

# SOUNDS IN CONTACT: THE AMERICAN BIRD SOUNDS OF A GERMAN-AMERICAN WORKER POET AND NEW EMPIRICAL METHODS OF COMPARING LITERARY SOUNDS<sup>1</sup>

Gunilla Eschenbach

*German Literature Archive Marbach*

Sandra Richter

*University of Stuttgart*

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Unlike in linguistics and—recently—poetics (Schöller), onomatopoeia has long been overlooked in the fields of comparative literature and global literature studies. In 1998, the linguist Jürgen Trabant claimed that onomatopoeic words are more “international” (139) than other words, because these words refer to sounds that might be more or less similar across different countries. Furthermore, onomatopoeia could be regarded as the first evolutionary expressions; therefore, onomatopoeia may represent an early stage of shared linguistic development. It is not by accident that onomatopoeia is typical for nursery rhymes, whose purpose is to motivate children to imitate them and, step by step, learn to speak. The claim that onomatopoeia in literary works are international expressions and understandable for a global audience, however, seems naïve. What if a connection between the onomatopoeic word and its meaning (the “original” acoustic source) failed, or what if such a word were only understood in a specific social or local context? We will argue that onomatopoeic words require careful interpretation along the lines of their sound contexts, be they local or global or even entirely fantastic and invented only by a single author. Consequently, we will focus not only on *written* onomatopoeic words but also on their *acoustic* representation, reference, and meaning. Addressing these issues, we

aim to incorporate empirical research on literary texts, as informed and assisted by the use of digital database and quantitative analysis in linguistics and sound studies (Klimek, Müller). This approach promises a new method of comparison in global literary studies. Onomatopoeic words can become relevant in situations that, building on Uriel Weinreich's notion of "languages in contact," we call "sounds in contact." Sounds in contact may facilitate communication between speakers of different languages, and even between animals and human beings, but they may also lead to misunderstandings.

Our main questions will be: what does the comparison of sound mean at all, what does it entail, and what is its goal? The general aim is to strengthen the comparative focus in the vast research field of literature and sound. Our examples are cases of birdsong onomatopoeia in the songs and lyrics of Wilhelm Benignus (1861-1930), a forgotten author who migrated to New York State from the small German town of Heilbronn in 1882, and who favoured nature writing, especially ornithological onomatopoeia, in order to write "American poetry." Benignus provides us with extraordinary intercultural examples of birdsong that we will present in light of the long comparative history of birdsong from antiquity to the present.

## BIRD SOUNDS IN LITERATURE

Although birdsong has been a prominent poetic element since antiquity, the various onomatopoeia of birdsongs have seldom been compared and contrasted with each other. Since Julius Pollius's *Onomasticon* (second century AD), a re-edition of the Greek, "voces variae animantium" have received considerable attention in fictional and didactical texts, such as Johann Amos Comenius's *Orbis Pictus*. Until the fourteenth century, bird sounds were mainly transcribed phonetically. As Latin remained the most prominent language, translation did not matter much, although vernacular poems on birds were known. For instance, In "Der Mai mit lieber zal," Oswald von Wolkenstein attributed "raco" to the raven and "liri" to the lark. Building on Aristophanes's comedy *The Birds*, a number of bird parliaments and bird languages became prominent in medieval literature (Busch). In his *Musurgia Universalis*, Athanasius Kircher tried to note, or rather, to quote birds in standard notation (Wald-Fuhrmann 148ff).

Shakespeare is known not only for inventing a decisive confusion of birds in *Romeo and Juliet*—as Juliet asks: "Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day: / It was the nightingale, and not the lark" (*R&J* III.v. 1-2)—but also for using onomatopoeic expressions. In the song "It was a lover and his lass" from *As You Like It*, we find both interjections such as "hey," "ho," and "hey-nonny-no," and onomatopoeic words for singing birds such as "ding a ding ding" (*AYLI* V.iii. 13-18). In Schlegel and Tieck's translation into German, the onomatopoeic expression is rendered as "tirlirelirei," a tongue twister that cannot be sung particularly well. In Shakespeare's

