

## Shelley's Poet-Birds

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In 'To a Skylark', Shelley wonders how to understand the bird he observes: 'What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?'<sup>1</sup> The same question might be asked of poets, we realise, when Shelley swiftly makes the skylark 'like a poet' that is '[s]inging hymns unbidden' (ll.36; 37), a singer of such sincerity and feeling that it might seem a model for the poet. Shelley was fascinated by the identity and responsibility of the poet. Wordsworth asks, 'what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?'<sup>2</sup> Shelley's approach is more oblique, his prose and poetry strewn with similes rather than bound by definitions. Conjuring the ideal poet as a combination of legislator and prophet, *A Defence of Poetry*, imagines one who 'essentially comprises and unites both these characters' (*Major Works*, p.677). In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley complements this abstract though thoughtful description with brief portraits of figures such as Dante and Plato who provide examples of the nature of the poet. But in his poetry, Shelley returns to the more figurative idea of the poet as a bird, granting himself the freedom to conceive multiple ways of seeing or imagining the poet via an avian counterpart. Strengths and weaknesses are drawn out through the parallels: the poet-bird, sometimes standing in for a particular poet, at other times representing the poet as an unspecified figure, lets Shelley muse upon the reality and the ideal of the poet's role.

Shelley wrote in a letter to William Godwin of early 1812, in response to Godwin's censure of his habit of publishing too regularly: 'If any man would determine sincerely and cautiously at every period of his life to publish books which should contain the real state of his feelings and opinions, I am willing to suppose that this portraiture of his mind would be worth many metaphysical disquisitions'.<sup>3</sup> Shelley's determination to view his work as evidence of 'portraiture of mind' at different points in his life goes some way to explaining Shelley's freedom of thinking through the image of the poet-bird in his poetry and drama. The role of the poet is, for such a self-conscious poet, a continually evolving idea and a spur to thought. A close consideration of Shelley's representation of the poet-bird reveals the shifting contours

of Shelley's imagination: the swan, the eagle, the owl, the nightingale, and the parrot are some of the ways in which Shelley considers the poet, tugging us out of any easy understandings of the possibilities of poetry and the character of the poet.

In *Alastor*, Shelley has his Poet confront a swan. Here, the swan is emphatically *not* a poet, and this fact catalyses the Poet's dismay. Despite the Poet's claimed superiority to the bird ('Spirit more vast than thine'), the painful juxtaposition of the 'surpassing powers' (ll.287; 288) and the unresponsive elements reveals him meditating upon human potential and its seeming incompatibility with the world. The Poet laments the gulf between any sense of human ascendancy over animals compared to the reality of the swan's imagined happiness as set against his human disappointment.<sup>4</sup> 'Thou hast a home, / Beautiful bird! thou voyagest to thine home, / Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck / With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes / Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy' (ll.280-4). At this stage of his career, Shelley is much more inclined to see the bird as far removed from humanity rather than as a point of identification. But this changed quickly. By 1818, Shelley's 'Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills' returns to the image of the swan as a poet-bird. This later poem sees Shelley write the poet *as* bird rather than musing upon their separateness as if to see the poet as able to marshal the swan's gifts. Byron is on his mind as Shelley draws a parallel between the swan and his peer:

That a tempest-cleaving Swan  
Of the sons of Albion,  
Driven from his ancestral streams  
By the might of evil dreams,  
Found a nest in thee; and Ocean  
Welcomed him with such emotion  
That its joy grew his, and sprung  
From his lips like music flung  
O'er a mighty thunder-fit,  
Chastening terror

(ll.174–183)

These energetic tetrameters see Shelley construct an image of Byron that pays tribute by equating him with the swan. Unlike in *Alastor*, we are not forced to pay heed to the difference between the man and the bird: Byron's forceful presence sponsors Shelley's epithet, 'a tempest-cleaving Swan' as Shelley remakes Byron's description of Harold, '[d]roop'd as a wild-born falcon with clipt wing, / To whom the boundless

air alone were home' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III.129-30).<sup>5</sup> Shelley retains the wildness but elevates Byron to an empowered position over the elements where he can command more than air. Nodding to Byron's self-description, shared by Harold, as one '[d]riven from his ancestral streams', Shelley paints Byron as the poet-bird delivered from suffering via joy transmitted from the ocean to the poet. Byron identifies the ocean with freedom in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV, in stanzas praised by Shelley as rescuing the canto from 'contempt & despair' (*Letters*, ii.58), and Shelley takes hold of Byron's images to make a paean to his friend's intensity as the ultimate poet-bird. Byron, now cast as a swan, does not labour under the burden suffered by the *Alastor* Poet. Instead, Byron wears the swan's superiority as a mantle, protecting him against pain as Shelley makes an idealized poet-bird in the image of his peer.

Making use of an eagle's superiority allows Shelley a different approach to birds that mirrors his growing confidence as a poet, and his burgeoning faith in the poet's power. Michael Ferber writes: 'Romanticism is that literary movement where the eagle surpasses the nightingale and the lark as a symbol of the poet, the poetic genius, or the creative imagination';<sup>6</sup> but Shelley seems equally motivated to problematize even that emblem of 'poetic genius'. *Julian and Maddalo*, as Stuart Curran phrases it, presents 'the fellowship of the two friends — obviously in this poem two disguised but great poets'.<sup>7</sup> Shelley takes pains to ensure we understand the titular characters as representing the literary identities of their real-life counterparts. Byron being cast as the eagle pays careful homage to Byron's real and literary identities. The speaker, an older and wiser Julian, recalls Maddalo as choosing his despondent position in response to Julian's optimism:

[...] pride  
Made my companion take the darker side.  
The sense that he was greater than his kind  
Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind  
By gazing on its own exceeding light.

