

Affective Observation

MELISSA SODEMAN

Writing of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), one of its many nineteenth-century editors speculated, “Probably no book in any language has incited more people to take up the study of natural history.” Gilbert White’s book would become an English classic, heralded by the Victorians for its peculiar ability to send readers out of their homes and into the field. Yet in *Selborne*, I suggest, White brought home and field into new proximity with one another by leavening his precisely rendered observations with deft sketches of the domestic habits of wild creatures. In an aperçu indicative of the way he extends aspects of English home life outward to nests, dens, and burrows, White describes a pair of flycatchers that have made their home among the vines on his house. “A pair of these little birds,” he writes, “had one year inadvertently placed their nest on a naked bough, perhaps in a shady time, not being aware of the inconvenience that followed. But an hot sunny season coming on before the brood was half fledged, the reflection of the wall became insupportable, and must inevitably have destroyed the tender young, had not an affection suggested an expedient, and prompted the parent-birds to hover over the nest all the hotter hours, while with wings extended, and mouths gaping for breath, they screened off the heat from their suffering offspring.” This vivid tableau of parental exertion does more than anthropomorphize the flycatchers; it domesticates their behavior by surmising their “affection” for their young. In this anecdote and others like it, White transposes domestic affections to the animal world and thereby brings birds and other creatures within the circle of human care and consideration.

As it was for other eighteenth-century naturalists, White’s study of the natural world was continuous with domestic employments like gardening, but it also marked a significant departure from eighteenth-century observational practices. In this paper, I argue that White develops a mode of affective observation capable of recognizing the shared reciprocities that made animal life coextensive with life in an English village and, moreover, that his work confers a view of the natural world not as serenely balanced and set apart from human concerns, but as thrumming with life and closely interconnected with the human world. Apprehending nature not as something out there, separate from human affairs, so much as something to be found at home, in the garden, under the eaves, White’s affective observation carries with it appreciation and even affection for his objects of study and, simultaneously, offers readers a new means of affiliating themselves with, and caring for, the natural world. Understood this way, the anthropomorphism that Gillian Beer has argued is fundamental to language appears in *Selborne* less as a flaw or impediment than as a curiously enabling feature of White’s particular mode of natural history.