play, the Duke's fool Touchstone ridicules the song with its onomatopoeic imitation of birdsong as "foolish song" (*AYLI* V.iii. 23). He refuses to accept the subtle relation between sound and meaning in the song. Thomas Morley's musical setting increases the sonic dimension of the text. Numerous word repetitions destroy the conventional text semantics and diffuse the words into pure sound equivalent to the interjections and onomatopoeic words.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, along with the Romantic enthusiasm for nature, birds mattered, among other non-human creatures. Romantic poetry contains relatively little ornithological onomatopoeia, although birds are often sung to, alluding to their emblematic, mythological, or symbolic function (Collins). References to birds are paradoxical: they are poetic creatures of high esteem, as long as they themselves keep quiet. Among the exceptions is the rural English poet John Clare who, in his "Progress of Rhyme" (1835), used the onomatopoeia "chew-chew," "tweet tweet jug jug jug," "wew-wew," "chur-chur," "tee-rew," "chew-rit," "will-will," and "grig-grig" to imitate a nightingale.

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Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense ballad "Jabberwocky" (1855), a portmanteau poem that describes a dialogue between a father and his son in the form of an allegory of maturation (Goldfarb), does not use onomatopoeic bird sounds to represent nature. Rather, in the second stanza, a father warns his son to "beware the Jubjub bird," which exists only in the literary world of Carroll's texts. The related onomatopoeic sounds "yum yum" and "quack quack," however, are crosslinguistic and can evoke similar associations in many languages.

The popularity of this poem has led to a great number of recitations, 72 of which can be found on *soundcloud.com*, many in English and German. Some of these are spoken, while others are sung with added sound effects. Comparing these recitations, the onomatopoeic word "Jubjub" is intoned differently every single time: volume, pitch, accentuation, tempo, marking of speaker change (literal speech), and phonetic articulation vary. Furthermore, the vowel /u/ is pronounced along a spectrum ranging from the sober /ʊ/ through /o/ to the bright /ɜ/. The case becomes even more complex when musical sounds are added and further levels of meaning are established. Craig Haslam, for example, sings "Jabberwocky" to the melody of Edvard Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from the *Peer Gynt Suite*, thus acoustically transferring the ballad to the old Norse fairytale world of Edda. In Younisono's sound setting, a whispered "Jubjub" is underlaid as a continuous pulse of poem recitation (with singing voice). Although these renderings might be influenced by the relevant linguistic and cultural background of each speaker, singer, or musician, the acoustic source—in this case, Carroll's text—can still be recognized. This globalization of the text might have been helped by two aspects. First, Carroll did not refer to any real acoustic source that would have needed a specific onomatopoeic expression in other languages. Second, the "Jubjub" could be regarded as a poetic expression that is attractive in itself.

The history of German poetry shows similar results. Although in "Märchen vom

Rhein" (Fairytale of the Rhine), Clemens Brentano mentions a nightingale and a swan, he refrains from giving them voices. The same holds true for Hölderlin, whose favourite bird is an eagle, a bird that does not sing (*singen*) but calls (*ruff*) with a weak and whistling voice. When Mörike adapts the technique of the forestry scientist Johann Matthäus Bechstein, he notates the nightingale's song in human syllables: "Tiuu tiuu tiuu tiuu / Spe tiu zqua / Tio Tio tio tio tio tio" (Raulff 69). His transcription of birdsong onomatopoeia, however, does not become part of a poem. Instead, the most prominent poem with an expression that at least resulted from an onomatopoeic notion is Hoffmann von Fallersleben's praise of spring, "Alle Vögel sind schon da," known today as a children's song. In the poem, Hoffmann von Fallersleben's speaker describes the birds' "Tiriliern"; on a syntactic level, the word is used to characterize the bird's behaviour, while on a semantic level, the verb does not exist, and its sound evokes birdsong itself. Onomatopoeic expressions are, characteristically, often used in simple or even pedagogical poems that aim at reaching

**452** out to a wider and less erudite public. Furthermore, the "Tiriliern" is less an imitation of a concrete bird than an idealized version of birdsong. There is no context given; "Tiriliern" seems to be an original sound in itself.

Benignus does not rely on the poetic dimension of onomatopoeic words and sounds alone. He seems to mainly address a German-speaking audience in America or Germany, building on both the experience of birds in nature and the tradition of bird song in the European and American literary fields. In cases in which his German-speaking audience may not be acquainted with the "real" American bird, he reworks his poems as he switches from English to German; or alternatively, explains and comments on the onomatopoeic words and their natural source.

