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# Shelley's 'To a Skylark' and Thomas Hardy: Irony and Form

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## ABSTRACT

The interpretation of poetry is certainly an intellectually demanding, and ultimately fulfilling task, and one of the means by which the scholar can approach the work of a great poet is when he/she encounters the work of a great precursor to which the latter poem is indebted, but one must bear in mind that the latter work, must be one in which there is an authentic voice. In this paper the endeavour is to investigate one such instance: the relationship between Shelley's 'To a Skylark' (1820) and Thomas Hardy's 'Shelley's Skylark' (1901). The conjecture here is that Hardy's poem is not one in which the mere influence of an earlier poem is predominant, but evinces an intentional irony. Furthermore, irony is manifested in Hardy's poem not only in statement but also in form. After an introduction on the reception of Shelley's poetry both in criticism and among poets, a close reading of both poems, and how they interact, follows.

**Keywords:** criticism, irony, form, trope, meter, pastoral, epoch

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although Shelley's place in the canon of English poets is assured, to this day he has never had as wide a readership as William Wordsworth; the human and humane concerns in Shelley's work are undeniable, yet it is one of intense rapture, engaged with some of the fundamental metaphysical assumptions in the Western tradition (while also open to what Shelley had known of Eastern thought), and in the reception of his work there have been many who claimed that Shelley had somehow failed as the two following citations will show.

Mathew Arnold, writing on Byron in his 'Essays in Criticism: Second Series' (1888), said the following of Shelley: "he is a beautiful and enchanting spirit, whose vision, when we call it up, has far more loveliness, more charm for our soul, than the vision of Byron. But all the personal charm of Shelley cannot hinder us from at last discovering in his poetry the incurable want, in general, of a sound subject-matter, and the incurable fault, in consequence, of unsubstantiality" (Arnold 165), and in the same essay Arnold makes this judgement of both Shelley's poetry and character: "Shelley, beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" (Arnold 204).

In Arnold's estimation, Shelley was incapable of fulfilling the role of poet as sage and guide, ostensible in the second statement quoted above: "ineffectual...beating in the void...in vain". For Arnold, this was poetry in which there was a discrepancy between style and substance: Shelley was a master of verse-forms (something that even Wordsworth, after he had long ceased writing much poetry of worth, acknowledged), yet Arnold's conclusion is that Shelley's work lacks a "sound subject-matter".

Criticism of Shelley's poetry in the first half of the twentieth century was similarly divisive, although by this stage Shelley's place in the canon was definite. F.R. Leavis, who sought the utmost intellectual and moral seriousness in literary criticism, made the following claim in his essay 'Thought and Emotional Quality': "There is...an obvious sense in which Shelley's poetry offers feeling divorced from thought—offers it as something opposed to thought" (Leavis 218). Leavis (like Arnold), prizes Shelley's mastery of form, yet he concluded that he did not possess a firm conceptual ground: "Along with this characteristic goes Shelley's notable inability to grasp anything—to present any situation, any observed or

imagined actuality, or any experience, as an object existing independently in own nature and in its own right” (Leavis 218-219).

Yet Shelley has always had his defenders, particularly among poets, Robert Browning being the most notable poet of the Victorian age who openly admitted Shelley’s influence. This paper will attempt an analysis of the interaction between one of Shelley’s greatest poems, ‘To a Skylark’, with Thomas Hardy’s lesser known ‘Shelley’s Skylark’ first published in his second volume ‘Poems Past and Present’ in 1901. Hardy’s admiration of Shelley’s poetry began in youth, when he first encountered Palgrave’s anthology of English poetry ‘The Golden Treasury’ (Tomalin 73) and this persisted until the end of his life, referring to him as “our most marvellous lyricist” (Pinion 20). The extent of Shelley’s importance to Hardy as both poet and novelist must remain outside the space of this paper as this would require much strenuous study, and in Hardy’s case, as our analysis will show, it is not the influence of Shelley’s work upon his own that is at hand.