(ll.48-52)

Shelley's phrase 'eagle spirit' alludes to Byron's *The Lament of Tasso*, which opens with the poet asserting his own 'eagle-spirit of a Child of Song' (*The Lament of Tasso*, I.2, *BCPW*, 4.116). Byron's poem was a favourite of Shelley's during the composition of *Julian and Maddalo*, and *The Lament of Tasso* offers the 'primary

model for the Maniac's monologue'.<sup>8</sup> In the quoted lines, Shelley underscores Byron's part in forming *Julian and Maddalo*'s appraisal of his friend and rival even as he offers his own separate perspective in an urbane tone that signals his departure from the Byronic source. The eagle is a careful choice in terms of the bird's symbolic status. 'As poets claimed eagle natures', writes Michael Ferber, 'they not only laid claim to a much higher social status than they had attained for millennia (unless they were lords to begin with)'.<sup>9</sup> Shelley takes in that high social status and, twisting its import, makes his reader conscious of how much of that self-appraisal rests upon Byron's 'sense that he was greater than his kind'. Whether Byron's likeness to an eagle makes him proud, or whether pride itself makes him eagle-like is left unresolved. Byron's paradoxical quality is the combination of his 'darker side' with his 'exceeding light'. Shelley sees the pitfalls and the grandeur of the image of the poet-bird as eagle with Maddalo as a dark double for himself.

The image of the Byronic poet-bird as eagle is ambivalent, and Shelley responds to Byron's own ambivalence about being a poet. Shelley was aware of Byron's challenges, arch or otherwise, to the value of poetry. In 1813, Byron wrote 'no one should be a rhymers who could be any thing better';<sup>10</sup> and 'any thing better' seemed to him to entail 'a life of action', such as the life that Napoleon Bonaparte famously led.<sup>11</sup> Byron's fascination with Napoleon saw him, in 'Napoleon's Farewell', praise the deposed emperor and forge an image of how 'the Eagle, whose gaze in that moment was blasted, / Had still soared with eyes fixed on victory's sun!' (II.15-16).<sup>12</sup> These lines refer obliquely to Pliny in his *Natural History*, where, following Aristotle, he relates how new-born eagles are forced to look at the sun: Byron affirms himself as 'one whose gaze stands firm against the light it rears'.<sup>13</sup> The imperial eagle functions as a double for Napoleon, just as Byron makes Napoleon, as Jerome McGann notes, 'in part a figural self-projection' (*BCPW* 3: p. 473). Shelley, with the lightest of touches, knowingly anoints Byron with the title for which Byron longed. Shelley crowns his lordship with a new kind of poetic aristocracy that insinuates that the Byronic eagle could lay claim to the pen as his weapon of choice where words might attain the status of deeds. This praise is not unlaced with criticism: *Julian and Maddalo* sees Shelley play with and question the nature of Byron's poetic identity. For the eagle image is not wholly positive: self-love enraptures it, blinded to the world by its own dazzling brilliance. The criticism is as clear as the praise; narcissism blinkers the Byronic poet-bird, compromising its ability to see a world

beyond the self. The eagle, in all its pomp, is a perfect parallel with Byron, not least for its potential weakness.

The eagle's status continued to fascinate Shelley. In 'Ode to Liberty', which opens with an epigraph from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV, Shelley allows his speaker to claim the eagle's identity for himself.

My soul spurned the chains of its dismay,  
And in the rapid plumes of song  
Clothed itself, sublime and strong;  
As a young eagle soars the morning clouds among,  
Hovering in verse o'er its accustomed prey  
(ll.5-9).

Shelley, though apparently referring to Byron with the reference to the eagle, casts his allusive net far more widely. Timothy Webb, the editors of *The Poems of Shelley*, and Tom Phillips, all note that Shelley draws upon Pindar's *Nemean* 3 (ll.76-82).<sup>14</sup> Phillips points up that, given the profound political differences between the two poets, Pindar's work 'is as much a foil as a straightforward model'.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Shelley does not exactly emulate Byron as the eagle, or Pindar, who had written similarly about the eagle, but rather selects an image of the eagle that performs in a quintessentially Shelleyan manner. The poet-bird aims to transcend the real in favour of finding in 'rapid plumes of song' a means to allow the soul to soar beyond the actual and even 'transfigure[s] the world it imagines'.<sup>16</sup> *Hellas* associated the eagle with defiant freedom where it 'Scorns the embattled tempest's warning' (l.77) but as Christopher Hitt shows, *Laon and Cythna's* 'malevolent' eagle lurks in the background of 'Ode to Liberty'. Hitt writes that '[a]n attentive reading of 'Ode to Liberty' reveals that Shelley repeatedly invokes such subtly ominous imagery in reference to the object his poem ostensibly exalts';<sup>17</sup> and the eagle is no exception.

