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"The Instrument to the Agent": Reading P B Shelley's "To a Skylark" in the Context of His *a Defense of Poetry*

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Abstract:
This article would like to reiterate three things. Firstly, that the poem, as many have commented, is an example of Shelley's imaginative power and the poetic genius that sought to harmonize and seamlessly fuse the apparently irreconcilable issues that arose owing to his personal and poetic beliefs with the demands of the craft. Secondly, the poem is an example of the British Romanticism's ability to carve out bewitching lyricism. And finally, the poem is an extremely good illustration of Shelley's poetic diction.
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Much has been written about Shelley, especially after he fell into the critical disfavour of the Leavis led *Scrutiny* team in the first part of the twentieth century, 1936 to be precise, that has served to reevaluate his works. Writing as recently as 2003, David B Pirie, a senior professor of English Literature at Manchester University, declares:

> The brief period in which it was fashionable to see Shelley as both a sloppy thinker and a careless writer is over. The consensus has swung back to a directly opposite position. (Pirie, 112)

Pirie was commenting on the basis of several book-length studies that had appeared on Shelley in the late 1970s and 1980s, when "theory wars" were being fought intensely in Europe and the United States (to name a few, Timothy Webb's *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* {1977}, Richard Cronin's *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* {1981}, Miriam Allott's *Essays on Shelley* {1982}, Paul Dawson's *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* {1983}, Kelvin Everest edited *Shelley Revalued: Essays From the Gregynog Conference* {1983}, William Keach's *Shelley's Style* {1984}. The resurgence in critical attention bestowed on Shelley's works is a clear indicator that he has been "forgiven" for his transgressions – both poetic and personal – in the West, but the critical and academic establishments in India that have always shown a great enthusiasm for importing, even fetishes at times, have not attempted to revisit him. It must be remembered that Shelley was held in great esteem in India (see, for instance, Aurobindo's *Future Poetry* and the poems of the early Indian poets in English) before it became fashionable to disparage him and cast his works out of our critical radar. Perhaps, the Indian English

studies' apparatuses that so eagerly took to literary theory must have missed out on literary theory's methodology – that of revisiting works that either had been canonized or consigned to the waiting rooms of history.

In spite of the fact that most aspects of Shelley's poetry and his prose, especially his views on poetic diction, have been widely commented upon, practically little or only a very little critical effort has gone into reading his poetry in the context of his poetic credo. This article is a brief attempt to retread Shelley's poetry with the objective of demonstrating how his poetry is illustrative of his theoretical formulations on poetry and poetic composition. The article proposes to accomplish this by interfacing his well-known lyric "To A Skylark" with his views articulated in his famous *A Defense of Poetry*, an essay written in reply to his friend Thomas Love Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* in 1821.

Shelley opens the essay by distinguishing between the 'two classes of mental action': reason and imagination:

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which may be called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by thought to another, however produced; the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. (Bloom, 415)

In the next few sentences, he indentifies roles each of them plays in the process of literary creations. A reader with some working acquaintance of the origin of European rationalism knows that ever since the seventeenth century Age of Enlightenment, it has hinged upon "Reason", which formed the bedrock of the development of the European intellectual tradition. But for Shelley, reason is merely the principle of analysis and 'its action regards to the relation of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results' (Bloom, 415). On the other hand, imagination is the synthesizing principle and has for its object 'those forms which are common to universal nature and existence'. In other words, reason, though analytic, is passive since reason is the mind "contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another", that is the relationships between the thoughts rather than thoughts *per se* and hence it is concerned primarily with differences among things, as it merely focuses on making distinctions. And imagination is the mind "acting upon those thoughts ... composing from them ... other thoughts." Thus imagination is active, since it is concerned primarily with similarities among things and acts on thoughts

themselves thus making it a synthesizing principle.

From a reading of the essay, it is clear that Shelley held the view that though reason and imagination played critical roles in the production of poetry, imagination was superior to reason and that it provided a means to alchemize what reason has supplied to the mind. In a nutshell, in the essay, Shelley represents reason, with its ability limited to delineating differences, as the 'instrument' and imagination, which focuses on the 'similitude of things', the 'agent', in the production of poetry.

