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Birds and Romantic Idealism in Shelley and Keats

As has been noted by critics of the period, a certain insecurity about the founding principles of Romanticism developed as the second generation of romantic poets established themselves. In 'To a Skylark' Shelley appeals to a new kind of spiritual sublime as represented by the soaring ephemeral skylark and its elusive song, whereas Keats turns away from transcendentalism altogether by concentrating instead on "the feel of physical experience" [1], exhibited in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' through the disjunction between the bird and the speaker. Both poets exhibit a newfound uncertainty about the purpose of poetry, introducing themes of impotence, self doubt and spirituality unbound from mortal existence which have no place in the comparatively simple pantheism of the waters, mountains and daffodils of the 'nature poets' Wordsworth and Coleridge. Shelley and Keats bring this transition to light in their poems through explorations of spirituality and physicality, fluidity and stasis, and by questioning the limits of not only human existence but also of poetry itself in its capacity to facilitate transcendence. John Bayley says of Keats, "he is the first of the romantics to reveal the kinds of anxiety and guilt about the relations of art and reality which are still with us today".[2] The readers of the later poets are forced to acknowledge a new paradigm of Romanticism as Shelley and Keats' birds represent reconsiderations of poetry's purpose despite their ambivalence as to what this purpose is and how to achieve it.

In both 'To a Skylark' and the 'Ode to a Nightingale', the birds and their song refer to divine inspiration, but represent new manifestations of old Romantic ideals. Shelley's 'To a Skylark' pursues a plane of spirituality above that of Wordsworth's skylark in his poem of the same name, whose bird has its "heart and eye / Both with [its] nest upon the dewy ground".[3] While Wordsworth is, as described by Diana Hendry, "firmly earthed in the Lake District",[4] Shelley invokes a skylark representing a divinity which ascends beyond human existence but is not religious. Wordsworth's skylark was published five years after Shelley's and there is some evidence to suggest the existence of a dialogue between the poets centring around the metaphor of the bird. Wordsworth's skylark,

[1] Bayley, John, *The Uses of Division*: *Unity and Disharmony in Literature*, Edinburgh: Chatto & Windus (1976) p. 108
[2] Bayley*, op. cit*, p. 108
[3] Wordsworth, William, *To a Skylark* (1805), http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174830
[4] Hendry, Diana, *Up with the lark(s)*, Critical Survey , Vol. 4, No. 1, Berghahn Books: Jane Austen and Romanticism (1992) , p. 67

his “pilgrim of the sky!”, can be read as a direct response to Shelley’s “blithe Spirit!” (1) Shelley’s skylark is a “scorner of the ground!” (100) , “scorn[ing] / Hate, and pride, and fear” (91-2). The repetition of “scorn” here emphasises the bird’s elevation by the poet to a place of spiritual authority which is not only transcendental of our “ground” but also able to judge its mortal fallibility from above, the abundance of which is emphasised by the repeated syndeton in “Hate, and pride, and fear”. In response, Wordsworth questions both Shelley and his own skylark with the line “Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?”, to which the answer in Wordsworth’s eyes, as pointed out by Hendry, should be a “clear ‘no’”.[5] Wordsworth offers through his skylark a symbol of “Heaven and Home” in union, whereas Shelley presents a clear disparity between the poem’s speaker on the earth and the skylark, whose “sweet thoughts” he has “never heard” (62-3). The position of Shelley’s bird in relation to the speaker cannot be defined in terms of “Heaven and Home”. In fact, he says of his skylark, “blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert, / That from Heaven, or near it” (1-3). Shelley’s skylark is a “Spirit” which seems to elude any concrete definition, at first described only through negation (Bird thou never wert”) and the vague retraction in “Heaven, or near it” which suggests that even the skylark’s elevated state cannot be localised simply to “Heaven”. Shelley states in his ‘A Defence of Poetry’, “Poetry is indeed something divine”,[6] and his alignment of poetry with divinity is evident through the skylark metaphor, whose “skill to poet” is something which mortal humans may “not…ever” “come near” (95). The ephemeral presentation of the skylark is suggestive of the elusiveness of the divinity to which Shelley aspires. He refers to poetry as “something divine”, thus unable to define what poetry exactly is but asserting its divinity nevertheless. It is this new mysteriousness which Shelley attributes to poetry’s transcendental quality that warrants it worthy of our pursuit.

