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Re-Looking into the Romantic Skylark: A Study of Wordsworth and Shelley's Skylark Poems

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In his 1924 essay Arthur Lovejoy speaks about the discriminations of approaches within “romanticism” and prefers to use the term in plural. Two major romantic poets Wordsworth and Shelley wrote poems on the same subject, e.g., the flight of a skylark but based it on two different thought dynamics that offer individuality to their poems. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the two poems *To a Skylark* by Shelley and *To the Skylark* by Wordsworth in order to show the diversity and difference that “romanticism” offers.

In “On the Discriminations of Romanticism” Arthur O. Lovejoy speaks about the fallacy of homogenizing the concept of romanticism: “we should learn to use the word *Romanticism* in plural...the discrimination of the Romanticism which I have in mind is not solely or chiefly a division upon lines of nationality or language. What is needed is that any study of the subject should begin with a recognition of a *prima facie* plurality of Romanticisms, of possibly quite distinct thought complexes, a number of which may appear in one country” (p.235-36). For Lovejoy the discrimination is not just national or linguistic but in the plurality of thought complexes engendering from the same socio-political-cultural-geographical space. The distinctiveness of the thought dynamics that characterizes the works of the British romantic poets of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century proves this position of Lovejoy in various ways.

In this paper, I will try to stretch Lovejoy's proposition a little further and show how the two major romantic poets, Wordsworth and Shelly, embody two different thought complexes in two of their poems having (almost) the same title and addressing the same subject; that is, their distinctiveness is discernible not only in their creative work as a whole but also in their approach to a single subject or theme; how they appear to be philosophically and aesthetically different and dissimilar in treating the same subject.

The romantic passion for skylark makes the bird itself a signifier of Romanticism. Both Wordsworth and Shelly compose poems on it titled as “To the Skylark” and “To a Skylark” respectively. Both the poems start with directly addressing the bird as a higher species, having a spiritual aura around, which makes it a bird “from heaven”, a “pilgrim of the sky”. Wordsworth's poem “To the Skylark” written in 1825, represents the romantic conflict of ideal/actual in a typical wordsworthian way. The poet apostrophizes the bird as an “ethereal minstrel” and through his characteristic interrogative pattern of sentences affirms that though the skylark's “wings aspire” higher, its “heart and eye” are fixed with the dewy ground. The duality and the simultaneity of an upward physical movement and a downward fixity are noteworthy. It

represents the romantic aspiration of binding art and life--an almost incommensurable couple--together, thereby generating the irresolvable conflict between the two. Living in the ideal realm of art does not mean negating the actual world of existence but the sense of responsibility comes with double affirmation. The bird not only comes back to its nest "at will", even while flying above she thrills the bosom of the plain "with her love prompted strain" which stems from the firm bond between she and her own (since there is a hint of mother child bonding). The spontaneous singing cannot be restricted by the limitation of time and place. It sings all independent of the "leafy spring" and "shady wood" unlike the nightingale. Likewise the glorious light of the sun in the background, the skylark's song floods both the sky and the world. The metaphor is further stretched out to the human world when the poet compares this divine instinct with that of those people who might cherish and pursue an ideal single mindedly but never become indifferent to the common duties, thus considered as "wise". The imagery of the kindred points directs us to that of a magnet suspended in a way to move freely to touch both the ends in a perfect balance. The balance, an artist or a poet needs to keep is in between the claims of art and the claims of life, the heaven and home.

Wordsworth's concept of a poet as postulated in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is of "a man speaking to man; a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (Preface.,171) -- a figure, familiar yet unfamiliar in the sense of its exceptionality having everything more or greater than to be found in common human being. In this poem Wordsworth makes the skylark a worldly creature , one among many, though somewhat special in its "proud privilege to sing". The music it creates is inspired and prompted by the love of and for its fellow-mates. Like the poet it gives immediate pleasure to the world listening to it. And the "never failing bond" between the skylark and its listener ,the poet and its readers is what inspires the artist to bring his feelings nearer to the persons whose feelings he sought to describe through his art –

That love prompted strain/
 (betwixt thee and thine never failing bond)/
 Thrills not less the bosom of the plain
 /...leave to the nightingale her shady wood
 A privacy of glorious light is thine
 Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
 Of harmony with instinct more divine". (To the Skylark)

For Wordsworth, "the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (Preface,174). The poet explores truth through his art and makes it a part of our existence. Poets are wise because they are aware of their moral obligations which they can fulfill only through their art as for being "True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!" Written in barely 18 lines, the poem reflects the deep meditative approach of the poet towards life, a way of living that a creative entity aspire for, not a life of escapism but one which would be a perfect harmony of world and art.