Though the violence in Pindar's lines is excised in Shelley's poem, it remains implicit in the image of the predator. Shelley refreshes the image of the poet as eagle in these lines: as in *Prometheus Unbound*, a potentially negative instance of power—as when Prometheus proclaims, '[y]et am I king over myself' (*Prometheus Unbound*, ll.492)—is transformed. The speaker does not endorse or threaten predatory violence; the eagle hovers in 'verse', freed from more visceral forms of ferocity. Shelley renews the symbolic potential of the eagle by his determination to provide new possibilities for the poet-bird. Byron reappears in *Adonais*, not only as the 'Pilgrim of Eternity' (*Adonais*, l.264), with fame looming '[o]ver his living head'

(l.265), but also as a shadowy contrast to Keats's double, 'the lorn nightingale' (l.145). The eagle, never completely associated with Byron, is painted as mourning its fellow singer while '[s]oaring and screaming around her empty nest' (l.150). The parallel is undeveloped; it is left implicit and carefully ambiguous. Shelley co-opts Byron as a mourner in his elegy, as a protagonist in *Julian and Maddalo*, and for an inspiring epigraph in 'Ode to Liberty', with the eagle forging the connection between the three.

*Triumph of Life* sounds some its most affirming notes when it considers the eagle as a symbol of those who escape the 'contagion of the world's slow stain' (*Adonais*, l.356), and Byron's presence runs through the lines:

All but the sacred few who could not tame  
Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon  
As they had touched the world with living flame

Fled back like eagles to their native noon,

(ll.128–131)

Shelley's Byron again hovers at the edges of the poem. Charles E. Robinson notes the lines' connection to Byron's 'birds of Paradise' (III.169) 'form'd of far too penetrable stuff' (III.170) in *The Prophecy of Dante*, birds who 'long to flee / Back to their native mansion' (III.169-70) where 'soon they find / Earth's mist with their pure pinions not agree' (III.170-1).<sup>18</sup> Writing in *terza rima*, as Byron had in *The Prophecy of Dante*, Shelley revels in the form's austere power to give his birds a different emphasis. Byron darkly declares that 'few shall soar upon that Eagle's wing, / And look in the Sun's face, with Eagle's gaze, / All free and fearless as the feathered King', (III.70-2), noting that most 'fly more near the earth' (III.73). Shelley has his eagle spirits manage both types of flight. Shelley's eagles might flee 'All free and fearless' but they have 'touched the world with living flame' before they make good their escape. Keats's nightingale is the bird 'not born for death' ('Ode to a Nightingale', l.61).<sup>19</sup> Shelley's eagles seem not born for life; they touch life and then leave the tyrannous scene, untainted by their surroundings. The 'sacred few' earn their praise through their ability to take on earth and heaven. The eagle as poet-bird achieves its highest incarnation in *The Triumph of Life*, testifying that even in the midst of some of Shelley's darkest writing, the role of the poet remains unspoiled and still a source of power and potential.

Shelley's symbolism is never leaden, and elsewhere he finds a different poet for the eagle to double. In *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, Coleridge inherits the mantle of the poet-bird as eagle, but Shelley performs a typical twist on what might have been a more straightforward celebration of the poet. William Hazlitt also paralleled Coleridge with the eagle, remembering how the poet, as a preacher, 'launched into his subject, like an eagle dallying with the wind';<sup>20</sup> and Coleridge affectingly characterized himself as a tortoise in contrast to eagles in a letter to Thomas Poole, 'Let Eagles bid the Tortoise sunward soar—/ As vainly Strength speaks to a broken Mind'.<sup>21</sup> In *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, it is the eagle whose strength is vainly possessed, and Shelley detects in Coleridge shades of what he had earlier described as Byron's eagle-like blindness in *Julian and Maddalo*. William Keach writes that these lines, along with those on Byron in *Julian and Maddalo*, reveal 'Shelley's fundamental ambivalence toward the mind's reflexive capacity':<sup>22</sup>

You will see Coleridge—he who sits obscure  
In the exceeding lustre, and the pure  
Intense irradiation of a mind,  
Which, with its own internal lightning blind,  
Flags wearily through darkness and despair—  
A cloud-encircled meteor of the air,  
A hooded eagle among blinking owls.—  
(ll.197-203)

These lines, though similar in imagery to Byron's amused and amusing thrust at Coleridge as 'a hawk encumber'd with his hood' (*Don Juan*, 'Dedication', l.14 BCPW v.3), lack Byron's more combative edge. Despite these differences, their shared sense of Coleridge as 'hooded' and blinded is suggestive. *Julian and Maddalo* had Byron's 'eagle spirit blind / By gazing on its own exceeding light' (ll.51-52), and Shelley takes that sense of excess and superiority and maps it onto Coleridge with his 'exceeding lustre'. An excess of mental brilliance blinds both poet-birds to the world beyond the self. These lines reveal a soft-pedalled sympathy for Coleridge, where what might have been criticism softens into rueful compassion. The gifts that had rendered Coleridge so brilliant though obscure lead him to suffer resignedly through a darkness that, unlike Milton's in *Paradise Lost* (*Paradise Lost*, III.1-55), promises no poetic recompense. Coleridge enjoys neither sight nor vision. Coleridge as the poet-bird seems all the more tragic for his degraded state: Shelley's exploration of the role of the poet never tips into mere celebration.

Shelley introduces a further element into the lines, with Coleridge, as the ‘hooded eagle’ appearing ‘among blinking owls——’ (l.203). Those owls seem comic, amusingly banal in comparison to the majestic but bowed poet, but the owl takes on a larger meaning in the light of Shelley’s later *Defence of Poetry*. *Rosalind and Helen* introduces a brief comparison of the owl with the nightingale where both species ‘wake in this dell with daylight fades’ (l.137) but where the nightingales remain with the ‘gray shades’ (l.138), the pragmatic owls flee to ‘a merrier glen to hoot and play’ (l.140). Their rational behaviour, though perhaps unfeeling in comparison to the soulful nightingales, foreshadows Shelley’s treatment of the owl in *A Defence of Poetry*. In one of the most impassioned moments of Shelley’s essay, he asks:

What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship—what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit, what were our consolations on this side of the grave, and what were our aspirations beyond it, if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?

