Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To a Skylark" (1819)

Shelley's poem epitomises the Romantics' increasing tendency to 'read' natural objects as messengers from a higher world as the century wore on. His lyric "To a Skylark" takes the form of a heightened monologue in which the poet searches for the *meaning* of the skylark considered as a symbol of transcendence in a framework of ideas which endows the poet with a privileged position as an intermediary between the conditions of 'mortal' life and that higher reality where only spirit exists.

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! **happy, care-free*
Bird thou never *wert, **was*
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest *thy full heart ** pour* (arch.)
In profuse *strains of unpremeditated art.**music*

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost *soar, and soaring ever singest. **fly*

In the golden lightning
Of the *sunken sun, **sun-set*
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple *even **evening*
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven,
In the broad day-light
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy *shrill delight,

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought **made*
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded* not: **noticed*

[…]

Teach us, *Sprite or Bird, **spirit*
What sweet thoughts are thine:
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That *panted forth a flood of **rapture so divine. **fast breathing **ecstasy*

[Continued]

The poet addresses the bird as a symbol of spiritual life – and hence denies that it is an ordinary creature. He also attributes to it the power of purely natural expression which the poet does not have. The first stanza introduces an analogy between bird and artist which underlies much of the poem – a simply if idealistic, notion which the poet skillfully elaborates. .

Much of the poem simply captures the 'soaring' character of the skylark's flight – a bird that seems to rise to incredible altitude above the countryside, singing as it goes until it disappears from sight. In this aspect, it is like a human soul parting – viz., *unbodied* - from a corpse and 'soaring' Heaven-ward. (See 'from Heaven, or near it', in the preceeding stanza.)

The flight of the bird at sunset makes it seem like a star seen in 'broad daylight' (phr.) and hence very like the Evening Star, or Hesperus, which is actually Venus – otherwise known as the Morning Star. Delight is an evocative word for pleasure and shrill equally describes the actual song of this little bird and the sounds made by lovers.

… thoughts which recurrently involve the analogy of bird and poet – such that the poet is seem as living in the 'light' in a way analogous to the bird's habitation in the sky. Here the poet is said to bring thoughts – including hopes and fears – which the world does not know or recognise. In this respect he is a prophet as much as a poet.

The question is rhetorical since the bird is certainly not singing about wine. In fact, 'wine, women and song' are the staple subjects of popular poetry and here the poet is thinking of a more elevated theme as befitting the song of the skylark. It is a theme which causes not merely melody but excitement (*panting*) and leads to *rapture*. Lastly, it is more divine than human.

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own *kind? what ignorance of pain? *species

With thy clear keen *joyance *cf. *joissance* [Fr.]
*Languor cannot be: *tiredness, ennui
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must *deem *judge, think
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is *fraught; *troubled, mixed
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if we could *scorn *despise, dismiss
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

[…]

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to 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.

The poet asks what makes the bird sing? Although the answer given by a naturalist might be simple (e.g, *mating*), he sees in it in a passionate attachment to natural things – including the bird's own kind – i.e., other birds – i.e., other birds – but here Nature herself.

The poet focuses on the analogy with human love (i.e., *romance*) and argues that the bird experiences ecstasy without tiredness or any the feeling of repletion. A glance at Shelley's love-life indicates the source of this remarks.

Here the argument is that so *pure* a song can only come from a pure and untrammelled contemplation of life's essence, which is not available to the poet or other mortals.

These memorable lines certainly echo the speech in Shakespeare's Hamlet where the hero speaks of man as a creation with 'godlike in reason […] looking before and after' – but it is that very 'capability' which accounts for so much sorrow.

Hence the argument that, if we could dismiss or disregard it, we would attain to a happiness (joy) even greater – or, rather, higher – than that of the song-bird (i.e., the bird's 'joy' would not come near ours.)

Yet, the skylark's song is 'better' than any other form of music or even any form of idealism locked in books: he is, in that sense, both a model and a tutor to the poet who, like him, should 'scorn' ordinary existence.

And so the poet asks the bird to *teach* him how to sing. More specifically, to feel in his brain what the bird must feel. It is notable that the last lines resemble those of Coleridge in the second strophe of "Kubla Khan" where says that, if he could remember the maiden's song, he too could sing 'with symphony and song' …