Unlike Shelley, the uncertainty found in Keats’ poetry does not focus on a redefinition of the Romantic ideals but manifests itself as self doubt in turning away from transcendentalism altogether. Keats’ nightingale is indeed representative of a divine spiritual force, but as remarked by Firat Karadas, “What distinguishes Keats’s poem from ‘To a Skylark’ is that in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’

[5] Hendry, *op. cit*, 67
[6] Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *op. cit.,* 696

stillness, stability, sleep and the sense of loss pervade the whole atmosphere of the poem."[7] Keats finds in the natural world around him not the capacity for spiritual elevation, but in direct antithesis to this, a realisation of human inability to experience anything but one's immediate physical impulses and sensations. Whereas Wordsworth's bird is a "pilgrim of the sky" – an envoy between "Heaven" above and "Home" below, Keats' nightingale represents a cosmic profundity completely inaccessible to his speaker on earth, to whom the nightingale's song becomes "pain"ful for being "too happy" (346). After the human "aches" and "pains" of the first line, Keats writes "'not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness" (5-6). The jarring repetition of "happy… happy… happiness" exhibits a syntactical and lexical saturation which mirrors for the reader the insistent stabbing "happiness" of the nightingale's song to the speaker. The bird is a "Dryad of the trees", a nymph-like embodiment of foreign otherness in an otherwise familiar world of "beechen green, and shadows numberless", a setting described by Bayley as having an "awkwardness" which is ultimately "marvellously in contrast with the nightingale's invisible departure".[8] Whereas Wordsworth absorbs his skylark's transcendental emanations, and Shelley actively pursues the divinity of his skylark, Keats's nightingale only reminds him of the "awkwardness" of his own mortality. The proclamation, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" (61) immediately sets apart the "Bird" from humanity, and thus also its "happiness" from our "weariness" (23), and the speaker's comparative impotence only serves "like a bell / To tell me back from thee to my sole self! Adieu!" (71-2) The funeral connotations of the tolling bell suggest that the Shelleyan pursuit for transcendence is futile in light of our own mortality, and throughout Keats' poetry he struggles between depicting this essential humanity as something to be embraced and an opposing anxiety which deems this corporeality to be a curse.

Shelley depicts his skylark through an array of similes and metaphors, referring to "cloud"s (8,29, 33), "sun" (12) and "Heaven"s (18, 30). Bayley writes that Shelley's use of "metaphysical entit[ies]" aims "to bring us… into a universal relation with things, which does not involve being imprisoned in their thingness", thus describing the "I change but I cannot die" philosophy of Shelley's *The Cloud* as

[7] Karadas, Firat, 'Imagination, Metaphor and Mythopeiea in Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats', *European University Studies*, Peter Lang (2008), vol. 446, p. 176
[8] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 117

pure "anti-Keats".[9] Indeed it is Shelley's "metaphysical" ethereality and Keats' contrasting "thingness" which simultaneously sets the poets apart from their predecessors whilst also distinguishing them from each other. Shelley's poem is one of dazzling aesthetic fluidity, and it seems that through the vividness of his imagery the speaker aims to partake in the skylark's liberation. The poem moves swiftly through visualisations of the skylark; "Like a cloud of fire; The blue deep" (8-9), into "golden lightning" (11) and then "rainbow clouds" (33). The flashes of colours throughout the poem are indicative of a visual saturation of "aerial hue" (49) which would have been too strong, "too happy", for Keats. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill describe the fantastical images as "Turneresque in their swirls of energy"[10], as though the poem acts through ekphrasis, gesturing beyond mere words to visual abstraction to compound the skylark's extraordinary power. The "silver sphere" "Whose intense lamp narrows / In the white dawn clear" refers in a single stanza to three different visual manifestations of the sublime, indicative of the intangible fluidity of the metaphors despite the vividness of Shelley's "aerial hue"s, described by Leader and O'Neill as "vanishings and manifestations".[11] However, Shelley's synaesthetic "interlacing figurative suggestions"[12] "Makes faint with too much sweet those" that are "heavy-wingèd" (55). This is suggestive of Shelley's poetry being "too much sweet" for Keats in the same way that the nightingale is "too happy", making him "faint" with "drowsy numbness" (1). Keats' own colours are grounded to objects, imbued with a "thingness" which the critics of his time deemed a "brand of vulgarity" – "rich" but "disconcerting".[13] Keats writes not of the "pale purple even" which "Melts" (26-7) around the Shelley's skylark, but of a "purple-stained mouth" (18), not of a "golden sun" but of "sunburnt mirth" (14). Keats' "stain"ing and "burn"ing of the Shelleyan ideals exhibit the statement made by Bayley that "it is the earth which drags down Pegasean poetic thought, … the lofty, and the ideal".[14] Whilst ephemeral spirituality seems ever more distant, the "vulgarity" of the physical is an inescapable force.

