

# The English Romantic Poetry: Readings into the Nature and Significance of the Birds.

Nisha Indra Guru

Head, Department of English

Government Girls' Autonomous PG College of Excellence, Sagar, M.P.

## Abstract -

*English romantic poetry provides us an opportunity to understand the true worth of human experience consequently it proceeds to suggest that experience has to keep growing, developing and expanding from ordinary to significant, and, in the process, it must speak of the world in which we live and also the other world in which the God lives. Now such a situation has been rendered into the actuality of experience by employing befitting symbols and, in this regard, we can understand that birds remain the most apt types of symbols wherein the fact of transcendence has been so clearly and so finely comprehended. For the matter of that, birds in the romantic poetry are suggestive of purity, innocence, commitment, sincerity in as much as they have the unique power to leave this world and embark upon a Godward flight. Thus birds have a conspicuous place in the romantic poetry in as much as they are ordained upon holiness and whatever is of the nature of Providence.*

**Keywords:** Birds, Movement, Holiness, Transcendence, Totality.

The quality which made the Romantic poets different from their predecessors was not only subjectivity, inner experience, personal values, feelings of inadequacy, excessive egoism, charm for remote, impulse to adventure, spirit of revolt and thirst for freedom, above all it was imagination. This belief in imagination had connection with the contemporary belief in the individual self. The French Revolution had almost changed the beliefs of the people from society to self. Besides this, for a century the English philosophy had been dominated by the theories of John Locke and the field of science

was dominated by Newton. "The mechanistic explanation which both philosophers and scientists gave of the world meant that scanty respect was paid to the human self and specially to its more instinctive, though not less powerful, convictions. Thus, both Locke and Newton found a place for God in their Universes, the former on the ground that the works of nature in every part of them sufficiently evidence a deity, and the latter on the principal that the great machine of the world implies a mechanic".<sup>1</sup>

All great romantics Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley were confident that not only the imagination was their most precious possession but that it was somehow concerned with a supernatural order. They believed that this world is governed by some supreme power and that there is an order of things which is not that which we see and know but it is imagination that deals with non-existent and it reveals an important kind of truth. They believed that when imagination works it intimately connects with a special insight or perception or intuition and sees through things which an ordinary intelligence is unable to see. It was this search for an unseen world that awoke the inspiration of the Romantics and made them such sensitive poets. English Romantics were keen observers of the world and looked around them with attentive and longing eyes to probe the mystery of Universe by exploring the world of nature and found their initial inspiration there. "Nature was not everything to them, but would have been nothing without it, for through it they found those exalting moments when they passed from sight to vision and pierced, as they thought, to the secrets of the Universe".<sup>2</sup>

English romantic poets believed that every living object of the world is a symbol of everlasting powers, and through their imagination they wanted to grasp and understand it in their poems. As these poets were the painters of the senses, they described the invisible in the language of the visible, and really saw it with their inner vision. Above all they were concerned with the sense of spiritual reality at work in all living things and they felt united even with the commonest events and objects of life, this vision of life made them so humble that from ordinary reaper to less significant objects like glow worms, crickets and other small organisms started playing important part in their journey of the exploration of this world and its mystery. This paper tries to understand/ explore the presence of ultimate reality in the form of a single spirit, expressing itself in all living



objects. Specially, we see that all the romantic poets, felt drawn towards different birds present in the nature and tried to explain the unseen power of the spirit through these objects. They have used different birds as a symbol of different quality of the spirit which is shared by all living objects of the nature. This representation of the different qualities of the birds ultimately establishes a unity among all organisms of the nature and by doing this they seem to provide an independent illustration of Hegel's doctrine that "nothing is real but spirit".

### I

William Wordsworth raises the status of a bird in his most celebrated poem "Cuckoo" to such an extent that the bird remains invisible throughout the poem but her presence, which is confirmed by her voice, is so inspiring to the poet's imagination that he starts seeing the bush, tree and sky in thousand ways and ultimately it turns out to be a hope, a love - the most potent quality of the all-pervading spirit, the ultimate reality. While trying to find out the bird, the poet discards even the physical appearance of the bird and considers her to be a voice, a mystery; thus, co-relates it to the mystery of the Universe - the spirit:

Thrice welcome, darling of the spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery  
To seek thee did I often rove  
Through woods and on the green;  
And thou wert still a hope, a love;  
Still longed for, never seen.