(*Major Works*, p. 696)

Poetry appears as a vehicle for eternity. Shelley suggests poetry as possessing Lucifer’s power through its light-bringing force, and Prometheus’ virtue with fire. Life itself is uplifted and redeemed through poetry, allowing us a foretaste of eternity while we live in the mortal world. Poetry, as ‘something divine’, offers us the chance of escaping existence, which Shelley so often rued. In 1822, Shelley wrote with bitter humour of the absurdity of believing ‘As if after sixty years of suffering here, we were to be roasted alive for sixty million more in Hell, or charitably annihilated by a coup de grace of the bungler, who brought us into existence at first’ (*Letters*, ii.407). For Shelley, eternity is what we are owed because of existence’s travails, and poetry alone allows us to feel its intimations before we die. Reason is not viewed as poor but as incapable of delivering us this taste of eternity: ‘Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; Imagination the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole’ (*Major Works*, pp. 674-75). Reason becomes ‘calculation’, and Shelley uses the owl, Athena’s bird, to represent its particular limitations. Unwilling rather than unable to soar, the ‘owl-winged faculty of calculation’ observes but cannot aspire to the work of poetry. Poet-birds as owls do not exist.



‘Poetry, in a general sense’, writes Shelley, ‘may be defined to be ‘the expression of the Imagination’ (*Major Works*, p. 675) and in this particular sense, poetry is eternal. Reason lags behind imagination’s transcendent achievement. Coleridge, surrounded by ‘blinking owls’ (*Letter to Maria Gisborne*, l.203), seems a beleaguered representative of poetry diminished by living in a society of reasoning ‘owls’. Coleridge suffers from his isolation, marooned in London without a community of peers who might understand or sympathize with him. Shelley almost weeps his own fate in Coleridge’s as he admits, ‘You are not here!’ (l.132) to his interlocutor before projecting that by next winter his house will be ‘a grave / Of dead despondence and low-thoughted care’ (ll.293-94), only cheering himself by imagining a future surrounded by friends to ‘make our friendly philosophic revel’ (l.319). That subtle doubling is no accident: Shelley finds in Coleridge a fellow poet, more a peer than an authority figure,<sup>23</sup> who sought to couple political fervour with poetic imagination. Thomas Love Peacock noted Coleridge’s strong influence on Shelley’s imagination:<sup>24</sup> that influence remained present throughout Shelley’s life. For the *Letter to Maria Gisborne* fears that Shelley might become rather more like Coleridge than he would like if abandoned to the ‘blinking owls’ that would hood his own eagle-like poetic mind.

Shelley’s nightingale plays a different role. Soother of Laon’s suffering in *Laon and Cythna*;<sup>25</sup> able to lull ‘fevered brains’ in *Athanase*;<sup>26</sup> the nightingale is ‘the poet-bird’, as *Rosalind and Helen* has it, the empathetic and sweet singer.<sup>27</sup> The inspired and inspiring singer takes hold of her audience during ‘her heaven-taught tale’ (l.1117). Lionel continues:

‘Now drain the cup’, said Lionel,  
 ‘Which the poet-bird has crowned so well  
 With the wine of her bright and liquid song!  
 Heardst thou not sweet words among  
 That heaven-resounding minstrelsy?  
 Heardst thou not that those who die  
 Awake in a world of ecstasy?  
 That love, when limbs are interwoven,  
 And sleep, when the night of life is cloven,  
 And thought, to the world’s dim boundaries clinging,  
 And music, when one beloved is singing,  
 Is death? Let us drain right joyously  
 The cup which the sweet bird fills for me’.

(ll.1118-1130)

The nightingale's 'bright and liquid song' is translated into 'sweet words' by Lionel's impassioned interpretation. The nightingale is less the poet proper than the inspiration for poets in this rendering. The bird's musical notes are heightened by Lionel's creative imagination into what Wordsworth might call 'philosophic Song' (*The Prelude* [1805], l.230. The feminine rhymes manage to hold off potentially comic effects in favour of displaying Lionel's ardour for a 'world of ecstasy'. The more dissonant rhymes, 'minstrelsy', 'die', 'ecstasy', sound less broken than aspiring for a fullness only available to the notes uttered by the nightingale, the 'poet-bird'. For Lionel, the bird sings of death, even within life, with a rapture that refuses to dwell upon the threat of pain.<sup>28</sup> The cup that Lionel enjoins them all to drink recalls Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: there, the cup symbolized His suffering and death, as mentioned in all four Gospels.<sup>29</sup> Lionel changes the terms of this suffering thanks to the nightingale's song, asking that the cup be drained 'right joyously'. Love, sleep, thought, music: each turn to death as a triumphant mode of being revealed by the nightingale's song and Lionel's interpretation of its melody. The hierarchy between the poet and the listener is relaxed; one needs the other for any interchange. Shelley looks ahead to the nightingale of *A Defence of Poetry* where even the apparently solitary singer finds an audience receptive to their song. The poet-bird as nightingale suggests a fragile confidence in the possibility of true interaction between poet and sympathetic reader.

