The Romantic Imperative: Shelley, Keats and a call to action

Shelley and Keats wrote in a time of industrial revolution, when the seeds of man-made climate change were sown. Though without the knowledge we have today of human contribution to natural destruction, the Romantic poets sensed a mortal threat to the natural world, if only because of the urbanisation that ensued. Apocalyptic imagery was rife following the Tambora eruption of 1815, so that in a context very different their fears read with chilling familiarity; but, in singing of the virtue of natural ways, they may give us a blueprint for the future. And of all the Romantics, Shelley and Keats are surely best placed to excite our emotion, their delicacy and beauty destroyed all too early like the nature they describe.

The most immediate connection to nature that Shelley and Keats offer us is through the birds to whom they cry out. ‘Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!’, Shelley opens ‘To a Skylark’, and it is to ‘thou’, the nightingale, to which ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is addressed; by the very act of apostrophising the birds, the poets set up an affinity between themselves and the creatures. Birds are often equated with poets as producers of song; Shelley himself likens the skylark to ‘a Poet hidden/In the light of thought/Singing hymns unbidden’. Yet, as suggested by their centrality to the titles, the birds are not level with us at all, but far higher, spiritually as physically: Shelley writes that ‘Thou of death must deem/Things more true and deep/Than we mortals dream’, the haunting, hushed assonance showing the intangible spirituality of the bird. If their plane of existence is so superior to our own, how can humanity countenance driving these creatures to extinction through carelessness?

Both poets despair of the human condition, and in doing so offer a solution – we can prevent climate change by personal change. ‘We look before and after,’ Shelley laments, ‘and pine for what is not’. This contrast of human greed to avian bliss is shared by Keats: in the world of man, ‘Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes/Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow’. ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ links destruction of nature to human greed explicitly, describing how after the fabled encounter ‘The sedge is withered from the lake/And no birds sing’. As Jonathan Bate explains, ‘he imagines a nature that has died because man is in thrall to desire.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Our lust for acquisition may be intrinsic, but there is hope that it might be within our power to suppress it, and make sacrifices, such as abstention from air travel, to alleviate the crisis we find ourselves in today.

By adopting instead the philosophy of nature, we can not only conserve it but reach it spiritually. The Romantics tell us that happiness and peace lie in living in tune with nature, as in Keats’ bucolic ‘To Autumn’, which effortlessly combines the human and the natural in descriptions of autumn as the ‘close bosom-friend of the maturing sun/Conspiring with him’, or as residing in spirit in human constructions, ‘sitting careless on a granary floor’ or ‘by a cyder-press.’ Failure to achieve the same interconnection with plants and animals that they possess with one another is described in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’: the ‘plot/of beechen green’ which the nightingale inhabits is itself made ‘melodious’ by the song, and ‘the coming musk-rose’ is in turn ‘the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves’; the speaker, meanwhile, is a clumsy observer, preoccupied by his longing to ‘forget/What though among the leaves hast never known/The weariness, the fever and the fret’ that humans face, a potent tricolon of troubles all too recognisable. It is only the nightingale that lends the speaker the lucidity of thought to even articulate this discrepancy; when the nightingale leaves, the poem shifts from florid musing to haunting confusion: ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/Fled is that music:– do I wake or sleep?’. Without nature, then, we grope, like Keats, in darkness and despair. Without the song of Shelley’s skylark, the world would be ‘But an empty vaunt/A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.’

Romantic visions of natural destruction are grave. The ‘Year Without a Summer’ of 1816 following the Tambora eruption suggested apocalypse to the Diodati circle; while the poets could not blame humanity through science as we do today, their Christian education taught that such disasters were divine retribution. In Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’, ‘Power in the likeness of the Arve comes down…Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame/Of lightning through the tempest’. The ravaging of the landscape may be due to the power of nature rather than man, but such concepts are not antithetical. Today we must fear the destructive power of nature as instrument rather than agent, enabled by the actions of man in contributing to global warming.

Keats and Shelley insist on the central importance of appreciation of the natural world. Only in truly listening do we realise its beauty and profundity; their poetry is in this akin to birdsong. After all, it is ‘on the viewless wings of Poesy’ that Keats can fly to the nightingale. The poets see themselves as intertwined with the natural world beyond avian imagery; Shelley in ‘Adonais’ calls Keats ‘a portion of the loveliness/which once he made more lovely’, suggesting that it was partly Keats’ poetry which made the natural world so very beautiful. To poets we must therefore turn, to ‘the wise, and great, and good’, as Shelley writes in ‘Mont Blanc’, who can ‘interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel’, the ‘voice’ of nature. It is only through poetry that we can be made to feel intensely enough to change our mindsets; and from there our actions, from there our habits, from there the world.

1. Jonathan Bate, ‘The Song of the Earth’, 2000, Harvard University Press [↑](#footnote-ref-1)