

LOOSE NOTES IN THE WASTE OF AIR: THE SKYLARK ACCORDING TO SHELLEY, WORDSWORTH AND JOHN CLARE

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There pipes the woodlark, and the song –thrush there
Scatters his loose notes in the waste of air.

Thomas Gray “Couplet about Birds”

Fifty years later such sentiments would have seen Thomas Gray booted out of the Poetry Society without an Elegy to his name. For the next generation of poets birds do not “scatter” their “loose” notes randomly about nor is the air into which they are scattered a “waste”; it is heaven itself. Gray’s birdsong sounds more like a chicken scratching in the farmyard than the “profuse strains of unpremeditated art” that Shelley was to hear.

Had Gray been listening to the music of the skylark rather than to the undergrowth-lurking woodlark and song-thrush it is doubtful that his response would have been any different; the skylark inspired poets in the first half of the nineteenth century with an enthusiasm that Gray could only have found puzzling. The reason for the skylark’s popularity with the Romantic poets is no secret: it soars high into the sky, enjoying the exclusive solitude of the heavens, and it sings loudly, melodically and ceaselessly –the bird is a poet. These characteristics are celebrated in the best-known of skylark poems, Shelley’s “To a Skylark” written in 1820. Shelley was not the only poet of the period to write about the skylark; Wordsworth wrote two poems, both with the title “To a Skylark”, the first in 1805 (I shall refer to Wordsworth’s poems by their dates) and the second twenty years later, in 1825. However, the real specialist in skylark verse was John Clare who wrote at least six poems specifically to the skylark (“Address to a Lark Singing in Winter”, “Larks and Spring”, “To the Lark”, “To a Lark Singing in Winter”, “The Sky Lark”, “The Sky Lark Leaving her Nest”) and mentions it in many more. This is not surprising considering Clare’s vast poetic output and the fact that he planned to publish a volume of bird and bird nest poetry to be entitled “Birds Nesting”. Although Clare’s first skylark poem, “Adress to a Lark Singing in Winter”, was written in 1815, and Wordsworth’s first version ten years before that,

Alauda arvensis is, for better or for worse, invariably associated with Shelley's blithe spirit. Each poet's portrayal of the skylark, and their poetic vision differs as do the various characteristics they attribute to it; it is these differences that I shall examine in this essay.

Shelley's skylark is notoriously unreliable as a guide for bird-spotters. It is a creature capable of producing unearthly music; flying beyond the reach of the human eye but it is, as the poem says, a "spirit/Bird thou never wert". There can be no visual description because it is "unseen", mundane details of the bird's life cycle, its colouring, diet, reproductive or domestic habits are not given; it is pure sound, pure energy, pure spirit, it is not a skylark at all. Annoying as this may be to nature-lovers it is, of course, irrelevant. The skylark is:

Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought

It is constructing its own world, as the poet does, unasked, "unpremeditated". Digestion, excretion or reproduction are not to be associated with this, or with Wordsworth's unworldly creatures. Not only are Wordsworth's and Shelley's skylarks similar in their unbirdliness but both reveal an elitist contempt for groundlings. "Thou art laughing and scorning" Wordsworth accuses in 1805 and plaintively asks "Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?" in his 1825 poem. Shelley's skylark is a confirmed "scorner of the ground" but Wordsworth is prepared to admit, at least, to a nest: "Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest" (1805), which seems delightfully domestic if biologically inaccurate. The only hint that Wordsworth has actually seen a skylark comes in his description of the inebriated madness of its flight ("Drunken Lark!"—1805), which might reflect the flight pattern of the birds observed by the poet, and it descends in authentic skylark fashion to "Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will" (1825). Shelley's skylark is much more single-minded: it just goes up. It is left to John Clare to tell us what a skylark actually looks like. In "To a Lark Singing in Winter" we learn that the lark has a "speckled breast", is russet in colour and builds its nest in the stubble field, perhaps from bits of straw since he observes in the same poem that: "Here's some small straws about her nest". In "Larks and Spring" Clare watches "the skylark as he springs/Shake mornings moisture from his wings"; he is able to describe the skylark with the familiarity that comes from a life-time spent in the fields.

Shelley describes emotion, he is not interested in nature notes. Of "To a Skylark" J.R. Watson says: "an inspiration which celebrates the imagination rather than the sight, is the Shelleyan characteristic"¹ so we should not expect to find the ornithological observations in Shelley's poetry that we find in Clare's. Accurate or not, the poets' skylarks reflect each poet's vision of the world about them. Both Shelley and Wordsworth have linear vision, their birds travel in straight lines, though Wordsworth's lark may wobble temulently. Shelley's skylark starts from the ground, though we never see it there:

From the earth thou springest:
Like a cloud of fire,

The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

It flies higher and higher, out of sight, still singing, never descending. Wordsworth's bird, as we have seen, has one foot in the nest. It is capable of upward and downward movement; its role is not that of Shelley's whose task is prophetic, even apocalyptic. Wordsworth confines his bird to an axis whose poles are "Heaven and Home"(1825). A strangely limited field of operations for a bird described in the same poem as "pilgrim of the sky", this skylark has an enviously carefree life moving easily between the comforts of home and the spiritual satisfactions of heaven; here there is no sense of the intensity of creation, there are no volcanic clouds of fire flooding from the skylark's blazing wings as there are in Shelley's poem. Wordsworth's skylark disdains the challenges lying beyond the horizon, it is "Type of the wise who soar, but never roam" (1825). John Clare also associates the skylark with home, though he simply enjoys the bird's presence and the memories it evokes rather than pontificating on the merits of staying at home:

Tis one of those heart cheering sights
In green earths rural chronicles
That upon every memory dwells
Among home fed delights

"The Sky Lark Leaving Her Nest"

Clare's vision is not, however, confined to a home-heaven axis; his skylark has the itch to see beyond the horizon. A story told by Clare's first biographer describes how, as a boy, he set out one day to walk to the horizon: "Onward he trotted, mile after mile, towards where the horizon seemed nearest; and it was a long while before he found that the sky receded the further he went."² The skylark is as keen to see beyond the horizon as Clare the boy was:

Right happy bird so full of mirth
Mounting and mounting still more high
To meet morns sunshine in the sky
Ere yet it smiles on earth

"The Sky Lark Leaving Her Nest"

In the same poem Clare talks of "the circle of the sky." His vision is three-dimensional; it gives, as John Barrell says, a "sense of circular activity."³ he not only looks up and down, but around him as well. The boundaries of his vision are an imaginary dome circumscribed by the circular horizon around him and limited by eyesight or earshot above him. This is reflected in his poetry in two ways. Firstly he describes the scene surrounding him with a detail that Shelley and Wordsworth forgo:

The rolls and harrows lies at rest beside
The battered road and spreading far and wide
Above the russet clods the corn is seen
Sprouting its spirey points of tender green

Where squats the hare to terrors wide awake
Like some brown clod the harrows failed to break

“The Sky Lark”

These opening lines of “The Sky Lark” set the scene, he also tells us of the noisy boys beneath the hedge, out picking wild flowers who startle the lark and send it up into the sky. In this, and many other poems by John Clare, there is a sense of simultaneousness: events do not occur in linear time, any more than they do in linear space but are the record of the poet’s whole experience as part of the world around him. The poet absorbs the scene surrounding him and recreates the crowded moment in his poetry. Secondly, as John Barrell points out in reference to “The Skylark,” the poem itself confirms the sense of temporal and spatial circularity:

it is worth pointing out how the circular movement is working, referring us back to images earlier in the sentence and thus making the poem less a continuum than a manifold in which everything is kept before our eyes. Thus we return, in the sixth line, to the harrows we met in the first.⁴

The lark flies up as the boys come too close, and it drops back to its nest as they pass on, and then at the end of the poem we are brought back once more to the hare and the lark’s nest:

While its low nest moist with the dews of morn
Lye safely with the leveret in the corn

The lark itself moves only upwards and downwards, but the poet’s roving eyes and pen are all around framing the bird in a broader picture. Clare is quite aware of the Romantic attributes ascribed to the supposedly ground-scorning lark. With the bird safely startled into the sky Clare muses on the boys, perhaps with Shelley in mind:

Where boys unheeding past - neer dreaming then
That birds which flew so high - would drop agen
To nests upon the ground where any thing
May come at to destroy had they the wing
Like such a bird themselves would be too proud
And build on nothing but a passing cloud
As free from danger as the heavens are free
From pain and toil - there would they build and be
And sail about the world to scenes unheard
Of and unseen - O were they but a bird
So think they while they listen to its song

“The Sky Lark”

As a countryman Clare is incapable of the suspension of disbelief, or ignorance, required to ascribe too much to a simple bird; his fancies that the bird might “build on nothing but a passing cloud,” though expressed, are subordinate to his view of the bird as a genuine fellow being.

All three poets identify with or aspire to be like the skylark. For Shelley and Wordsworth the skylark has gifts that the poet would like for himself. Shelley unambiguously compares the skylark to a poet: "Like a poet hidden/In the light of thought." The poet recognizes not just a colleague, but a poetic and revolutionary superior:

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.