But the nightingale is also vulnerable, depending as she does upon unseen 'auditors' (*Major Works*, p. 680) to elevate song into meaning and acquire emotional weight. 'The Woodman and the Nightingale' shows the woodman's lack of sympathy as risking the silencing of song. *Epipsychidion* grieves for Emilia, cast as the imprisoned nightingale, to whom the poet would sing:

Poor captive bird! who, from thy narrow cage,  
 Pourest such music, that it might assuage  
 The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee,  
 Were they not deaf to all sweet melody;  
 This song shall be thy rose: its petals pale  
 Are dead, indeed, my adored Nightingale!  
 But soft and fragrant is the faded blossom,  
 And it has no thorn left to wound thy bosom.  
 High, spirit-winged Heart! who dost for ever  
 Beat thine unfeeling bars with vain endeavour,

Till those bright plumes of thought, in which arrayed  
 It over-soared this low and worldly shade,  
 Lie shattered; and thy panting, wounded breast  
 Stains with dear blood its unmaternal nest!

(*Epipsychidion*, ll.5–18)

Sound becomes sense in this quotation where the rhymes embody rather than ornament the meaning of the lines. Simon Jarvis asks, '[i]f technique is the way art thinks, and if self-absorption is, curiously, the way art notices others, then might this 'virtuoso incantation' be, not simply a screen or a cocoon or an anaesthetic, but a medium—a medium for thinking, and for thinking about historical experience, just when in the very act of apparently retreating from it?'<sup>30</sup> Shelley replies with an emphatic 'yes'. Rhyme does not only consider 'historical experience' but takes in all forms of experience. Rhyming 'forever' with 'endeavour', Shelley insists on the doomed but onward motion of the poetry, where song's notes sponsor its meaning. Shelley's nightingale, translated in the poetry into an image of the suffering woman, invoking Philomela's grief-stricken imprisonment, both sings and is sung about. The nightingale is helpless before the 'rugged hearts' that replace the sensitive listeners of *Rosalind and Helen*. Deaf to the nightingale's 'sweet melody', and indeed any melody at all, the speaker offers to this '[h]igh, spirit-winged Heart' another song, a song perhaps equally powerless, matching her 'vain endeavour' with a parallel 'vain endeavour'. Nightingales or poets might sing with all possible beauty but face no better fate than shattered collapse. The nightingale as poet-bird sees Shelley consider the bleak possibilities of reception for even the most beautiful of singers.

Pitting his two key poet-birds, the eagle and the nightingale, one against the another, Shelley weighs up if, and how, each identity might define the limits and possibilities of their power. Having identified with both birds, Shelley's stake in the question is personal. But typically, Shelley decides to allow for both. The comparison in *Adonais* between the eagle and the nightingale throws into sharp relief the difference between their powers.

Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale  
 Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain;  
 Not so the eagle, who like thee could scale  
 Heaven, and could nourish in the sun's domain  
 Her mighty youth with morning, doth complain,  
 Soaring and screaming round her empty nest,  
 As Albion wails for thee:

(ll.145-51)

The question of the nightingale's identity begins to cause problems. Should we understand the nightingale as Keats, the poet of 'Ode to a Nightingale', or as Shelley, the mourner grieving the loss of Adonais? Coleridge's 'The Nightingale' offers a persuasive way of reading the bird in this context where he hymns 'So many Nightingales' (l.56) that 'answer and provoke each other's songs' (l.58).<sup>31</sup> Shelley uses a similar image in *Prometheus Unbound*, where Shelley makes his lyrical drama's nightingales 'unenvying' (II.ii.97), surrounded by fellow nightingales that would sustain and further the song each sang 'Till some new strain of feeling bear / The song' (II.ii.34-5). 'In 1819 Shelley saw this work of a nation's self-representation as a collective enterprise', writes James Chandler, 'one that involved a company of poets singing, like the nightingales in *Prometheus Unbound*, both in and of an ever-expanding horizon of inclusion'.<sup>32</sup> Here, the nightingale can stand in for both Keats and for Shelley, two poets numbered alongside '[s]o many Nightingales' as Shelley's nightingale responds to Keats's. The nightingale of *Adonais* is a harmony of Shelley and Keats's songs and their identities, speaking to their shared identity under the banner of being poets.

'Paradoxically it is often by the courtesy of another' writes Christopher Ricks, 'that a poet becomes himself',<sup>33</sup> and here Shelley shows how using another's image, in this case the nightingale, allows him to create a distinctly individual poetry. Shelley laces the stanza with allusions.<sup>34</sup> The eagle, as William Michael Rossetti showed, recalls Milton's *Areopagitica*, where the bird represents the nation's grief, where its complaint mirrors how 'Albion wails for thee'.<sup>35</sup> Everest rightly notes that Shelley stretches the truth to breaking point given Keats's relative lack of renown. However, if Shelley has updated the nightingale to stand for Keats and himself, the eagle is also open to new symbolic possibilities. The eagle's strength exceeds the 'lorn' nightingale's power. Though both 'could scale / Heaven', only the eagle has the ability to outstrip any predators. Shelley, who had repeatedly painted Byron as an eagle in his earlier poetry, suggests a different resemblance between the bird and the poet. Writing to Byron about Keats's death, Shelley sought to persuade Byron of Keats's significance and to blame hostile critics for their treatment of him. Comparing Keats to Byron, Shelley writes: 'You felt the strength to soar beyond the arrows; the eagle was soon lost in the light in which it was nourished, and the eyes of the aimers were blinded' (*Letters*, ii.289). No longer is Byron imagined as a blinded eagle, as

Shelley had it in *Julian and Maddalo*, but here he is ‘nourished’ by the light. For Shelley, the ‘arrows’ that Byron had escaped finally destroyed Keats. James Bieri writes, ‘Shelley’s conflicted and competitive feelings about Byron influenced *Adonais*, which rebutted Byron’s derogatory views about Keats’s poetry’.<sup>36</sup> Shelley’s stanza tries to redress the balance between the poet-birds. Though praising Byron as eagle, we recall Shelley’s earlier misgivings and we are forced to rethink the implicit hierarchy in the lines: including a Keats/Shelley hybrid as the ‘lorn nightingale’ and a Byronic eagle within the same stanza, Shelley wrests possible conflict into poetic harmony. Just as in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, no victor is declared. Poet-birds, though they might be of different species, ‘scale / Heaven’ alike.