At the end of the poem Wordsworth makes it clear that this world is fit place for such a pure spirit, thus putting a stamp over the thought that all existence is a manifestation of the Divine. Describing the role of Infinite on the finite, through the Bhagavad Gita, S. Radhakrishnan says, "He is the cosmic seed. With reference to this world, He becomes Hiranyagarbha, the cosmic soul .... The Lord is the father who deposits in the womb which is not self, the seed which is essential life, thus causing the

birth of every individual."<sup>3</sup> And Wordsworth says:

O blessed Bird! The earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial, faery place;  
That is fit home for thee!

## II

As every organism of this world expresses the presence of divine we should love all, respect all in order to show or love, we towards Divine. Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives the same message in the Ancient Mariner where he presents the story of bird Albatross, and mariner, The man. The Ancient Mariner has been set against a supernatural background in which the theme of guilt and redemption has been presented by the poet in the form of a Myth. In order to reveal his sense of mystery of unknown forces at work in life he presented the abominable crime in the form of killing of an innocent bird, which in the manner of Blake show, "that he saw strange powers behind the visible world and he believed that men were moved and directed by them." Coleridge, like all romantics, believed in the order of the world in the form of a spirit who watches over the good and evil actions of men and requite them with appropriate rewards and punishments. Although the presentation of supernatural in the poem is new and quite entertaining, yet we find ourselves drawn towards something deep and serious in it. And it is the moral of the story which stirs to our imagination and sense of responsibility in the form of human beings when he says:

He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small  
For the dear God who loveth us  
He made and loveth all.

In the poem the presence of Albatross is a symbol which shows that all things- great or small, have been made by God and he reveals himself through all things, therefore, we should love all whether man or animal, things animated or unanimated. The Bhagavad Gita also reveals this truth by saying, "The Supreme is the Seminal Reason of the world. All beings result from the impregnation of matter through



logospermatikoi or animating souls. Through them God carries out His work in the world. God has an external vision of creation in all its details ... These seminal ideas which have a divine origin, which belongs to the casual logos are the explanation of our love in God. While God is in one sense transcendent to human nature, there is also in the soul a direct expression of the divine."<sup>4</sup>

William Blake is also of the opinion that, "A symbol ... is characterised by translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the Universal in the general above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal".<sup>5</sup>

Through the poem "The Ancient Mariner" Coleridge presents the eternal in a temporal, individual shape and since by eternal he means belonging to the world of absolute values, the theme of crime and punishment presents in the poem an instance of a universal truth. The actual crime is exposed in the very first section of the poem. We still feel strange why mariner shoot the bird Albatross, we do not find any specific reason behind the killing of the bird but Coleridge makes this incident significant in two ways. First, as we know nothing of the reason, we are left to think whether it was annoyance, anger or mere frivolity that he killed the bird without any significant reason. And this shows the essential irrationality of the crime which is a serious thing. As we are not responsible for the birth of any organism, it is against the law to kill anyone without any reason. Every organism represents the Ultimate reality, the spirit, individually on this earth and we are expected to respect and love every soul on this earth, in order to show our love towards the spirit. Secondly, the crime is against nature, against the sanctified relations of guest and host. The bird, which has been hailed in God's name, "as if it had been a Christian soul", which is entirely friendly and helpful, is killed wantonly and recklessly. By killing the bird without any reason, the mariner breaks a sacred law of life. In his action we see the essential frivolity of many crimes against humanity and the ordered system of the world, and we accept the killing of the Albatross as symbolical of them. Here Coleridge seems to be influenced by the Neo-Platonic ideas of the brotherhood of all living things. By presenting this poem and laying before us the moral of the poem in such clarity of idea he ensures our belief in the unity of souls and the presence of one spirit in all individuals in this world.