The primary conjecture in this paper is that Hardy’s poem is an instance of the intentional use of irony. A common misconception regarding irony is that it is the expression of a somewhat detached, yet darkly humorous, disparagement of a statement or some other form of expression, and it is a term the meaning of which has greatly expanded since its first appearance in Plato’s ‘Republic’ in the 4th century BC, and by the 19th century irony came to stand for a vision of existence, cosmic in scope. J.A. Cuddon has summarised irony (*ironia*) in Roman rhetoric as “a rhetorical figure and a manner of discourse in which, for the most part, the meaning was contrary to the words. This double-edged nature appears to be a continuing feature of irony” (Cuddon 371). This brief summary of one of the classical definitions of the term is indeed useful in this reading of Hardy’s poem, as it will be shown that it not only applies to individual statement, but also to the form of a particular poem (in this case Hardy’s).

In the instance of poetry, this is paramount, as A.C. Bradley argued in his lecture ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’ (in his ‘Oxford Lectures on Poetry’ from 1909): “If substance and form mean anything in the poem, then each is involved in the other, and the question in which of them the value lies has no sense” (Bradley 14). ‘Substance’, in Bradley’s use, signifies import and meaning, while form signifies the dimensions of a poem that are not entirely verbal, furthermore claiming that form (which also includes the interplay between stanza and meter) together with what is explicitly verbal,

contribute to a poem's meaning. Although Bradley does not speak of the relationship between the works of one poet when engaged with that of another, the presumption here is that the interaction between 'substance' and 'form' (in Bradley's understanding of these terms) when researching such an engagement is essentially useful. Furthermore, as Bradley stated: "If substance and form mean anything in the poem, then each is involved in the other, and the question in which of them the value lies has no sense" (Bradley 16).

## 2. THE SKYLARK IN FLIGHT: SHELLEY

'To a Skylark' is one of Shelley's best known and anthologised pieces, and its formal qualities are ample evidence of Shelley's mastery of style. It consists of twenty-one stanzas in a form of Shelley's own invention: each stanza consisting of five lines, its rhyme scheme ababb, with a line length in the first four lines consisting of seven and four syllables respectively, each stanza ending with an alexandrine, with much metrical variation in each line. Stephen Spender (a poet who claimed to have something of an affinity for Shelley, unlike his friend and contemporary W.H. Auden), attempted to categorise the range of Shelley's poetry, placing this poem in what he regarded as Shelley's pure lyrics, concluding that what is particularly evident in this group is that he "masters words rather than tames them, and shows little sense of their limitations. He invents juxtapositions of images which are almost unthinkable..." (Spender 38), adding further that there is generally "such a rapid succession of different impressions, that the reader feels that metre and words are being used as rails among which he is hurled at headlong speed without being given time to study the detail" (Spender 38).

According to Spender, it was these very qualities that sometimes led to a lack of discipline in Shelley's work, and he ends his essay with a comment on Shelley's style: that it is "from one point of little use to a contemporary poet. That is to say, not only the subject matter, but also the language is removed from common experience and common speech, in all but a few poems" (Spender 46). It is most likely that Spender had preconceived expectations of the general aim of poetry, and that it was one that could not accommodate a voice such as Shelley's, yet Spender's description of Shelley's poetry as one in which the "juxtaposition of images...are almost unthinkable" and in

which there is a “rapid succession of images” is certainly apt as the second, third and fourth stanzas of “To a Skylark” will show:

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.  
 In the golden lightning  
 Of the sunken Sun  
 O'er which clouds are brightning,  
 Thou dost float and run; Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.  
 The pale purple even  
 Melts around thy flight,  
 Like a star of Heaven  
 In the broad day-light Thou art unseen,—but yet I hear thy shrill delight  
 (Shelley 463-464, ln. 6-20)

There is no outright description of the skylark itself, nor are the natural phenomena surrounding it described in minute detail, yet the reasons for this are neither the result of Shelley's failure nor vagueness, and according to Catherine Runcie an absence of direct description informs this poem from its outset: “The title ‘To A Skylark’ together with the first line produces a fully developed noun metaphor, comparing the skylark by apposition to a ‘blithe Spirit’. By line 1, the ‘realistic’ referential function of the concrete noun ‘skylark’ has already disappeared. The lark is not a concrete token of larkness” (Runcie 205-206) and this almost entirely sets the tone for what is to follow.