[9] Bayley, *op. cit.*, 149
[10] Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, 'Introduction', *The Major Works*, *op. cit.*, p. xv
[11] *Ibid.*, p. xv
[12] *Ibid.*, p. xii
[13] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 115
[14] *Ibid.*, p 115

Indeed, compared to the nightingale's transcendental joy the earthly world might seem an "anticlimax of deflation, the cold hillside of truth"[15], however when viewed without the distress of our own impediment for spirituality, nature and our experience of it become a kind of "material sublime"[16] for Keats. Spiritual transcendence is ironically compared to intoxication; "the coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine" (49). The conflation of "musk" and "wine" with the natural world in "rose" and "dewy" is indicative of the physical "[dragging] down" the transcendental, referring to the earthly "love" and "wine" (64) which in 'To a Skylark' is dismissed by Shelley in pursuit of something more "divine" (65). Keats' references to the "drowsy numbness" of "hemlock" and the effect of "some dull opiate" (1-2) further use intoxication to illustrate the limits of human transcendence. This sounds in bathetic comparison to the nightingale's song, which only awakens the speaker to his own "aches" and "weariness".

'Ode to a Nightingale' begins not an exhilarating invocation of the bird, as with Shelley, but with the speaker's own melancholy in the face of the bird's "happiness", indicative of a fundamental anxiety in Keats' writing. In observation of the bird's flight the speaker feels himself descending lower and lower, having "drunk" from its song and then "Lethe-wards … sunk" (2-4), the plosive rhyme here emphatic of his descent. The speaker can only long for the "deep-delvèd earth", to "[Taste] … the country green" (12-3) when it is not eclipsed by the nightingale's blinding extraordinariness. The evocative suggestion of "Tasting" the earth indicates the desire for a sensory experience of the world rather than one which is spiritual. Indeed, Keats' physical descriptions are extremely rich, and that which seemed spiritually abundant in Shelley's "overflow[ing]… bower" (45), "Heaven… overflowed" (30) is translated by Keats into "the feel of physical experience"; "the pressure of reality".[17] Keats's use of such phrases as "a beaker full of the warm South" (15), "the seasonable month endows" and "fruit-tree wild" (44-5) is evocative of bodily warmth and fertility, thus using aesthetic imagery to almost eroticise the experience of Spring in a style which Byron reproached as "a sort of mental masturbation".[18] Keats once wrote in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, though humorously, "Perhaps I eat to persuade myself I am somebody".[19] To him, the most bodily

[15] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 147
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 115
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 110
[18] Bieri, James, Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography: Exile of Unfulfilled Reknown, 1816-1822, p. 240
[19] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 112

experiences such as eating and indeed, sex, are crucial to affirming one's own selfhood and existence in a world which is otherwise indifferent to us. Whilst Shelley poses open-ended rhetorical questions to the skylark as to "What" (71-75) it constitutes, Keats' questions are closed binaries, "Do I wake or sleep? Was it a vision or a waking dream?" (79-80), suggestive of a more basic kind of confusion about one's own human state. It is clear that Keats was not merely anxious about the composition of literature but also basic human experience; the question of existence bore enough "pressure" for him without having to consider the full capacities of poetry as well. He is, as Bayley describes, "not… rejecting the Romantic emphasis on the poet's ego, but offering a different version of it"[20] which takes this multifaceted anxiety of being into account. Further to this, in his poem "As from the darkening gloom a silver dove", in the context of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' and much of the rest of Keats' oeuvre, it is impossible not to detect a certain insincerity or disbelief in the poem's hyperbolic descriptions of the "Upsoars" of an "immortal" "silver dove"[21]. In its "superior bliss" we can read a comparison to the same ephemeral joy appealed to by Shelley, and in the following "or, at desire / Of the omnipotent Father" Keats projects the bird as an envoy of God in the same way that Wordsworth's "pilgrim" skylark represents a force of religion. In the somewhat pithy nature of Keats' reference to such transcendences we see a subtext of doubt in both old and new Romantic idealism, and an anxiety as to what this means for his own poetry.