## III

Among the romantic poets of England, it was P.B. Shelley, who inspired by the Platonic Theory, believed in a supernatural power, which is at once immanent and transcendent and which moves through all objects of Nature and human life ... animate or inanimate. Like Plato, Shelley believed that one spirit moves through the Universe, giving things form and shape according to its power. He also believed that the soul is immortal and has its pre-existence and reincarnation. Like Plato, Shelley thought that entire Universe is the evolution of an absolute intelligence. All parts of this universe are inspired by their own intelligence. The Sun is the visible embodiment of the Supreme spirit. The planets are all divine or work under the guidance of divine spirits. Thus, each object of nature had a separate intelligence of its own, which it receives from the supreme spirit that moves through the Universe.

In the verse III of Chapter IV of the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna describes the mystery of birth to Arjun, He says, "My womb is the Great Prakriti (Mahat-Brahma) into which I deposit the seed (of My Intelligence); this is the cause of the birth of all beings".<sup>6</sup>

Now the question arises when we all are the expression of the same spirit why do we suffer different problems in our physical life? why do we suffer loneliness, poverty, diseases, discrimination and things like that! Almost all the romantic poets of England have tried to answer these basic questions of life through their poems but it is in *The Skylark*, we see how Shelley attempts to find out the reasons of human sorrows and miseries by analysing the reasons of joy, happiness and ever lasting freshness in the songs of skylark. Discussing the basic factors which poison human life at its very source, and fill it with misery, Shelley, comes to the conclusion that they are hate, pride, fear and sorrow. If men could somehow get rid of these, as the skylark seems to have done, they would be in a position to reach very much near the skylark in point of happiness. According to Shelley, the skylark enjoys unalloyed happiness because it is free from hatred, pride fear and mental depression, very common with human beings. If man can throw away these evil tendencies from their temperament, they would attain real happiness:

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.

And Shelley says that in fact we can learn more from skylark, which has no love for worldly objects, and therefore keeps itself away from the earth, than we can learn from the most delightful tunes produced by musicians, or from the lofty thoughts contained in great books:

Better than all measures  
Of delightful sound  
Better than all treasures  
That in books are found  
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

In this way Shelley makes it clear that even a small object on this earth has a great role to play in the cycle of the universe and each object, with its individuality, can teach and eradicate some problems attached to the other objects of nature. The selfless, ego-less joy present in the soaring song of skylark teaches us that only feeling happy in ourselves and standing aloof from society will relieve us but we shall be able to reach the Ultimate reality only when we are able to cut short our ego and do our job selflessly.

Explaining the same situation why even good actions and virtues can keep men on the reincarnational wheel Swami YoganandParamhans says, "The sattva qualities (inherent in human beings) are themselves pure and untainted by delusion, yet when a person relates happiness and wisdom to his own physical body and brain, his soul has identified itself with the human ego. Even a noble man who thinks in terms of "I" in connection with his experiences of happiness or his acquisition of wisdom - "I am happy; I am wise"- is harbouring selfish rather than selfless sentiments.

Bliss and wisdom belong to the soul. But through delusion the ego connects them with bodily enjoyments and intellectual knowledge to be its own qualities, thus ignorantly chaining the soul to bodies and rebirths. Through these, the ego experiences diluted and limited pleasures and knowledge, instead of realising the unalloyed and

infinite bliss and wisdom of the soul".<sup>7</sup>

Thus the soaring song of skylark is the expression of selfless, ego-less joy, hence it expresses the presence of spirit in it.

#### IV

Keats being a sensuous poet and having romantic qualities in him believed that ultimate reality is the truth of life and it can be found only through imagination. Keats saw imagination as a power which both creates and reveals, or rather reveals through creating. Keats accepted the works of imagination not merely as existing in their own right, but as having a relation to ultimate reality through the light which they shed on it.

His sense of beauty played a vital role in the understanding of the Ultimate reality. When he found himself drawn (under the effect of senses) towards imagination, he felt himself transported to another world and believed that he could almost grasp the universe as a whole. Sight and touch and smell awoke his imagination to sphere of being in which he saw vast issues and was at home with them. In Ode to Nightingale, he listens to the pure song of the bird and finds himself transported to the world of heaven. Describing the gloomy sight of darkness due to the crowded bushes he says,

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Where with the seasonable month endows  
the grass, the thicket, and the fruit free wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;

The more intensely a beautiful object affected him, the more convinced he was that he passed beyond it to something else; he reaches to the realm of death after listening to the song of nightingale and realises,

Darkling I listen; and for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath.