Yet to return to the lines quoted above. In lines two, three and four of the second stanza we find “...from the earth though springest;/like a cloud of fire/the deep blue thou wingest”: the place from which the skylark has taken flight is irrelevant, as it is from the ‘earth’ both as a whole and an element. The skylark's flight is described as one almost without cessation, displaying a tireless vitality, this is reinforced by the final line of the stanza which follows it: “Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun”. The skylark possesses a lightness unencumbered by the burden of mortality: ‘float’ is used instead of ‘fly’, while ‘run’, and ‘race’ immediately follow, both words connoting greater physical exertion, yet its ‘race is just begun’ attributing an image of incipient potency to the skylark.

The burden of experience is not entirely banished in this poem, as William A. Ulmer observed: “Shelley shows the dream of limitless bliss to be a belated projection of human desire, a projection born of and indelibly shaped by the experience of mundane limitation, without which such dreams could not exist” (Ulmer 36). ‘Belated’ can mean two things, both meanings not entirely exclusive: one sense is that of being ‘overtaken’, the other that something has ‘come late’, and both are applicable: “a belated projection of human desire” after such desires have been thwarted by the preponderance of mortal concerns, and also that such a ‘projection’ has come after an incipient potency has weakened over the course of time (Shelley’s skylark possesses such a potency without cessation). This is apparent in stanzas sixteen and eighteen:

With thy clear keen joyance  
 Languor cannot be—  
 Shadow of annoyance  
 Never came near thee;  
 Thou lovest—but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.  
 (Shelley 465, ln. 76-80)  
 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 ever should come near.  
 (Shelley 466, ln. 91-95)

‘Languor’, the ‘shadow of annoyance’ and ‘love’s sad satiety’ are common to human experience and, furthermore, even if ‘we could scorn Hate and pride and fear’ we still remain at a loss regarding how we could ever attain the existential state attributed to the skylark. Donald H. Reiman traced the movement of ideas in this poem, claiming the lines cited above as part of the poem’s final section “in which the Poet ceases his questioning and accepts the value of the imaginative inspiration represented by the bird” (Reiman 116). Stanzas eight to eleven form a series of tableaux. Caroline Runcie sees this as the poem’s “second movement”, the first of which begins “with the poet divinely inspired to sing hymns that create sympathy in the world”, continuing with a movement in which “we begin with art, with poetry-in-this-world-and we proceed through the other comparisons that are the sweetnesses of phenomenal life, tenderly stirring memory and desire, both perhaps forms of longing” (Runcie 207). The word ‘like’

is at the inception of every stanza in this section, all similes inspired by the skylark's song and flight. In order, the vast range of tableaux include "a poet hidden...", "a high-born maiden/In a palace tower" either awaiting or momentarily without her lover (which of either is unsaid), "a glow-worm golden/in a dell of dew" and "a rose embowered/In its own green leaves", all representative of different facets of the world: creative endeavour, sorrow and anticipation, the world of animals and of plants. The poet has indeed accepted this imaginative inspiration in the final stanzas, acknowledging not only human finitude, but that of all that exists.

A citation of the thirteenth stanza of this poem will suffice to better comprehend the poem's form:

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,  
What sweet thoughts are thine;  
I have never heard  
Praise of love or wine  
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine  
(Shelley 465, ln. 61-65)

The first and third lines contain spondees primarily, the second line beginning with an anapaest. The first line begins with the imperative 'teach', initiating the use of spondees in this line, emphasising its exhortative tone that the skylark share its vision of the fulfilment of desire, while the anapaest in the second line, with its gentler flow, is mimetic of the movement of the skylark in flight and the freedom it represents to the poet. The spondees in the third and fourth lines emphasise the essential difference ("I have never heard.., ") between the subject of the skylark's song and what the poet claims has heretofore been the common subject of 'praise': 'love' and 'wine'. The final line consists of four iambs and an anapaest, with accents falling on words linked to those prior in this stanza: 'panted' is linked to 'love', 'rapture' to both 'love' and 'wine', 'divine' to 'sprite'.