## BENIGNUS'S POEMS ON AMERICAN SONGBIRDS

The German author Johannes Schlaf, an early translator of Walt Whitman, claimed "seine Begabung reiht ihn durchaus unter die ersten Talente der Deutschamerikaner"<sup>2</sup> in his review of Benignus's *Weltstromlieder* (*Songs of the Great River*) in the June 10, 1906 edition of the Vienna journal *Die Zeit*. Apart from this one positive reception, his poems did not bring him any literary or financial merit. Benignus was a farm worker who lived in poor areas and struggled with finding a permanent home. He earned his life as a berry picker, sold coloured shells, wrote for newspapers such as *Atlantic City Freie Presse*, and tried to publish and present his literary works to American and German audiences. At the same time, he sought to distinguish his own work from the all-too-German American contexts, given the migration of Germans to America from the seventeenth century onward. At first, religious freedom as it was granted in America played a role for those immigrants who often belonged to radical sects of more or less Pietist origin. Later on, politics became more important. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the revolutionary Forty-Eighters found exile in

the US. They established communities, periodicals of all kinds, clubs, societies, and, last but not least, so-called *Liedertafeln*: associations in which songs were sung in the tradition of German romanticism. Some of these events served as get-togethers for the German-speaking community (Bungert 388) while at the same time, emigrants like Benignus were eager to promote their understanding of America: the modern America or the natural America, the America in which various cultures came together or the autochthonous America.

Benignus united many of these tendencies in himself. His texts were set to music by German-American composers of his acquaintance: Carl Rieck, Eugen Haile, Eduard Herrmann, Hermann Spielter, Willy Spielter, Adalbert Schüler, Victor Neustadt, and Carl Theodor Thomas. Some of these compositions were self-published, but most remained unpublished, perhaps because Benignus moved away from the German tradition of song and looked for a new style that could characterize his America, similarly to his role model Antonín Dvořák. In 1891, the composer was invited to America to create a “national music” or a musical idiom for the nation. In the resulting *Symphony No. 9*, popularly called the *New World Symphony*, he assimilated different ethnic musical traditions, such as indigenous Indian dance and spirituals, into his own music.

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Other than Dvořák, Benignus did not take the songs of the various American ethnic groups into account, but focused on the natural soundscape of the country. Benignus adapted and modernized the German Rhine Romanticism to the Hudson, a river he considered equal to the Rhine (Benignus, *Stimmen der Wasser* 12). His *amerikanischen Naturmelodien*, or “American melodies of nature,” assemble modern urban sounds such as steamboats on the Hudson River, elevated trains, electric engines, and sirens; and the natural sounds of American landscapes, including geophysical sounds from the mountains, the sea, and the great rivers and biological sounds such as bird vocalizations. The latter are both topics and elementary structures of his poems, songs, children’s plays, and short stories. The sonic character of his texts and songs can be deduced from many of their titles, such as *Klänge vom Hudson* (*Sounds from the Hudson*, 1901), *Meerlieder* (*Sea Songs*, 1902), *Weltstromlieder* (*Songs of the Great River*, 1906), *Stimmen der Wasser: amerikanische Landschaftsbilder* (*The Voice of the Waters: American Landscapes*, 1908), and *Nature Melodies of God’s Country: American Nature Poems and Songs* (1919). A typical device of his writing is the integration of regional sounds and songs.

The collection *Melodien vom Rhein, Neckar, Hudson und Niagara und Klänge und Schimmer vom deutschen Heimwald* (*Melodies from the Rhine, Neckar, Hudson, and Niagara, and Sounds and Glimpses of the Forest in the German Homeland*, 1924) reveals a conceptual bilingualism. Some of Benignus’s “Nature Poems and Songs” have English titles and German texts; some have both English and German versions, and others are exclusively in English. Paratexts give instructions for a sonic performance of the main texts, or at least for their aural perception. For example, the poem “Rheinwein” is defined in the subtitle as “Ein Lied vom Rhein” (“A Song from the

Rhine”). It informs the reader that the poem has been conceived as a song and, additionally, that the poet himself has sung it in the first place: “Am Hudson gesungen, am Fuß der Palisaden.” This setting evokes Psalm 137:1, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.” The title page further announces that “Rheinwein” was composed, first for voice and piano, and second for male choir and string quartet, by Carl Theodor Thomas. The text aims at two different social contexts: the intimate German *lied* tradition and the gregarious, popular male choir in singing societies. In the setting for male choir, “Rheinwein” served as a drinking song for the German community’s choral societies in New York. German-speaking music lovers and literary circles were important paying audiences for Benignus’s songs and poetry readings.