Thus, beauty of visible things carried Keats into ecstasy and opened the gates



of the mystery of the world through which he could enter into the realm of something permanent and Universal. The beautiful song of nightingale helped his imagination to realise the immortality of the spirit and its soothing effect on the bereaved humanity.

V

The English Romantic Poet's aim was to convey the mystery of things through individual manifestations and thereby to show what it means. They appeal not to the logical mind but to the complete self, to the whole range of intellectual faculties, senses and emotions. They fashioned the shapes which displayed unseen forces at work through particular examples retaining their individuality. William Blake used imagination as a tool to carve the design of Ultimate reality in his poems. He held that imagination is a divine power and everything real comes from it. For Blake, imagination uncovers the reality masked by visible things. Through visible things he reached the transcendent state which he called "eternity" and feel free to create new and living worlds.

Though Blake had a keen eye for the visible world, his special concern was with the invisible. For him every living thing was a symbol of everlasting powers, and it was these which he wished to grasp and to understand. For him even the commonest event might be fraught with lessons and meanings. How much he found can be seen from his "Auguries of Innocence", where he displays his sense of intimate relations which exist in reality and bind the worlds of sight and of spirit in a single whole. His words are simple but contain deep meanings, as when he says:

A Robin Red breast in a cage

Puts all heaven in a Rage.

Blake's Robin Red breast is "not merely a visible bird but a spiritual thing, which symbolises the free spirit which delights in songs and the carefree flight of life".<sup>8</sup> Blake seems to be visionary here when he expresses that such a spirit must not be repressed, and any repression of it is a sin against the divine life of the Universe. It is not only the bird, which has been described in the poem but a whole train of small living objects, who may not be important for the people in general but Blake makes them important by explaining their qualities through the punishment which is to be deserved for such people who harm these small animals in any way. He says:

A dog staved at his Master's Gate  
Predicts the ruin of the state  
And,  
A horse misused upon the Road  
Calls to Heaven for Human Blood.

## VI

The Romantic Poets of England were different from their predecessors in their approach towards life as Pope, Dryden and Johnson believed in curtailing the imagination and insisting on reality, presented their works of art with the help of visual impressions and metaphors, on the other hand the Romantic Poets solely believing their intuitions saw the world from personal angles and with the help of imagination tried to probe into the vast appearance of the world; and to find out the governing force behind the existing reality and concluded in their works that there, certainly is, a common spirit which expresses itself in every living or non-living organisms of the world and we should love and respect all living and non-living organisms of the world, in order to reach the Ultimate reality, the all pervading spirit, the essence of our life and the base of all knowledge in this universe. And this could be done only by surrounding ourselves, by diluting our egos to such an extent that there remains no difference among all existing and non-existing objects of the world, and we become one with them. Only this attitude of life can give us salvation and we can get rid of fret, fever, poverty, ignorance and all other miseries of the human world. We should have hope and love like Cuckoo, acceptance for all like mariner (when he accepts slimy objects of the sea and sees miracle), self-less, ego-less intention like skylark, simplicity to open the mystery of life like nightingale and respect for every organism as presented by Blake in the "Auguries of Innocence", only than we could raise ourselves to the level of that spirit, which will help us in becoming one with this Universe, the goal of every human being's life.

### References -

1. Bowra, C.M., The Romantic Imagination; Oxford University Press, Oxford New York, 1961, p.2.
2. Ibid, p.13.



3. Radhakrishnan.S, The Bhagavad Gita, Harper Collins Publishers, India, 1998, p. 315.
4. Ibid, 316.
5. Bowra, C.M.,
6. YoganandParamhans, The Bhagavad Gita, Self Realization Fellowship, California, 1996, p.906.
7. Ibid, 908
8. Bowra, C.M., p.14.

**Poems Concerned:**

William Blake: Auguries of Innocence

William Wordsworth: Cuckoo

S.T. Coleridge: The Rime of Ancient Mariner

P.B. Shelley: Ode to a Skylark

John Keats: Ode to a Nightingale