Shelley's visual "swirls of energy" were, in contrast to Keats' proclivity for solidity, intangible and written in what Bayley described as total "asexual anthropomorphism".[22] Shelley claimed in his 'Defence of Poetry' that the poet's "thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time"[23], and thus we can see that the only kind of fertility in 'To a Skylark' is a metaphorical, spiritual germination which seeks to pursue new futures and higher planes of being; the same drive for liberation which fuelled Shelley's pro-Revolution political writing. The phantom blur of his skylark is indefinable as "Spirit or Bird" (61), and rather described with a series of interlinked metaphors ("Like a poet… Like a high-born maiden… Like a glow-worm… Like a rose"). The repetition of "Like" emphasises the skylark's insubstantial nature, transmuting effortlessly through a series of temporary images. This again parallels Shelley's political proclivity for change though here expressing the

[20] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 111
[21] Keats, 'As from the darkening gloom a silver dove', *The Complete Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 40
[22] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 149
[23] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *op. cit.*, p. 674

speaker's grasping for engagement with a distant immaterial spirituality through "vanishings and manifestations"[24]. The sense of movement in the poem is further emphasised in the purposeful use of active verbs, "springest", "springest" and verbalisation of 'wings' in "thou wingest" (7-10). As he states in the 'Defence', Shelley ascribes his poetry with an "invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awken[ing] to transitory brightness".[25] There is a sense that the poet in his poetic "flow" (104) aspires to be a kind of moral prophet, harnessing the impetus of the "spirit of the age" for the purposes of change and liberation.

The inconsistent rhyming and longer stanzas of 'Ode to a Nightingale' render Keats' poetry more weighed down and solid. Shelley's use of "Like" and other conjunctions such as "On", "Of", "As" and "In" to begin lines gives the poem a sense of constant liveliness and mutability which transcends its own structure, giving it like the skylark an "unbodied joy" (15) which moves between each short 5-line stanza. In contrast, Keats begins his stanzas by referring back to the previous; "And with thee fade away into the forest dim – / Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget" (20-1), "in faery lands forlorn. / Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!"(70-1) In both cases, a shift occurs which takes the speaker back to himself from the ethereal; from initially fading "with thee" (the nightingale) to his own "Fad[ing] far away", and more obviously, the turn from "faery lands" to his own "sole self". The stalling effect of returning to the words of the previous stanza is suggestive of a rhythmic stasis which stands in contrast to Shelley's fluidity. John Jones refers to an "end-stopped" effect which is expressed through the "static quality of Keatsian narration" and its bathos.[26] Instead of Shelleyan progression Keats' struggle with the pursuit of idealism is suggested through an opposing sense of regression in his poem, which he seems to struggle against. The poem intermittently suggests that the speaker wishes to pull himself out of his own impotence, though the short lived determination in "I will fly to thee… on the viewless wings of Poesy" (33) is ultimately undercut as he finds himself "half in love with easeful Death" (52), standing in the "shadows numberless" of the bird above. The monosyllabic end-stop which ends "To thy high requiem become a sod." (60) breaks the rhyme scheme by undercutting the euphonic long vowel sound of "ecstasy" which finishes the previous sentence, and such a break is characteristic of Keats'

[24] Leader and O'Neill, *op. cit.*, xv
[25] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *op. cit.*, p. 697
[26] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 145

rhythmic contrast to Shelley's flowing lyricism. As noted by Bayley, Keats often "imposed on [his poetry] and on himself patterns of romantic aspiration that do not fit", and such "romantic aspiration" was a place "where Keats himself was only too anxious to go".[27]