Though it might ‘scale / Heaven’, Shelley does not forget the nightingale’s fragility. The nightingale as a poet-bird represents the problem of beauty and weakness concentrated within a single figure. Shelley’s decision to invoke the nightingale in *A Defence of Poetry* carefully draws upon the nightingale’s classical heritage.<sup>37</sup> Song is a record of pain and a means of its alleviation. Freighted with interpretative possibilities, Shelley makes his nightingale a singer that is both suffering and knowing. Despite the web of influences at work, Shelley is not content to mouth his predecessors’ words. Newell F. Ford notes that ‘Shelley transfigures whatever hints he takes from the Greeks: the poet-nightingale that ‘sits in darkness’ is a real bird of the English countryside at the same time as it symbolizes the fate of a Keats or a Shelley composing in solitude with little or no audience’.<sup>38</sup> This insight suggests the subtlety of Shelley’s treatment of the nightingale, where each specific classical allusion, the physical fact of the bird’s existence, the nightingale as invoked by Shelley’s peers and within his own prose and poetry, and its status as a figure of Shelley’s imagination, combine within the single image. *A Defence of Poetry* claims: ‘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’ (*Major Works*, p.680). This sentence, split into two by a semicolon, first emphasizes the poet as a solitary and non-human creature before we learn of the presence of an audience of ‘entranced’ listeners, throwing into question the precise nature of the nightingale’s solitude. On the level of allusion, Shelley’s nightingale is hardly solitary, based as it is upon a slew of literary and philosophical referents. Yet Shelley makes his nightingale

anew, letting us see the bird as both isolated and as part of a collective, alone but overheard, unique though traditional.

Stanley Plumly writes that birdsong is ‘both a personification of and an alien to the voice of our grief emotions, a song both representative and removed’.<sup>39</sup> Shelley takes hold of this doubleness and experiments with its implications. Avoiding the simile, Shelley proclaims that the poet ‘is’ a nightingale, not ‘like’ a nightingale. Playing with language, Shelley reminds us, *sotto voce*, that the ancient Greeks referred to the nightingale and the poet by the same name, *aēdon* or singer.<sup>40</sup> Shelley whispers a nonhuman otherness about the poet where the nightingale, like Keats’s in his ode, exists apart from humans. Where Keats, in his ode, never quite fools himself or feigns that he has achieved a complete union with the bird, Shelley immediately, and without warning, plunges into an assertion of the nightingale and the poet as the same and set apart from any human peers.<sup>41</sup> If in other high Romantic poetry, we see ‘a reversal of hierarchy, placing the animal above the human’,<sup>42</sup> in *A Defence*, we see Shelley place the animal inside the human or *vice versa*. Power and fragility emanate from this hybrid being. The ‘unseen auditors’, though ‘entranced’, may feel because of the poet-nightingale’s song, but they do not understand where such feeling comes from or how it is inspired. The nightingale-poet and its listeners do not share a common ground: they are a taxonomic world apart.

*Charles the First* becomes a summative test of Shelley’s poet-birds as the play offers a plethora of images.<sup>43</sup> Shelley’s metaphors test and retest his earlier images of nightingales and owls before the parrot offers a new and darker foil for the poet. The play insinuates a similar ambivalence about the nightingale, with Archy saying: ‘only the nightingale, poor fond soul, sings like the fool through darkness and light.—’ (I.ii.484-85) Ornithologically correct (despite H. W. Garrod’s concerns about Shelley’s accuracy about nightingales),<sup>44</sup> Shelley’s nightingale-poet in the play seems more stubborn than prophetic, disorganized not dignified. There lurks a rueful grimace at this ‘poor fond soul’ who sings, as Tennyson would later write, ‘because I must’ rather than for plaudits.<sup>45</sup> Though Jeffrey sees the line as Archy referring to Charles, it seems, as Nora Crook shows, to be Archy referring to how ‘the nightingale sings like the fool’ (*CPPBS*, vii.724).<sup>46</sup> The lines, spoken by a Fool who seems more like a poet, betray Archy’s discomfort as he is forced to hide from the politicking swirling dangerously around him, singing, if ‘Fool’-ishly, through all conditions. In the second act, Archy parallels himself with the owl, whispering to himself ‘Poor

Archy, whose owl eyes are tempered / to the error of his growth, and because he is a fool and by special / ordinance of God forbidden ever to see himself as he is, sees now into / that deep eye—' (II.45–48). Cut off by a threat from Strafford, who will later be executed, Archy's identification with the owl is momentary but significant. A *Defence of Poetry* sees poetry as reflective of society, where 'Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar errors' (*Major Works*, p. 681), and Archy duly links his diminished eyesight to that 'error of his growth' in his particular milieu. Though Archy cannot properly evaluate himself, he sees into 'that deep eye', a Shelleyan version of Wordsworth seeing 'into the life of things' ('Tintern Abbey', l.50). Archy's black humour does not fully disguise his positive self-appraisal when he says we must, 'join in a procession to Bedlam to entreat the madmen to omit their sublime Platonic contemplations, and manage the state of England:—' (II.64–6). Philosopher-kings are back: poets are the first to proclaim their power and even share in it. But what kind of poet-bird will Archy become?