Having noted these, let us engage with the poem "To A Skylark". The poem, as has been well documented, was completed in July 1820 and was published along with Shelley's magnum opus *Prometheus Unbound* – two years before his tragic death when his boat went down off Viareggio near the Gulf of Spezia in Italy on 8th July 1822. What is important to notice is that the two events: the completion of the poem, writing of *The Defense of Poetry* were separated by just a year.

It is also well- known that the inspiration come to Shelley on hearing the "carolling" of the bird when on a walk with his wife Mary Shelley on "a beautiful summer evening while wandering among the lanes whose myrtle hedges were the bowers of the fire-flies" (Sandy).

Written in five line stanzas with four short lines and a long fifth line, the first four lines are metered in trochaic trimeter, the fifth in iambic hexameter, the purely "physical" form of the poem (as printed on the page) itself is an attempt not only to imitate the bird's 'call' (as an ornithologist would term it) but also at a verbal replication of the flight of the bird: two flaps for each wing (represented by the four short lines) and the soaring movement upward (suggested by the long last line of the stanzas). Only a handful of poets in the history of poetry in English have been able to integrate the essence of their poetry and the subject material through the medium of form as successfully as Shelley does in this poem. The poem's form functions as a reinforcing apparatus for the thought conveyed through words that ultimately results in the concretized formation of the poetic structure that is in consonance with the well-known American professor and critic Wimsatt's observations:

> Poetic structure is always a fusion of ideas with the material, a statement in which the solidity of the symbol and the sensory verbal qualities are somehow not washed out by abstraction. (35)

What strikes a reader of the poem, before anything else, is the dazzling array of images that Shelley presents with breath- taking rapidity that attains a rhapsodic intensity. For the sake of brevity and convenience, and moreover, because they have been so widely commented upon, these images can be broadly classified under three heads: 1. Those emphasizing the beauty of the bird's

song (the haunting melody of a high-born maiden's soulful songs calling for her love, the 'sound' of the fresh spring rain on the 'twinkling' grass), 2. Those reinforcing the point that the bird is invisible, as for example, in the lines 'like a star of heaven/ in the broad daylight', 'like a poet hidden …Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view', ("To *a* Skylark", ll 17-18, 36, 50) and 3. The height form which it is raining the melodies ('That from heaven, or near it', 'higher still and higher/ From earth thou springest', 'The deep blue thou wingest …'ll 3, 6-7, 9). At first glance these fast –flitting images, more reminiscent of the post modern visuals, appear to be presented in a rush causing some disorientation in the reader. However, a closer scrutiny brings the realization that the poet could be suggesting the rapidity of the bird's soaring flight.

Unlike some Italian birds that are extremely colourful (e.g., Little Crake, or European Bee Eater or Rufous- tailed Rock Thrush), the Eurasian Skylark, most probably the species of the skylark that Shelley and his wife must have heard carolling, is a rather 'dull looking' "fellow", not particularly a feast for the eye, to use a well-worn cliché. An entry in Wikipedia brings this out clearly:

> Like most other larks, the Eurasian Skylark is a rather dull-looking species on the ground, being mainly brown above and paler below. (Wikipedia)

For a 'dull-looking' bird to have made such an impact, Shelley must have been either an ornithologist or at least an avid amateur bird-watcher – for whom all species of birds are "attractive". But Shelley was neither (there are no evidences to suggest he was); he was a poet – most importantly a Romantic poet at that. Moreover, from Mary Shelley's account of the event (quoted above), they also saw fireflies during the course of their walk that inspired the poem. As any romantic wanderer in open spaces in the rapidly dwindling light would testify, the sight of the flitting fireflies must have been "wondrous" – to use an expression typical of the Romantics. But not to Shelley! His focus was on the dull plumaged bird's song delivered from a height. As a keen- eyed poet he honed onto the most appealing aspect of the bird – the ability to deliver songs 'on the wing'. It is here that reason as the principle of analysis assists the poet in the choice of the poetic material as it distinguishes between the bird and fireflies.

In fact Shelley was not the only poet who was enchanted by this quality of the skylark – there exists a skylark poetry writing "tradition" with at least a dozen poems based on the skylark. And all of them emphasize this aspect of the bird.

Shelley's contemporary William Wordsworth's lines from a poem based on the same bird read:

> UP with me! up with me into the clouds!