454 Although Benignus cultivated the image of a romantic, idealistic, and unworldly author, he was acquainted with modern popular mass culture and its cultural industry. Benignus made use of strategies of self-marketing, self-publishing, and self-archiving. For instance, he offered his own song composition “Es singt im Hag eine Nachtigall,” along with “Rheinwein,” to Carl Laemmle, also Swabian by birth, who was president of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company and, in contrast to Benignus, had realized the American dream. His rejection did not stop Benignus from advertising his works; Benignus provided famous authors with his books and quoted from their letters of reply for advertisement purposes. From Wilhelm II of Württemberg, he received publication grants in return. He sent his publications to the New York Public Library and the Schillermuseum in Marbach, now the German Literature Archive Marbach, where his papers are still held, including his song “Es singt im Hag eine Nachtigall” (“With joyous Voice sings a Nightingale”). Benignus, as an enterprising author, suggested that Marbach could publish and sell copies of the song during the Schiller-exhibition in 1920. This did not happen; instead, Benignus published the song himself in the same year in Washington, DC and sent it as part of a leatherbound collection of eight songs, *Lieder von Wilhelm Benignus*, to the Schillermuseum in February 1922. This collection highlights the social and musical background of Benignus’s audience at that time. Only one of the five song composers represented in the collection had formal training: Eugen Haile, who had studied composition at the Stuttgart Conservatory before immigrating to America in 1903. A collection of his music manuscripts can be found in the New York Public Library. Haile’s two compositions show Wagnerian and impressionistic influences. The settings by other composers resemble simple church anthems with a dilettantish, and sometimes incorrect, realization of general bass rules that show a lack of sensibility towards the poems’ onomatopoeic and other literary qualities.

Benignus’s poems on songbirds allow us to compare his frequent uses of onomatopoeia, with an astounding result: the “A-e-o-lee” of Benignus’s “nightingale” is in fact the onomatopoeic transcription of the American wood thrush. This pseudo-onomatopoeic vocalization recurs in the poem “A morning Song of the Shawangunks,” in which Benignus transfers the European nightingale to the Shawangunk mountain

area:

With joyous voice sings a nightingale;  
full rich the sounds float away  
and awaken the echoes in glen and dale,  
and she hails the glorious day,

Given the dominant poetological position of the nightingale as a symbol of the poet, love, spring, and praise in German and European poetry, it would have seemed unthinkable for Benignus to refrain from a reference to the bird of birds, which the emigrant knew did not exist in the New World. The wood thrush was not enough to ennoble American song because the norms for soundscapes were still European, although Benignus claimed to have depicted an autochthonous America.

In his collection *American Songbirds*, Benignus pays tribute to the wood thrush, the bird that featured prominently in poems such as Walt Whitman's elegy for President Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." *American Songbirds* focuses on the birds in American and German literature, mixing English and German forms of expression and featuring texts in both German and English versions. In "Robin Redbreast's Call (Spring Song)," Benignus transfers the sound of the German onomatopoeic word for birdsong ("tschirili") into English. The German "tschirili" is a mere expression; the homonym sharpens the emotional quality of the interjection, as the robin sings "cheerily." The "A-e-o-lee" is now used to characterize the "Song of the American Wood Thrush or Bellbird."<sup>3</sup> In the poem, the onomatopoeic expression looks like a transcription of the birdsong and is used like a quotation at the beginning of the text:

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A-e-o!  
A-e-o-lee!  
A-e-o-lee-ee!

Benignus's "Evening Song on the Hudson" finally idealizes the song of the wood thrush and refers to the idea of the nightingale whose sound is peaceful and loving, accompanying men at night:

The bellbird's song above the woodland dell  
rings out with sounds of sonorous, golden bell,  
so sweet, that life's loud turmoil they abate  
and chase away unholy strife and hate.

The soul the sunset's glorious wonders drinks,  
and dove-winged Peace with benediction sinks  
to earth down softly, brings this gift, the best:  
Night's strength'ning sleep and dreamless, blessed rest.