Shelley's language of birds is recalibrated as he reassesses the role of the poet through the eyes of King Charles. Archy, a Fool steeped in the tradition of Shakespeare's archly knowing Fools, has a Shelleyan twist with his Platonically inflected speeches. The poet and the philosopher, as so often in Shelley's poetry and prose, cannot be separated with any degree of certainty. Charles observes his Fool with these words:

Poor Archy,  
He weaves about himself a world of mirth  
Out of the wreck of ours—and like a parrot  
Hung in his gilded prison from the window  
Of a queen's bower over the public way  
Blasphemes with a bird's mind.—His words like arrows  
Which know an aim beyond the archer's wit  
Strike sometimes what eludes philosophy.

(I.ii.107–  
14)

Archy is another of Shelley's doubles, a double that functions partly as a meditation upon the role of the poet. 'He weaves about himself a world of mirth' plays upon Shelley's fascination with weaving. Tilottama Rajan has shown the significance of '[i]mages of weaving' in Shelley's poetry:<sup>47</sup> and the self-delighting element to Archy's fantasy recalls the Witch of *The Witch of Atlas* weaving '[a] shadow for the splendour of her love' (l.152). Despite such self-delighting, there is also the sense that

he might also be frivolously escapist. Archy uses reality as the raw material for his own separate fantasy, discovering a utopia located far away from the real world: Lucian would mock Plato for a similar impulse.<sup>48</sup> Charles's description offers no bromides but an equivocal sense of the poet's place in society. If the poet can utter words 'like arrows' and hit targets that philosophy cannot, he can only do so 'sometimes'. For Charles, Archy's double is not a swan, or an eagle, or even a skylark, but a parrot, and his place is only a 'gilded prison' rather than the 'world of mirth' to which he aspires. This poet-bird seems rather reduced, surrounded as he is by the malice of Charles' court.

Nora Crook notes the link to John Skelton's 'Speke Parrot' (*CPPBS* 7, 689), and in this work, the courtier-poet seems reduced to 'decorative curiosity' or 'entertainer'.<sup>49</sup> There lurks a disgust at the role the poet is forced to play when confronted by power. Shelley was very aware of how other poets, notably Tasso, suffered at the hands of tyrants. Shelley wrote to Peacock of his emotions when visiting the public library in Ferrara Cathedral: 'There is something irresistibly pathetic to me in the sight of Tasso's own hand writing moulding expressions of adulation & entreaty to a deaf & stupid tyrant in an age when the most heroic virtue would have exposed its possessor to hopeless persecution, and—such is the alliance between virtue & genius—which unoffending genius could not escape.—' (*Letters*ii.47). Shelley draws a clear line between the 'a deaf & stupid tyrant' versus 'unoffending genius'. It is significant that the lines are not Archy's self-description, but Charles relating his perception of his Fool: we wonder how far Charles's view can be trusted. The parrot, in this light, functions as a reminder of how power looks upon its associates, despite Archy's own oblique sense of himself as a 'nightingale'. As Prometheus resisted the Furies' words that resemble 'a cloud of wingèd snakes' (*Prometheus Unbound*, I.632), so must the play's audience resist Charles's appraisal as a final word on the poet.

The poet-bird is a key means for Shelley to contemplate the role of the poet, adjusting and reprising his ideas throughout his career. The development of images of the poet-bird sees Shelley bring earlier poems into conversations with later poems, his own work into dialogue with that of Byron and Keats along with his classical predecessors. Shelley's mobile poetry imagines and reimagines the poet: his poet-birds are evolving efforts to imagine how poets can see themselves and how others see them. For Shelley resists all sense of finality with his poet-birds: it is to the poet,



not the bird, that we must say: ‘What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?’  
(‘To A Skylark, ll.31-32).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> ‘To a Skylark’, 31–32, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford, 2003), p.464. Shelley’s poetry and prose, unless otherwise specified, will be quoted from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’ (1802), *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2011) 595–615, p. 603. Wordsworth’s poetry and prose will be quoted from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1964), i.242. Future reference will be made to *Letters* and incorporated into the text.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley does not quite agree with Montaigne that the human being should not ‘pick himself out and set himself apart from the mass of other creatures’, but nor does he embrace Descartes’ rejection of the view that there is ‘some kind of thinking soul in animals’. See Michel de Montaigne, ‘An Apology for Raymond Sebond’, *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (2003) 489–683, p.505; René Descartes, Letter to Henry More, 5 February 1649, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. with introd. Desmond M. Clarke (2003), pp. 173; 174.

<sup>5</sup> G. Wilson Knight notes the connection between these quotations and also Byron’s use of tempests in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. See G. Wilson Knight, *Byron and Shakespeare* (1966; repr., Abingdon, 2002), p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Ferber, ‘The Eagles of Romanticism’, *Literature Compass* 3/4 (2006) 846–66, p. 846.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York, 1986), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> A. M. Weinberg, *Shelley’s Italian Experience* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Ferber, p. 851.

<sup>10</sup> Journal entry for 23 November 1813: *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (1973-94), iii.217.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (1976), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Lord George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1980-93), iii.313. Future reference will be made to *BCPW* and incorporated into the text.