### 3. AN ELEGIAC TONE: THOMAS HARDY

The stark difference between the form of Hardy's 'Shelley's Skylark (The Neighbourhood of Leghorn: March, 1887)' and its elaboration of subject and theme when compared to the original poem which inspired it, is immediately apparent, and due to its relative brevity, it will be cited here in full:

Somewhere afield here something lies  
 In Earth's oblivious eyeless trust  
 That moved a poet to prophecies -  
 A pinch of unseen, unguarded dust  
 The dust of the lark that Shelley heard,  
 And made immortal through times to be; -  
 Though it only lived like another bird,  
 And knew not its immortality.  
 Lived its meek life; then, one day, fell -  
 A little ball of feather and bone;  
 And how it perished, when piped farewell,  
 And where it wastes, are alike unknown.  
 Maybe it rests in the loam I view,  
 Maybe it throbs in a myrtle's green,  
 Maybe it sleeps in the coming hue  
 Of a grape on the slopes of yon inland scene.  
 Go find it, faeries, go and find  
 That tiny pinch of priceless dust,  
 And bring a casket silver-lined,  
 And framed of gold that gems encrust;  
 And we will lay it safe therein,  
 And consecrate it to endless time;  
 For it inspired a bard to win  
 Ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme.  
 (Hardy 101)

The title and subtitle are indications of a strong qualitative difference when compared to Shelley's poem: in the first two lines of stanza three of 'To a Skylark' "the pale purple evening/melts around thy flight" only the time of day is signified, whereas in Hardy's poem the reader is provided with both the month (March) the year, and the place (Leghorn, Livorno in Italy in fact, also adding a layer of irony as this is also the name of a breed of chicken,



and besides this, any reader of Shelley that it was in Italy that Shelley met his untimely death) where the poet had experienced what was to inspire him. The title itself individualises the skylark in its use of the possessive noun: it is 'Shelley's Skylark'. Particularisation of instance in Hardy's poem is one of the markers that differentiates Hardy's voice here from Shelley's as noted earlier in the section on Shelley's description of the skylark.

The relation between the first two stanzas of each respective poem is particularly revealing: in Shelley's poem "Hail to the, blithe Spirit!/Bird thou never wert,/That from Heaven or near it..." , while in Hardy's "Somewhere afield here something lies/In the Earth's oblivious eyeless trust..." . Shelley addresses the skylark in a way which tells the reader that the skylark is something other than it appears, the line itself an announcement of greater portent, while in Hardy's poem the skylark is 'something', the significance of which cannot be immediately grasped, yet what it signifies is revealed in the following line: "a pinch of unseen, unguarded dust".

The reason for this is that the elements central to the first stanza of both respective poems are entirely opposite, and in both stanzas they are written in higher case: 'Heaven' in Shelley's poem and 'Earth' in Hardy's, and both are used with a wider significance: in Hardy's poem 'afield' contributes to what is meant by 'Earth', implying definite location and movement in a rural or wild setting, exposure and agriculture, while connotations of idyll and pastoral are reduced and subverted in the line "In the Earth's oblivious eyeless trust". In Shelley's poem 'earth' (in lower case) includes the entirety of human endeavour and desire (both good and ill), whereas in Hardy's poem, 'Earth' is associated with the processes of growth, decay and death (especially in fourth stanza: "Maybe it rests in the loam I view...Maybe it sleeps in the coming hue/Of a grape..."). 'Eyeless' evokes Shelley's poem: in the fourth stanza of "To a Skylark", Shelley likens the bird to 'that silver sphere' of the dawn (the planet Venus), the final line of this stanza being "Until we hardly see-we feel that thou are there" (Shelley, 2001, p. 464). As noted earlier, descriptions of the skylark are absent in Shelley's poem, and it is the skylark's song and flight leading the poet onward. In the first stanza of Hardy's poem the word 'eyeless' also incites the work of the other senses, but both denotes and connotes oblivion.