The stanzas present a dialogue between the song of the bird, without onomatopoeic transcriptions, and the poet who describes its sound and impact. It is an "Evening Song" whose sound the speaker compares to a "sonorous, golden bell." The evening song of the Bellbird has a calming and sanctifying effect, promising a peaceful night.

Its song is indeed remarkable, as empirical evaluation of the sound recordings shows that the wood thrush sings consonant pentatonic intervals: falling minor third, rising major sixth, and ending on fifth. This leads to an overwhelming sound experience. Benignus imitates and reproduces the pitch and duration of the birdsong sequences through the low, mid, and high vowels and their succeeding duration, from “A-e-o!” to “A-e-o-lee-ee!”

456 Benignus’s unpublished piano prelude to “Es singt im Hag eine Nachtigall,” preserved in the German Literature Archive, is a noteworthy document in this context. In a short handwritten note, Benignus informs the reader that the wood thrush is often called “American Nightingale” and that the prelude represents the song of the wood thrush. This is practicable because of the melodic contour of the bird’s song, which is free from semitones and can be transcribed in terms of the Western music notation system. Benignus also says that the “Schillerverein” that holds the Schillermuseum is free to give this prelude to a better composer in order to correct or to recompose it. His own prelude resembles the music of the highly individualistic contemporary American composer Charles Ives, often called the first American composer, whom Benignus might have known in person. Benignus’s prelude is akin to Ives’s musical style: the right hand imitates the bird song while the left hand plays non-fitting harmonies. Two different musical strands seem to intermingle. The harmonies and the melody of the birdsong include dissonances within an underlying tonality that cannot be attributed to any key. By imitating Ives and mixing German and American sounds, Benignus probably aspired to become the first truly German-American poet.

From the choice of birds and the ways in which they are depicted and praised, the onomatopoeia in Benignus’s poetry illustrates how cultures can overlap and drift apart through “natural” sound. Departing from the example of the American nightingale, a realistic aim to imitate the bird’s song is clearly missing. Things are different with the wood thrush, as Benignus’s onomatopoeic imitation fits with the bird’s sound that, in “Evening Song on the Hudson,” finally replaces its European counterpart. If the nightingale was a poetic reference whose sound could be understood as an interjection, the wood thrush serves the main idea of Benignus’s poems to find a poetic expression for the natural American soundscape.

In parallel to Benignus’s idea of presenting onomatopoeia, an academic discussion of the time highlighted the relevance of what was called *Naturlaute*: whereas the medievalist and linguist Hermann Paul in 1880 was convinced that interjections and onomatopoeia represented only conventionalized speech, the philosopher and psychologist Wilhelm Wundt argued in *Völkerpsychologie. Die Sprache* (1900) that they indeed refer to the origins of language and express original feelings (Liedtke and Rosenbaum 131ff). Taking this debate into account, Benignus’s approach, though largely forgotten today, was timely around 1900. It is therefore no surprise that Marion Dexter Learned, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, nominated Benignus for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1910 (Nomination Archive).

## WHAT DOES THE COMPARISON OF SOUNDS ENTAIL?

From a physical point of view, sound is a vibrational event resulting from the friction created by the movement of matter (Bayreuther 76ff). Onomatopoeia refers to both the movement and the resulting sound itself. For instance, the processing of sound is being imitated through the duplication of syllables as in “toc-toc-toc,” for knocking at the door, or through a succession of phonemes as in “cock-a-doodle-doo,” the elaborate English version for the cry of a rooster, which contrasts sharply with the simplistic German “kikeriki.” While onomatopoeic words for a sound event can differ in a single language, the imitation of birdsong in more than one language becomes even more difficult. Onomatopoeia in different languages can resemble each other on an iconic level. They deviate at the same time in the ways in which an acoustic source is imitated in written form and the ways in which the written expression is being pronounced. Additionally, the sensual perception of sound is dependent on individual recognition. Even the “natural” sound of birdsong itself is not as stable as one might think: birdsongs differ from region to region and even within a population in a particular area. A comparative approach to bird vocalization, its syntax, themes, dialects, and variations, has become a field of ornithological research. A minority of birdsongs are inborn, but most of them have to be learned. To make things even more complicated, birds interact with their sonic environment: starlings adapt mobile phone calls as well as songs from other species such as the golden oriole; birds sing loudly or quietly depending on their environment and the time of the year.