For thy song, Lark, is strong;

Up with me, up with me into the clouds!

Singing, singing,

With clouds and sky about thee ringing... (William Wordsworth, "To A Skylark*",* italics added for emphasis)

Another poet who wrote a few years after Shelley, George Meredith's (1828 – 1909) poem "The Lark Ascending" reads:

HE rises and begins to round,

He drops the silver chain of sound

Of many links without a break,

In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,

All intervolv'd and spreading wide,

Like water-dimples down a tide

Where ripple ripple overcurls

And eddy into eddy whirls; (italics added for emphasis)

Sir William Devenant (1606 – 1668), a poet who came much before Shelley, in his short poem "Aubade", also based on the bird, writes:

THE lark now leaves his wat'ry nest,

And climbing shakes his dewy wings.

He takes this window for the East,

And to implore your light he sings—
(italics added for emphasis)

The point is that most birds – wonderful songbirds such the Thrush or the Robin – habitually sing only when perched, but the skylark is unique in that it sings as it soars ('And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest'). This observation is validated by Salim Ali's, the noted ornithologist, description of the bird's behaviour:

> The song delivered on the wing, is the skylark's chief claim to distinction. From the ground the bird springs almost vertically upwards on fluttering wings, rising higher and higher till it becomes a speck in the sky. There it remains more or less stationary on rapidly fluttering wings and pours forth a deluge of spirited, melodious warbling, often for more than 10 minutes at a stretch. The singer descends to the ground thereafter, but the performance is soon repeated. (Ali, 79)

Though most poets who chose the bird emphasize this ability of the bird, Shelley was deploying the bird for other purposes. As we reach the end of the poem, this observation becomes clearer. For, though what catches the poetic eye of Shelley initially, doubtlessly, is the bird's ability to soar high and sing, he does not treat this ability at a literal level; this unique dimension of the bird holds a symbolic value for Shelley. This is revealed in the attempt that is made in the poem to associate the earth with the deplorable human condition, filled as it is with hate, pride and fear and the sky with joy. Thus as the bird, the 'scorner of the ground', soars high, it transcends all pain associated with the 'ground'. (we might also recall Shelley's famous lines from another well-known poem,

"Ode to the West Wind" : 'Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf , a cloud/I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed'). Moreover, it would not be irrelevant to remind the reader at this juncture that Shelley was called "Ariel" (See Andre Maurois' biography of Shelley titled "Ariel") for his penchant for ariel images and scorning, like the bird, 'ground' at the slightest of opportunities.

However, notwithstanding the brief digression, the article's contention is that it is through reason that Shelley quickly recognizes this detail that singles out the bird as an appropriate subject matter for poetry given his intentions.

To carry the argument forward, the article would like to foreground the fact that Shelley's primary objective behind the presentation of the visuals is to comprehend what the bird "really" is – a 'blithe spirit' no doubt, but a spirit that has never been a bird ('Bird thou *never* wert', 'What thou art, we know *not'*, *To a Skylark,* ll1-2, 31, italics added for emphasis). And in doing it, Shelley seems to be pushing reason as far as it can go almost running into the risk of falling into the trap that the Western mind has been vulnerable to since Plato:

> Consider for a moment the paradigm of rationalism that has permeated Western culture ever since Plato. The far-reaching results of this paradigm, so clearly seen in the extraordinary achievements of science (and its sister disciplines of mathematics and logic), along with the use of the scientific method, are surely not debatable. However, the truly extraordinary evolution of Western science also carries with it two core, epistemological assumptions of great significance.
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> The first assumption is basically that of scientism—the belief that science and scientific thinking alone can determine what is to be accepted as real, as well as determining the scope of what can be known. Under this presupposition, everything must either be subject to the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and other scientific disciplines, or else not be considered an "objective" experience. (Olalla, 1)

But Shelley does not fall in to that trap, for he instinctively understands that reason, whatever its virtues be, must be subordinated to imagination, if the unknowable has to be known. This becomes clear if we note that Shelley's objective, which is still informed by reason, is operating at two levels, the first, which is obvious, is to understand what makes the bird produce its notes in 'such a crystal stream', bereft of pain, and the second, the incapability of the bewildered humanity, caught in the throes of pain, aspiring to transcend its lot ('I know not how thy joy we should come near').