Shelley's poem "To a Skylark", written in 1820, was set on the flight of an actual skylark, a small European song bird that sings only in flight, usually when it is too high to be clearly visible. Chronologically it comes five years before Wordsworth's but the approach of the poem is very radical compared to Wordsworth's meditative and conservative one. In the very first stanza the poet establishes the bird as a happy spirit, a symbol of spontaneity and abundance in art. Soaring and singing compliment to each other in order to produce the "unbodied joy" that the skylark itself is. "Star of heaven" both for its invisibility in the daylight and its special status as an embodiment of 'unpremeditated art' makes its presence felt through its music overflowing both earth and heaven. The poet's attempt to find a fitting analogue for the bird and its song fails. He includes all the five senses and the four elements in the similes. The poet moves from the natural to human realm and then passes through the animal, vegetable and mineral realms. The bird is compared to the rainbow cloud pouring forth the rain of melody ; to a poet, in an oxymoronic way hidden in the "light of thought" singing instinctively of new hopes and expectations that the world initially does not take into account; to a high born maiden singing alone in her palace tower as an antidote to her love afflicted soul ; to a glow worm scattering its golden light himself being hidden behind the flowers and grass ; to a rose stripped of its fragrance by the warm wind and thereby attracting the heavy winged bees who get overwhelmed by the excessive sweetness of the flower; to the sound of the showers of spring falling on the sparkling grass ,rejuvenating the flowers. . Until now the poet, through the similes plays upon the romantic phenomena of invisibility and loneliness in order to appeal to the reader's imagination. Having been unsuccessful on all the modes of image making (visual, auditory, kinesthetic olfactory, and gustatory) to capture the spirit of spontaneous delight of the bird's song the poet finally has to admit ;

All that ever was
Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass.
(Norton,305)

Henceforth, the role the speaker is changed from his self imposed superiority to provide a fitting comparison to the bird's song to a humble submission to its spirit of joy. The poet asks the bird to teach the whole humanity its secret joy. The poet is now curious about the source of inspiration for such an unalloyed joy that the bird's song signifies. Neither anacreontics, nor chorus hymeneal nor even any "trumphal chant" could ever produce such a "a flood of rapture so divine". The bird resides beyond the phenomenal world so any effort to represent it by means of the worldly epithets is bound to be marked by limitations, imperfectness. The level of uncertainty and restlessness of the poet regarding the bird and its song is well expressed through a series of questions he put before the absent bird. Shelley elevates the bird to a symbol of pure joy and love as a contrast to the condition of the mortals. Being in a superior position, above the human world both literally and metaphorically the skylark has a better insight into life and death than the ordinary human beings have, lest it cannot pour forth such a crystal stream of music. Human lives are burdened with the thoughts of the past and fears about the future so they cannot enjoy the present unlike the bird, an inhabitant of the plane where languor, annoyance, satiety are complete aliens. Human beings are destined to lead a life where there is no space for pure happiness as,

Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught –
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

(Norton,306)

Shelley here echoes Keats's one line thesis 'beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Human beings are able to derive the pleasure of art only because they are painfully aware of the limitations of life. The poet wonders, if we are free from hate, fear or fear, would we still be able to share the joy of the bird. The skylark's art and wisdom surpass all the bookish wisdom and earthly sound and even the poetic skills. The bird is the symbol of ultimate truth and beauty which the human beings only aspire for but can never attain. In the last stanza of the poem the poet speaks of oxymoronic phrase "harmonious madness" which is the source of all poetic creativity that the bird's song possesses. And the poet wants the skylark to teach him that poetic joy so that he could enthrall the world with his "trumpet of prophecy" just as the bird holds him encaptured now.

The sense of mystery and delight is central to Shelley's concept of poetry as in *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley wrote "A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why"(p.232). Shelley's bird-poet in an almost hedonistic way speaks of living in the present unlike Wordsworth's skylark which is more moral and dutiful than instinctive and spontaneous. Its spontaneity is restricted by a sense of responsibility even in the moment of flight. On the other hand, Shelley's skylark is the epitome of intensity, excess, freedom, boundlessness, nothing can restrict its flight and in the poem, as Harold Bloom puts it, "it goes on until stopped and is never actually stopped"(Bloom,303). Wordsworth's skylark is very much for the dewy ground but Shelley's skylark is the scorner of the ground. Wordsworth speaks for the skylark but in Shelley's poem the two selves (addresser and addressee) merge and a sense of undecidability remains in the question of who speaks for whom – Shelley becomes the skylark and the skylark Shelley. Perhaps this poem works as one of the finest example of Keats' theory of negative capability. Shelley sees poetry as "the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful, or generous, or true..." (Defence,.239) and the poet as the communicator of this truth "the unacknowledged legislators of the world"(p.255). The poem is written in 105 lines divided into 21 stanzas, each stanza having four lines of alternating rhyme and a long final line rhyming with the fourth. Shelley invests a sense of power and passion to his work through this unusual structural pattern and this "harmonious madness" caters to the poem an integrity along with a grandeur and brilliance.

If romanticism is a struggle of emancipation from social conventions and artificialities the skylark would be the most perfect symbol to embody its spirit. Both Wordsworth and Shelley tried to capture the spirit of the bird in their own way. Wordsworth's to the skylark plays upon fixity and visibility since the bird is always there and never actually disappears from its viewer. Shelley's poem plays on flux having an "inconstant wing" as his idea of "intellectual beauty" contains. If Wordsworth's poem bears the mark of his self assertion, Shelley's his complete negation of the self, the differentiation Keats would draw between the "Wordsworthian egotistical sublime" and the "chameleon poet." (Keats,258)

In his essay Lovejoy in almost a deconstructionist way attempts to de-romanticize the concept of "romanticism" and get into the diversity and uncertainty of connotation and denotation revolving around it. As David Stevens rightly says, 'it may well be that an important part of whatever Romanticism turns out to be is the suggestion that we should be able to live

with, and even creatively celebrate, this uncertainty' (Stevens,11). This is indeed the celebration of this creative uncertainty that we are still reading and re-reading the poems only to find out a range of new interpretive possibilities that the poems offer with each attempt.

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