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Undeniably, sound and voice matter when it comes to cultural peculiarities and misunderstandings. Sound and voice seem to be entangled in Western or Eastern, Northern or Southern, national, regional, and local practice. Consequently, some onomatopoeic words semantically depend on their social and cultural context, as in Shakespeare’s “When birds do sing.” Onomatopoeic words can be entirely fantastic creations, such as Carroll’s “Jubjub,” or they can pretend to refer to real sounds and at the same time be deciphered as a cultural and ornithological misunderstanding, as in Benignus’s poetry.

Sound-imitating interjections in the written text shed a light on the genuine auditive dimension of literature, which makes onomatopoeia a relevant topic of research on the orality of literature (Schöller 11). In contrast to music, in which onomatopoeic expressions feature prominently in sublime works, such as Richard Wagner’s *Siegfried*, and are subjects of musicological research (Wald-Fuhrmann 150), literary studies, by and large, seem to have systemically overlooked onomatopoeic features of and in literary works, despite their significant presence, as can be seen from the examples of birdsong. This study focused on onomatopoeic words in relation to the sounds they produce and found astounding patterns and differences: onomatopoeic words do not necessarily need a referent external to human language in order to have an effect in the texts and, supposedly, on their recipients. The grounding of these words is not based on reference but rather on convention, tradition, or some kind

of aesthetic liking probably initiated by the main forms of the onomatopoeic words found in literature. Many of them consist of duplicated phonemes, parallel expressions intended to please the audience.

As empirical research has shown, parallel constructions are especially open for positive reception (Menninghaus et al.); parallel constructions such as “Jubjub,” rhymes and repetitions seem to appeal to a precognitive understanding of literature. The embodiment of text through sound and voice can help us understand a text more intuitively and increase its aesthetic attraction. Cognitive research, which highlights the relevance of cross-modal connections between sound processing and comprehension, points to some reasons why this could be the case and provides interesting insights for sound studies. The processing of sound-related words, for instance, activates areas in the auditory cortex that are involved in the processing of physical sounds (Kiefer et al.). Furthermore, sounds can be put in the right context more easily if they are accompanied by matching sentences (Brunyé et al.). Ornithological onomatopoeia offers a wide range of relations between original acoustic source, musical and literary conventions. These conventions, in turn, include further layers that are relevant to literary texts: symbolism, for instance, and long-lived local traditions that have a biological aspect too. Symbolism has hitherto been understood primarily from its pictorial worlds and iconography, but at the same time it works with characteristic voices that convey biological allusions. Symbolist literature, too, can only be fully understood if its sound forms are also included. If birdsong appeals to many cultures, future research may not only shed light on the different types of onomatopoeia in literary texts, but also explore why and how they interest and stimulate recipients, in order to understand their relevance in literatures around the world.

## ONOMATOPOEIC SOUNDS AND OUTLOOK: DIGITAL RESEARCH METHODS

Onomatopoeia is located between oral and written form, between sound and meaning. Digital versions of texts that include onomatopoeia may help us study their structures and forms, from simple duplications to more elaborate forms and their occurrence in various genres. Our alphabet font with punctuation, supplemented by typographic conventions, fixes a corridor of phonetic realization alternatives. However, much remains open, offering a wide scope for individual decisions. Specific metric or musical forms, for instance, restrict the corridor. The relationship between a text and its possible phonological realizations is therefore complex, especially if regarded on a global scale.

In literary text analysis, the reader can, and must, use his/her knowledge of the literary historical background to determine whether a text passage can be regarded as an aesthetically relevant deviation from the patterns anchored in the language system. In general, it is very difficult to always “carry along” an assessment of possible

phonetic realizations when reading individual text passages. In principle, however, embedded in a suitable methodological framework, the path via the phonetic realization can offer an empirical access to a text and the ways it could be understood. Such an empirical access allows a systematic comparison of different phonetic realizations of the same text passage under comparatively easily controllable conditions. The realization of the text through sound and voice in turn illuminates how its readers interpret the text.