It is also important to understand the basic nature of the use of figures of speech. Similes and metaphors are a means by which a writer or the user makes the

unfamiliar familiar, or to put it differently, guides the receiver to comprehend the unknown through the known. Thus, it is possible to read the poem as a typical example of the standard operating procedure of the Romantic poets:

> The Romantics were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand and present them in compelling poetry (Bowra, 10)

The poem in the process of unfolding synthesizes these inherent contradictions between what the mind seeks to know ('What is most like thee?') and what is unknowable to the mind ('What thou art, we know not'). A close reading of the poem makes this more apparent. Soon after the poet presents these two propositions in stanza 7, he goes on to provide four similes which may be read as an attempt to answer the question 'What is most like thee?' The bird is 'Like a poet hidden/In the light of thought…' (Stanza 8), 'Like a high-born maiden/ In a palace tower…' (Stanza 9), 'Like a glow-worm golden/ In a dell of dew…' (Stanza 9) and 'Like a rose embowered/ In its own green leaves … (Stanza 10).

The four similes presented are not as random as it might seem when seen individually. They have been chosen with a clear intent, a pointer to the fact that he was not a "sloppy thinker". In order to see the intent behind this strategy, it is necessary to see it in its inter-relatedness. And the intent behind the deployment of this poetic strategy is to effect a transition. This becomes clear when we notice that Stanza 7 directs our attention on the bird's ability to sing hymns '(T)ill the world is wrought/ To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not', and Stanza 8 highlights the soothing aspect of the bird's/poet's song: 'Soothing her love-laden/ Soul in secret hour/ With music sweet as love …'.

The next Stanza, the composition of which may, perhaps, have influenced Shelley who had seen the fireflies in the gathering darkness (glow-worms and fire-flies though technically different but belong to the same family of Lampyridae, a detail Shelley would, perhaps, not have known, being a poet and not a naturalist), suggests the diffusory nature of the bird's song that, like light, scatters 'unbeholden/ Its aerial hue/ Among the flowers and grass, which screens it from the view!'. And Stanza 10, almost Keatsian in its sensuousness, likens the bird to a 'rose embowered/in its own green leaves,' which diffuses its sweet scent. Collectively read, what the comparisons have in common is the fact that all four are like the now unseen skylark, out of sight or not easily seen.

Read this way, Stanza 7 is crucial in that the poet's mind beset with the demands of analysis is making a switch to synthesizing, in other

words, from reason to imagination. It takes the poet four stanzas to effect the switch. Let us get back to the four stanzas to see how the switch is accomplished. In the first two stanzas under consideration (8 and 9), the similes are drawn from the human world ('Like a poet …' and 'Like a high-born maiden …'), while in next two (10 and 11), the comparisons are drawn from the natural world ('Like a glow-worm …' and ' Like a rose …'). This becomes clearer when we remember that the core concern of the poet in the poem is to foreground the carefree existence of the bird ('What ignorance of pain', ll 75, 'Shadow of annoyance/ Never came near thee:', ll 78-79) and contrast it with the strife-torn human condition ('We look before and after/ And pine for what is not', ll 86-87). As a further proof, the article would like to direct the focus of the reader to the change that occurs in the tenor of the rest of the poem which is concerned with the poet's imploration to the bird to teach its secrets to the human world in general and to Shelley as a poet:

Yet if we could scorn

Hate, and pride, and fear;

If we were things born

Not to shed a tear,

I know not how thy joy we could ever come near. (Stanza 19, Bloom, 248)

And to him as a poet:

Better than all measures

Of delightful sound,

Better than all treasures

That in books are found,

Thy skill to a poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness

That thy brain must know,

Such harmonious madness

From my lips would flow

The world should listen then – as I am listening now. (Stanzas 20 and 21, Bloom, 248)

In conclusion, the article would like to reiterate three things that the poem, as many have commented, is an example of Shelley's imaginative power and the poetic genius that sought to harmonize and seamlessly fuse the apparently irreconcilable issues that arose owing to his personal and poetic beliefs with the demands of the craft. T poem is an example of the British Romanticism's ability to carve out bewitching lyricism and the poem is an extremely good illustration of Shelley's poetic diction.

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