga, 2021, p. 49).

Be it as it may, the encounter with the mouflon ovis is not limited to the experience of coming across a wild animal or a simple representation of nature, but involves Nisha as well and hints at a larger connection between human and nonhuman animals, as Larkin's poem seems to do as well. Nevertheless, in her novel endowed with "lyrical

prose" (Sweeney, 2021), Christy Lefteri goes one step further and surpasses the depiction of the mouflon ovis as an image evoking association between human and nonhuman animals. Indeed, its representation involves assimilation or even identification of the two spheres. In Yiannis's first description of the mouflon ovis, two elements are particularly important: the fact that the coat of the animal is strangely golden and that Yiannis acknowledges that "Its eyes were the exact colour of Nisha's – the eyes of a lion" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 11). Further on in the story, after the mouflon ovis has been shot, Yiannis looks again into the dying golden animal's eyes, "now pools of liquid gold" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 268). Although Yiannis does not know it yet, his girlfriend Nisha, who had mysteriously disappeared weeks ago, has been killed. In the novel, the mouflon tellingly has her same eyes, as if it shared a part of Nisha's soul or were even her reincarnation. This hypothesis finds further supporting evidence in the fact that Yiannis meets the golden mouflon ovis shortly after Nisha's murder, although he is still unaware of that. As Nisha had told Yiannis once, "If in another life you were a lion, I think I would recognise you and still love you" (Lefteri, 2021, p. 132). Therefore, the fact that the mouflon ovis has Nisha's eyes, paired with her death, creates a process of identification between the woman and the animal, which become one. As a consequence, unlike Larkin's poem, *Songbirds* offers a moving example of assimilation between two beings, rather than association.

If one wanted to be precise, it ought to be pointed out that Nisha's metamorphosis after her death may even be twofold, which introduces the importance of the inanimate world in the novel. Apart from becoming identified with the amber-eyed mouflon ovis, the woman also undergoes an inter-elemental rebirth, insomuch as her image is forever carved in a wooden sculpture made by an artist, Muya. Incidentally, this is a reversal of the myth of Pygmalion. It could be argued that Muya, the artist, carved the statue well before Nisha's death. Although this is true, it should be highlighted that the statue acquires meaning and fills Nisha's absence with a static presence only after her disappearance, understandably:

It was Nisha, to be sure, her heart-shaped face, her fiery eyes. Even the tiny dimple in her right cheek. I reached out and touched her hand. I wanted her to speak. I was desperate that she would break out of her wooden case and speak to me. 'Nisha,' I said, gently. 'Tell me where you are.' (Lefteri, 2021, p. 156)

Aside from this passage, bodies and inanimate materials are often linked together through an interesting use of metaphors, reminiscent of Anne Michaels's in her novel *The Winter Vault*. In the Canadian poet's novel, the carving of an anthropomorphic statue by a hominid is "the earliest example of stone made flesh" and the spectacle of the statues of the Temple of Abu Simbel that have been cut in several pieces to be moved consists of "ghastly devastation. Bodies lay exposed, limbs strewn at hideous angles. Each king was decapitated [...] their proud torsos dismembered by chainsaws" (Michaels, 2010, pp. 13, 3). Similarly, Lefteri describes the scattered tree branches in Muya's studio "like severed limbs" and the scar on Kiyoma's – Nisha's sister – chest "like a beautiful tree branch" (Lefteri, 2021, pp. 118, 81). Coupled with the rebirth as a golden mouflon ovis, Nisha may thus even undergo another metamorphosis which gives importance to the inanimate dimension as well, which is often connected to humans, in the novel.

Yet, the golden colour of the mouflon ovis's coat and eyes has far deeper implications than an identification between Nisha and the creature. As Iovino underlines, in Aldo Leopold's view, the interdependency of forms of life forges a fully-fledged community, rather than a mere juxtaposition of elements or a simple environment (2020, p. 126). Enlarging this concept, it could be said that the coexistence of humans, nonhuman animals, and inanimate elements creates an enormous and carefully wrought community regulated through complex mechanisms, in tune with the conception of an ecosystem. I claim that *Songbirds* advocates for such an ecocritical interspecies and inter-elemental community through the use of the colour gold and its recurring presence in the descriptions of the mouflon ovis. As a matter of fact, the motif of gold binds together numerous elements in the novel, both animate and inanimate: the golden leaves of cherry and pecan trees, the golden sun, the golden coats of dogs, the "gold and red and blue" wings of birds and the "pure gold" of a singer's voice (Lefteri, 2021, pp. 65, 65, 149, 163, 193). Nisha herself becomes part of this community when she vanished and turned to gold. She turned to gold in the eyes of the creature that stood before me. She turned to gold in the morning sky and in the music of the birds. Later, in the shimmering melody of the maid from Vietnam who sang at Theo's restaurant. (Lefteri, 2021, pp. 1–3)

This golden community is striking because it encompasses a myriad of different beings and natural elements but links them all together through the constant colour gold that may make reference to their equally important role in the world. In line with this, the

description of the golden eyes of a cat is particularly interesting: they are “gold, with an area of patchy blue that looked like the Earth from a great distance” (Lefteri, 2021, p. 33). Therefore, using gold as a *fil rouge* connecting all forms of life and even inanimate elements, the novel recovers the ecocritical and ancient sensitivity that connected the human and nonhuman spheres. Discussing oral traditions that linked humans to an entire community of living beings, Westling states that “radical changes to those ancient traditions came with domestication of plants and animals and with the settled hierarchical civilizations that began to separate themselves from the rest of the natural world” (2014, p. 1). However, in this case, no hierarchy is present, the sun is on equal footing with the mouflon, with Nisha and countless, multifarious other creatures. Another interesting image in the novel may hint at this multi-layered interspecies and inter-elemental community, namely the description of the subjects of Muya’s sculptures:

They were mostly faces of people, but also animals: a snake, an elephant, three dragonflies hovering on invisible strings. There were finely carved flowers and various birds and fish, even a globe of the Earth – all crafted intricately with minute, precious details. (Lefteri, 2021, p. 119)

Muya’s carvings include varied forms of life which culminate in the final reference to a ‘globe of the Earth,’ thus further reinforcing the idea of a large, varied community inhabiting the globe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ecocritical hues in *Songbirds* acquire multi-layered meanings. While “The Mower” by Philip Larkin seems to employ a transition from nonhuman to human creatures to create an association between them, through its depiction of the golden mouflon ovis the novel puts forward a deeper assimilation between animal and character. Added to this, the recurring colour gold might allude to a common spirit present in any creature and connecting it to a larger, interspecies and inter-elemental community of beings. Through the carefully wrought descriptions of the mouflon ovis, the motif of gold and meaningful passages that exemplify varied communities made of animate and inanimate elements, the distinction between human and nonhuman spheres is undermined and prompts us to rethink them in an ecocritical frame of understanding.

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