It is no coincidence that the feet of Shelley's skylark are as far off the ground as his own were, and that the bird of the poem bears as little relation to reality as Shelley's life did to the lives of most of people of the time. Like the lark, Shelley aspired to "heaven or near it" from which he could pour his "full heart/In profuse strains of unpremeditated heart." Shelley asks to be taught by the skylark, Wordsworth to be elevated by it:

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,
Lift me, guide me, till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind! (1805)

Life's journey on the ground is "rugged and uneven" and the lark seems to enjoy a happier existence. Nevertheless the lark is able to lighten life's burdens:

But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,
I, with my fate contented, will plod on (1805)

Clare's lark has an equally beneficial effect on its listeners:

For those that crosses fields of corn
Where sky larks start to meet the day
But feels more pleasure on his way
Upon a summers morn

"The Sky Lark Leaving Her Nest"

In his 1825 poem Wordsworth's lark becomes an "Ethereal minstrel." The word minstrel is closely associated with poet, and in this poem the skylark seems to be very similar to Shelley's:

A privacy of light is thine;
Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
Of harmony, with instinct more divine (1825)

But, as we have seen, this bird is “True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home” (1825): its head may be in the clouds but its feet are firmly on the ground as, surely Wordsworth is saying, should be the poet’s. Clare’s skylark is a minstrel too, but significantly his is the “farmers minstrel,” “Sweet minstrel of the farm and plough.” (“To a Lark Singing in Winter”) Although his skylark raises the spirits of the listener, just as Wordsworth’s does, it also shares the hardships of the world and Clare readily identifies with it for this reason. In “Address to a Lark Singing in Winter” Clare asks the bird why it is singing when everything is “cold and freezing”. Perhaps, he suggests, the bird “thinks that summer is returning.” If this is the case then the lark will be disappointed just as the poet has been:

Tis winter let the cold content thee
 Wish after nothing till its sent thee
 For disappointments will torment thee
 Which will be thine
 I know it well for Ive had plenty
 Misfortunes mine

“Address to a Lark Singing in Winter”

The skylark as poet is inevitably, for Clare, fellow-sufferer rather than “ethereal minstrel,” but something of the transcendent joy that Shelley’s and Wordsworth’s skylarks drop from the heavens, also drops from Clare’s. Compare Shelley’s lines:

Like a poet hidden
 In the light of thought,
 Singing hymns unbidden

with Wordsworth’s:

A privacy of glorious light is thine;
 Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
 Of harmony, with instinct more divine (1825)

and Clare’s:

But music sunshine’s all around
 Beneath thy song
 Winter seems softened at thy sound

“The Sky Lark Leaving Her Nest”

In each case the music emerges from light and affects in some way the ground beneath it. From Shelley’s light of thought songs are sung that will build a new world. From Wordsworth’s glorious light, harmony floods the earth drawing it nearer to the divine; the two “kindred points” are linked by the skylark’s song. Clare’s skylark is much more practical: it is cold and the bird’s song brings memories of warmth and summer to the listener making the winter momentarily more bearable.

The fundamental difference between Clare's larks and those of the other two poets is their sense of belonging. Clare's skylark shares its world with other creatures and with human beings. It sings for them and it suffers with them, but whatever it does, it does it in company and with a sense of shared experience. Its world is bounded by the horizon, just as Clare's world was contained within the parish boundary; it knows of a world beyond the horizon and is attracted by it but its attachment to home is its chief characteristic. In almost all of Clare's skylark poems the bird leaves and returns to its nest. Even in deepest winter the bird is able to find warmth and shelter there, it is a reliable and fixed point in an unreliable and unkind world. Shelley's skylark has no time for the ties of home, he does not aspire to satisfy simple bodily needs for food and warmth, perhaps because he has never lacked them. But there is something deeply attractive about Shelley's unbirdly bird. It may be absurd but it is also magnificent. Wordsworth's larks, on the other hand, are quite offensive in their smug contentment, their having the best of both worlds, their assurance of heaven and home like some latter day Calvinists, and their conventional wisdom which has none of the glorious ambition of Shelley nor the down-to-earth honesty of John Clare. Shelley's "To a Skylark" undoubtedly deserves its popularity but Clare's skylarks equally deserve to be more widely known than they are now. Where Shelley's bird, and language, soar beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, Clare's remain on earth, providing a more human vision of the poet's experience.

A poet could once assume that his or her readers knew what a skylark or a daffodil were, but in an increasingly cosmopolitan and urban world this is no longer the case. The characteristics of a skylark may have been familiar to an English man or woman of the nineteenth century but this can not be taken for granted of contemporary readers in Kingston, Jamaica or Wellington, New Zealand. The skylark as metaphor becomes useless when an increasingly smaller number of readers have seen, or even know, what a skylark is: Clare's poems, with their simple, generous and full descriptions are often more accessible to us than poetry which requires a knowledge or understanding that modern readers cannot automatically be assumed to have. In much of his poetry, not just in the skylark poems, Clare offers an alternative view of the early nineteenth century, and this adds to our appreciation of all poetry of the period. The two poets, Shelley and Clare, brought together by a small brown bird, are richly complementary and deserve to be read together.

Notas

1. Watson, J.R. (1970) *Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry*. London: Hutchinson Educational Ltd., p. 164
2. Martin, Frederick (1964) [1865] *The Life of John Clare*. Second Edition. Frank Cass & Co Ltd: London, p. 6.
3. Barrell, John (1972) *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place in the Poetry of John Clare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 163.
4. Barrell, p. 163.