In contrast, Shelley's enthusiastic harnessing of forward movement in his poetry is metaphorically reflected through the skylark's own song, whose "music doth surpass" (60) all human impediment. The lyricism of the poem is evident in its sound; "glow worm golden, in a dell of dew, scattering unbeholden" (46-7). The long euphonic assonance in "glow worm golden" is only emphasised by the alliteration of the "g"s around the soft "w", evoking a deep melodious richness akin to the skylark's own song. Through Shelley's writing style, he is himself conducting the same pursuit undertaken by the speaker in the poem, attempting the transcendence of words by appealing not only to "Turneresque"[28] visuals but also through the aural. Shelley's skylark "singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest" (10), expressing the "soaring" power of song emphasised through its own sibilant chiasmus. A sense of active reaching for the sublime is established in the poem through the rising rhythms at the end of its lines describing the skylark ("… just begun", "… shrill delight", "… so divine"), the anaphora of "Better… / Better" (96-98) and the incessant and incredulous rhetorical questioning in the repeated "What"s, deemed as "unfettered enquiry" by Leader and O'Neill. In such phrases as "Higher still and higher" (6), the speaker's admiration of the skylark reflects the pursuit of the "high poetry"[29] which Shelley exalts in 'A Defence of Poetry'. Shelley deems that "high poetry" is "as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially" [30], thus again harnessing through metaphor (rather than Keats' literality) of fertility, expressing the "[potential]" of poetry to bring new life and wonder to earth. Shelley's expresses an apparent inability to access and harness this creative power, which seems "more true and deep / Than mortals dream" (83-4) and therefore outside human imaginative capacity. However, Shelley states that the ideal of success is enough to drive him towards it as evidenced in the conditional; "Such harmonious madness / From my lips would flow / The world should listen then – as I am listening now" (103-105). The irony here is that whilst "The world should listen then", the nature of the "harmonious madness" would still be intrinsically incomprehensible; a spiritual "madness". As put by Leader and O'Neill, it seems that truly "nothing

[27] Bayley, *op. cit.*, 110
[28] Leader and O'Neill, *op. cit.*, p. xv
[29] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *op. cit.*, p. 693
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 693

will fully satisfy"[31] Shelley but the "process" of writing poetry itself; "the process of becoming"[32]. Keats' own personal drive for writing is described as a "vivid orgasm of the intellect … like madness"[33] by Bayley. It appears that there exists an intensity of poetic impulse in both poets which is analogous of "madness", though whilst in Shelley this is a deliberate and active endeavour, for Keats it is a strong physical impulse akin to the "vivid orgasm[ic]" nature of his poetry itself.

In conclusion, it would appear that both Keats and Shelley represent a new age of Romanticism for which the old ideals, in their comparative simplicity and also their comfortable faith in the transcendent capacity of poetry, no longer apply. Vincent Newey describes Shelley as representative of a "Poet's openness to an unknown future… the … 'flow' of nature [indicating]… a new wisdom and stability".[34] In fact, Shelley approaches the "unknown future" with not merely "openness" but a creative fervour, producing a sense of "flow" not representative of "wisdom or stability" but rather an active, unstable, pursuit of wisdom. Shelley harbours an unrelenting faith in the moral purpose of poetry, striving to reach new and liberating heights beyond those of the previous 'nature poets'. As remarked by Leader and O'Neill, he "thrived on conflict"[35] in his poetry, which manifests in 'To a Skylark' as the disparity in distance between the poet and the bird, and which does not evoke one's own impotence or lead to "guilt[y]" resignation as it does for Keats. Keats' discomfort with this inescapable struggle between life and literature can be aligned to the "hateful siege / Of contraries" suffered by Satan in Milton's 'Paradise Lost', quoted by Keats to describe the experience of composing 'Hyperion'.[36] In Keats' affinity to this phrase we can see the frustration of his inner conflict, that is, his personal impulse to describe the basic human "feeling of physical experience" despite his simultaneous concern about consequently "signifying nothing" in his poetry. 'Hyperion', Keats' own failed epic, itself represents his essential inability to appeal to the transcendental despite his best efforts. Whereas Shelley embraced his "conflicts" through what Hazlitt described as "a passionate dream, a straining after impossibilities, a record of found conjectures, a confused

[31] Leader and O'Neill, *op. cit.*, p. xix
[32] *Ibid.,* p. xv
[33] Bayley, *op. cit.*, p. 147
[34] Newey, *op. cit.*, p. 16
[35] Leader and O'Neill, *op. cit.*, p. xii
[36] Lau, Beth, *Keats's Paradise Lost*, Flordia: UPF (1998), p. 61

embodying of vague abstractions",[37] Bayley points out that the "contrasts between reality and dream are much more intimately and painfully personal for Keats"[38].

It can be said that whilst Shelley and Keats are often in direct opposition to each other, both in their approach to spirituality, their belief in transcendentalism and their faith in poetry itself, they stand nevertheless together in their revolutionising of old Romanticism, doing so here by using bird imagery to re-appropriate the first generation's invocations to nature. Ultimately, Shelley and Keats evoke a newfound sense of mortal vulnerability in the face of transcendentalism, and though this can manifest itself either as progression in Shelley or regression in Keats, its fundamental necessity to both poets' writing held enough power to create a new paradigm in the literature of Romantic period.

[37] Leader and O'Neill, *op.cit.*, p. xix
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