Databases with large collections of music, sounds, and lyric collections provide an excellent basis for subsequent studies on the global adaptation of onomatopoeic sounds. With the help of distributional semantics and digital phonetics, especially the evaluation of sonogram spectra, comparatist questions could be addressed so that the text could be enriched through multimodal components such as readings or musical realizations in order to explore the sounds that might be related to the onomatopoeia in a text. Comparative Literature could benefit from computer-assisted analysis techniques as have been developed in Sound Studies and linguistic research. In order to empirically test theoretical presuppositions such as that of the “internationality” (Trabant) or the individual, regional, cultural, and intercultural deviation of onomatopoeia in a lyric text, a quantitative empirical research design could be devised on the basis of large international lyric and sound databases. Rhythmic patterns, for instance, can be filtered out of literary texts even if they cannot be derived from text semantics, an approach that is being tested systematically in the project “Rhythmicalizer: A Digital Tool to Identify Free Verse Prosody” at FU Berlin (2017-20). Building on this tool, a specific algorithm could be developed to identify onomatopoeic words and sounds in literary text and allow comparisons.

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Tools like these can enable the quantitative empirical comparison of natural sounds, literary sounds, symbolically notated onomatopoeia in standard notation, or other transcription systems and intonation of onomatopoeic sounds in the singing or speaking voice. They could help to address a number of questions that have not come to light in text-based literary studies: how is an onomatopoeic word being pronounced, and to what extent do these realizations vary? Are there standards of pronunciations in different languages? To what extent can interlingual parallels be detected?

Furthermore, the relation between the properties of the onomatopoeia and the processing of these stimuli could be studied with the help of psychological research. A behavioural study on the perception of birdsong—given in acoustic form—has found out that aesthetic appreciation is determined by preferences for rates of 1-2 Hz (Roeske et al.). It would be fascinating to explore if the silent or loud reading of the relevant stimuli—expressed according to the written form—follows similar patterns.

Digital and empirical research can help us inquire how the natural soundscape has attracted authors and readers globally and how it has been realized in literature and its audiences. The findings might be ever more relevant at a time in which nature writing and ecological criticism are increasingly relevant. It is not mere coincidence that

many present-day authors are fascinated with ornithological onomatopoeia: Ulrike Draesner published her poems under the title *Subsong* (2014), an ornithological term for unspecific birdsong. In 2015, the artist Sophia Bauer presented 26 *Vogelstimmen* of birds that have ceased to exist in Germany since 1950. Only two years later, author Judith Schalansky collaborated with teacher and musician Peter Krauss for a book on birdsong. Furthermore, Helen MacDonald's memoirs about birds—*Falcon* (2006) and *H Is for Hawk* (2014)—have attracted considerable attention because they empathize with the birds and make them almost human.

This enthusiasm for nature, however, may require an aesthetic and perhaps anti-naturalistic antidote. American author Michael Collier, for instance, provides an eloquent expression of skepticism about ornithological onomatopoeia. In his 2011 poem “In Certain Situations I’m Very Much Against Bird Song,” Collier provides a lyric encyclopedia of ornithological onomatopoeia from children’s songs to Marianne Moore’s avant-garde poetry. His speaker comments on canonical bird songs: “it’s  
**460** a form of baby talk that gives me creeps.” For him, perhaps the only exception is Wallace Stevens’s blackbird, of which he approves because it does not sing phonetically. Collier picks up on Stevens’s aphoristic and notebook-style writing that does not imitate the real but rather abstracts from it. Collier’s speaker alludes to Stevens’s famous quotation that links the evanescence of poetry with erotic lust: “Poetry is a finikin thing of air / That lives uncertainly and not for long / Yet radiantly beyond much lustier blurs” (Stevens 155). Poetry is being viewed as a transitory art that appeals to all senses in providing unique expressions that build on real instances such as birdsongs.

Consequently, the relevance of onomatopoeia seems to depend on genre, at least in literature from the Western and Northern hemispheres. Though ornithological onomatopoeia features prominently in nursery rhymes, poetry for children, early modern drama, and nature writing from the turn of the twentieth century, such expressions have in large part been rejected in more elaborate literary forms. In these forms, birds may be described while speaking, yet with a human voice. Building on findings in cognitive linguistics, the original sounds or their imitations in onomatopoeic poetry might promote faster classification but they may be entirely misleading. The imitation of bird songs, for instance, has its own local tradition that cannot be compared at all easily. The famous nightingale is one of the best examples for a shared history that is unique at the same time.

## NOTES

1. This article originated from our collaborative project “Text Sound: Mixed-Methods-Analysis of Lyric Poetry in Text and Tone,” funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, Germany.
2. “his talent makes him one of the first among the German-American authors.” (Our translation.)
3. *Bellbird* is here used synonymously for *wood thrush*.

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