<sup>13</sup> ‘The sea-eagle only compels its still unfledged chicks by beating them to gaze full at the rays of the sun, and if it notices one blinking and with its eyes watering flings it out of the nest as a bastard and not true to stock, whereas one whose gaze stands firm against the light it rears’. Pliny, Book X, *Natural History, Volume III: Books 8-11*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1940), p.299. For Aristotle’s report, see Aristotle, *History of Animals, Volume III: Books 7-10*, ed. and trans. by D. M. Balme, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 05 (620a).

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford, 1976), 42–3; Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley, Volume 3, 1819-1820*, ed. Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington (2011), p. 388; Tom Phillips, ‘Unappended Relations’, *Classical Receptions Journal* 12.1 (2020) 109–27, p. 120.

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- <sup>15</sup> Phillips, p.120.
- <sup>16</sup> Phillips, p.121.
- <sup>17</sup> Christopher Hitt, ‘‘A Sword of Lightning’’: Shelley’s ‘Ode to Liberty’ and the Politics of Despair’, *The Keats-Shelley Review* 15.1 (2001) 64–85, p. 73.
- <sup>18</sup> Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD, 1976), pp.180-81.
- <sup>19</sup> John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1988), p. 348.
- <sup>20</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, *The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. Tom Paulin and David Chandler (2000) 246–64, p. 248.
- <sup>21</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works; Poems (Reading Text)* ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 2001), ii.804. Coleridge’s poetry will be quoted from this edition.
- <sup>22</sup> William Keach, ‘Reflexive Imagery in Shelley’, *Keats-Shelley Journal* 24 (1975) 49–69, p. 58.
- <sup>23</sup> Sally West, *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual Engagement* (Aldershot 2007), p.4.
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Peacock’s Memoirs of Shelley*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (1909), p.37.
- <sup>25</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, X.10–11: *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Volume Three*, ed. Donald Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook (Baltimore MD, 2004), p.277.
- <sup>26</sup> Athanase, l.169: *The Poems of Shelley: Volume Two, 1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (2000), p.321.
- <sup>27</sup> *Rosalind and Helen*, l.1119, quoted from *The Poems of Shelley: Volume Two, 1817-1819*, p. 300.
- <sup>28</sup> Jean L. De Palacio notes a connection to Hazlitt’s discussion of nightingales’ song. See ‘Music and Musical Themes in Shelley’s Poetry’, *The Modern Language Review* 59.3 (1964) 345–59, p. 354.
- <sup>29</sup> See Matthew (26:39, 42), Mark (14:36); Luke (22:42), and John (18:11).
- <sup>30</sup> Simon Jarvis, ‘Why Rhyme Pleases’, *Thinking Verse* I (2011) 17–43, p. 25. Jarvis quotes from J. H. Prynne, ‘The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry’, *The Listener* (February 14, 1963) 290–91, p.290.
- <sup>31</sup> Kelvin Everest notes the importance of Coleridge’s poem to this stanza. See Kelvin Everest, ‘Shelley’s *Adonais* and John Keats’, *Essays in Criticism* 57.3 (2007), 237–64, p. 246.
- <sup>32</sup> James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago, IL, 1998), p.192.
- <sup>33</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford, 2002), p.160.
- <sup>34</sup> Shelley draws upon Keats, Milton, Virgil, Moschus, and Coleridge, amongst others.
- <sup>35</sup> Everest, p.248.
- <sup>36</sup> James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography: Exile of Unfulfilled Reknown, 1816-1822* (Newark, DE, 2005), p.239.
- <sup>37</sup> The nightingale, making its songs out of its suffering, recalls Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Procne and Philomena’s resistance to Tereus’ tyranny, and Homer’s *Odyssey* where Penelope parallels herself with ‘Pandaerus’s daughter, the tawny nightingale’ who ‘pours out her full-throated song in sorrow for Itylus her beloved son’. Homer, *The Odyssey*, XIX.521–22, trans. by E. V. Rieu, rev. by D. C. H. Rieu, introd. by Peter Jones (2003), pp.262–63.
- <sup>38</sup> Newell F. Ford, ‘The Symbolism of Shelley’s Nightingales’, *Modern Language Review* 55.4 (1960) 569–74, p.571.

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<sup>39</sup> Stanley Plumly, 'Words on Birdsong', *The American Poetry Review* 21.3 (1992) 11–16, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ford, p.571.

<sup>41</sup> Milton is in Shelley's thoughts as John Kerrigan notes in 'Milton and the Nightingale', *Essays in Criticism* 42.2 (1992) 107–22, pp. 109–10.

<sup>42</sup> David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge, 2003), p.107.

<sup>43</sup> *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Volume VII*, ed. Nora Crook (Baltimore, MD, 2021), p. 681. Future references will be made to *CPPBS* and incorporated into the text.

<sup>44</sup> See H. W. Garrod, 'The Nightingale in Poetry', *The Profession of Poetry and Other Lectures* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 131–59.

<sup>45</sup> 'In Memoriam', XXI.23: *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Harlow, 1987), ii.340.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey, p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> Tilottama Rajan, 'The Web of Human Things: Narrative and Identity in *Alastor*', *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views*, ed. G. Kim Blank (Basingstoke, 1991) 85–107, p.96.

<sup>48</sup> Lucian, *A True Story, Phalaris. Hippias or The Bath. Dionysus. Heracles. Amber or The Swans. The Fly. Nigrinus. Demonax. The Hall. My Native Land. Octogenarians. A True Story. Slander. The Consonants at Law. The Carousal (Symposium) or The Lapiths*, trans. A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1913), p.321.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Brittan, *Poetry, Symbol, and Allegory: Interpreting Metaphorical Language from Plato to the Present* (Charlottesville, VA, 2003), p.91.