Trevor Johnson has noted that the number of Hardy's poems with animals as their theme (birds especially) is large enough that one can find common features in them, one being their lyricism, but also that their

“other common feature is Hardy's empathy; his sense of what may here be called with perfect aptness, a bird's-eye view of the world. The transience and frailty of these tiny creatures, their dependence on the vagaries of the weather and - occasionally - human kindness, is repeatedly stressed” (Johnson 119). Neither Shelley's nor Hardy's poem represents what the skylark may have, or may have had, in its view, yet unlike Shelley, Hardy marks the skylark's frailty, as well as its size and kinship with others of its species: “though it only lived like any other bird”, and its ‘immortality’ is exclusively its ‘immortality’ in Shelley's poem.

Johnson also claims that a characteristic of Hardy's poems about animals, and birds in particular, is that “their enviable freedom from the burden of consciousness is also touched in” (Johnson 120). In Hardy's poem the skylark is free from subjective time (involving states such as expectation, nostalgia, reminiscence, regret and resentment), yet its frailty, and its subjection to biological processes (to which all other forms of organic life must also succumb) are not forgotten. The last word in the final line of the fourth stanza “unknown” corresponds to the first two lines of stanza seven of ‘To a Skylark’ (“What thou art we know not/What is most like thee?” (Shelley 464) and stanza fifteen:

What objects are the fountains  
Of thy happy strain?  
What fields, or waves, or mountains?  
What shapes of sky or plain?  
What love of thy own kind, what ignorance of pain?  
(Shelley 467, ln. 71-75)

As we have seen, Hardy's ‘Earth’ (in contrast to Shelley's ‘Heaven’) is central, and the skylark's frailty and mortality are inextricably bound to Hardy's understanding of ‘Earth’. Hardy has also provided a partial answer to the question posed by Shelley in stanza seven: in Shelley's poem the skylark possesses a greater reality than the poet cannot entirely express, while in Hardy's it is “A little ball of feather and bone”, and the subsequent stanza finds Hardy attempting to answer this question somewhat tentatively as the use of anaphora in this stanza demonstrates (“Maybe...”), and while Shelley's questions aim toward the sublime, Hardy's uses of anaphora emphasise his poem's underlying naturalism (“Maybe it rests in the loam I view” being the most explicit example). Caroline Runcie claims that Hardy in this stanza “reduces Shelley's noumenal bird of the title to a concrete

noun, a 'real', bio-degradable bird in a random universe" (Runcie 211) while Iris Tillman-Hill sees this as Hardy's admittance of his own limitations "as though Hardy himself were remarking upon the limitations of his own perception, qualifying therefore the depth of his ability to explore reality. The loam, myrtle, grape and the pinch of dust give expression to a constricted intelligence, which, while sympathetic to a bard's ecstasy and vision, is forever out off from contact with that reality" (Tillman-Hill 81-82).

Tillman-Hills' claim aids in illuminating the litotes in the third and fourth lines of the first ("That moved a poet to prophecies-/A pinch of unseen and unguarded dust") and the entire second stanza show that Hardy's meditation on Shelley's skylark has not led him to 'prophecy' (as it had Shelley), but to thoughts of what is the lot of all species of organic life and is a trope most indicative of Hardy's use of irony, and, what is most surprising, like Shelley, has come to the realisation of the limitations of his intelligence, yet this realisation remains 'afield'.

Francesco Marroni places Hardy's work and worldview at the turning point between epochs and although conceding that there was much that could still be termed 'Victorian' in Hardy's aesthetic procedures and overall outlook, has noticed an aspect that does not exclude Hardy's poetry from, what were then, the nascent beginnings of modernism in poetry, claiming that in his verse there is "an expression of a modernity which, as well as dramatising a pervading sense of precariousness, entails a profound awareness of the human predicament. Faced with the paradox of human phenomenology, Hardy prefers to confess his helplessness" (Marroni, 2013, p. 150). A similar 'helplessness' when faced with humanity's predicament also pervades Shelley's poem, yet in 'Shelley's Skylark', as mentioned earlier, the frailty of the bird is central, standing in stark contrast to Shelley's celebration of it.

The stanza Hardy uses is traditional, while, as mentioned earlier, Shelley's is intricate and of his own invention: an octosyllabic quatrain. On its own, this does not exclude the possibilities of an elaborate syntax (as in T.S. Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality' for example), but the number of lines in each stanza precludes the number of end rhymes, and Hardy's vocabulary purposely makes less use trisyllables of Latin origin. Due to its imagery, the poem's penultimate stanza may appear inconsistent with what preceded it, although its formal qualities are more or less the same: four stanzas of a

factual, yet wistful, naturalism followed by a stanza the imagery of which hearkens to fairy-tale and traditional pastoral.

Indy Clark has written that this occurred in both Hardy's poetry and prose, as it shows Hardy's anxieties concerning the advances of an increasing urbanisation and the increasing importance of urban centres in the formation of an all-encompassing worldview, and that generally, and in Hardy's work, pastoral "created the need for a countervailing innocence and a longing for stability, whether in a half-imagined past or the writer's childhood" (Clark 164). This, and the final stanza, both evince a 'need for a countervailing' innocence, yet here this imagery must be read in comparison to Shelley's poem. If this proves a certain anxiety on Hardy's part, it is that Shelley's poem was written at a time in which a greater sense of wonder and enchantment were possible, still unchecked by the advances in science and technology which Hardy saw in his lifetime, and quoting Tillman-Hill again, it may have been Hardy's desire to regain the sense of wonder Shelley possessed that had motivated him to write this poem: "Hardy does not perceive the supernatural Shelleyan lark, although one feels that he would like to. That is, he may wish to be able to experience what Shelley himself had experienced upon hearing the bird sing" (Tillman-Hill 80-81). What doubly reinforces this theme of disenchantment and nostalgia is not only that Hardy cannot 'perceive the supernatural Shelleyan skylark' but that (as has been stated earlier) the 'supernatural' has been entirely banished from nature, with only the brute processes of nature remaining.

To conclude, Hardy's poem is an excellent representation of how a latter poet, with an original voice of his own, engages with the work of a strong precursor. Hardy's poem dedicated to one of Shelley's greatest is a masterpiece of understatement: its simplicity of form (both its stanza and meter), and its use of tropes both gain in meaning when read alongside the work which had inspired it, while also illuminating what may have passed the reader unnoticed in the original. What has also been shown in this paper is that in the case of irony, the statement alone is not the only locus in which irony is made manifest when a later strong poet engages with a work composed by a strong precursor, but also appears in the simplest formal aspects of the poem itself.

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## SAŽETAK

### SHELLEYJEVA PJESMA „TO A SKYLARK“ I THOMAS HARDY: IRONIJA I FORMA

Tumačenje je poezije zadatak koji je, premda iznimno duševno zahtjevan, u konačnici zahvalan, i jedan je od načina kako učenjak može pristupiti djelu velikoga pjesnika kada se susretne s djelom velikoga prethodnika, kojemu je poslije pjesma zadužena. Mora se imati na umu da kasnija pjesma mora biti izričaj autentičnoga glasa. U ovome radu zadatak je istražiti takav slučaj: odnos između Shelleyjeve „To a Skylark“ (1820.) i Hardyjeve „Shelley's Skylark“ (1901.). Pretpostavka je da u Hardyjevoj pjesmi ne prevladava puki utjecaj prethodnikove pjesme, nego da se u njoj očitava osviještena ironija. Nadalje, u Hardyjevoj pjesmi ironija izlazi na vidjelo ne samo u iskazu nego i u formi. Nakon uvoda u kojemu se prikazuje recepcija Shelleyjeva djela u kritici i među pjesnicima, slijedit će pomnivo čitanje obiju pjesama i njihove interakcije.

**Ključne riječi:** kritika, ironija, forma, figura, metar, pastorala, epoha