CHAPTER III

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Pythagoras and Plato talked about the music practised not only by human musicians, but by the cosmos the music of the spheres produced by Sirens. Christians replaced this pagan world spirit by the Christian God of love. In Dante the Pythagorean world harmony is sung not by the Sirens but by the angels vying with each other in the different revolving heavens through the physical and spiritual attraction of that Divine Love. Saint Ambrose introduced first the theme that the music of nature blends with human voices in praise of the Lord. In this transcendental unity the single objects lose their matter-of-fact identity and melt into the general atmosphere of piety.

After Ambrose birds are presented in Latin medieval poetry as "psalmists of God", nature's singers.

2. Spitzer, p.15
3. Ibid., p.15
are introduced into the more sophisticated company of human singers. Medieval love songs reflecting the theological theme begin with a picture of Nature revived in spring, with the birds and the poets vying in grateful song.

In the Renaissance, the original classical concept of Pythagorean and Platonic world harmony was revived by poets. "However the English Romantics introduce into poetry their selves and their problems of disenchantment caused by the waning of faith in the eighteenth century." As the poet is now isolated from the musical birds no concert materializes. The bird is for poets like Keats or Shelley a teacher as in medieval poetry. But it does not teach a firmly established orthodoxy which is shared by bird and poet alike. Neither is it a brother in the love of God. They teach the "knowledge of ultimate things inaccessible to the poet".  

To the three great Romantic poets Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, the bird stood out as a symbol of an ideal state, which man aspired to reach. Wordsworth's

4. Spitzer, p.18
5. Ibid., p.18
Skylark has a joy divine and 'glorious light' about it. It pours out a divine melody. It is 'drunken' in ecstasy as it soars up. The 'Cuckoo' to Wordsworth is a wandering voice, which passes from hill to hill and brings a tale of visionary hours. It is a hope and a love longed for. By listening to it the poet can once again build up the golden time of the past. In Wordsworth, there is a strong desire to merge with the happiness of the cuckoo or the skylark. But the poet is far away from the bird. By listening to the bird the poet creates the 'golden time' again

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

The Nightingale of Keats contrasts more sharply the world of nature, with that of man's. The bird reveals "a world of richness and vitality, of deep sensuousness, of natural beauty and fertility". 6

Keats stresses more emphatically on man's inability to achieve complete absorption with nature

and his return back to his own world. The song of the Nightingale raises the poet to a state of intense feeling. The listener tries very hard to immerse himself in the happiness of the bird, projecting himself imaginatively into the bird’s world. The happiness ends when the song is over. The song makes the poets heart ache and drowsy.

"My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense as though of hemlock I had drunk"

This is because of being 'too happy in the bird's happiness'. The nightingale is a 'light winged Dryad' of the trees which sings in ecstasy of summer in 'full-throated gage'. The nightingale is far away in a world which is free from the weariness, fever and fret of the world. It is an 'immortal bird' that is not meant for death. The poet desires to die so that he may become a sod to the high requiem of the bird. But the nightingale and the poet are worlds apart. Imagination can never deceive the poet and keep him in the ideal world too long.

"Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades"
The poet is brought back from the bird to his sole self. He wonders if the entire experience has been a vision or a dream. The nightingale of Keats brings out more emphatically the difference between the world of man and nature. Man is restless, obsessed by care and despair. The bird's happiness even makes the poet very happy. It fills him with a longing to take a drop of vintage and reach it. The bird is unaware of fading youth, beauty, love and illness in the world. It lacks man's self consciousness. The poet tries to reach the bird at least by the help of poesy. He feels that it would be rich to die while the bird sang melodiously. This 'immortal' bird has been singing since the ancient days. It is an eternal song. But the rich experience of the poet comes to an end with the fading of the song. Keats' Nightingale brings about an intensity of happiness and also despair. It transports the poet into an ideal world temporarily. Through it the poet has shown that "the world of mankind and the world of the Nightingale stand over against each other".

7. Brooks, p.425
Wordsworth's cuckoo, on the other hand, offers no such a transportation. The cuckoo only reminds the poet of the golden time of his childhood by its enchanting music. The skylark also picturises an idealic state which attracts the poet. He yearns to reach this happy state. It becomes the metaphor of an 'ethereal minstrel' and a pilgrim of the sky.

Shelley's skylark is a 'blithe spirit' that pours out its melody from Heaven. It is an 'unbodied joy' that sings as it soars. It is unseen though its music is heard. It fills the earth and air with its music like the moonbeams which flood the heavens. It is described by using a number of metaphors. It is like a poet hidden in thought who sings hymns:

Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it needed not

It is like a maiden in a palace tower who fills her bower with her love song. It is like a glow-worm which spreads light on its surroundings or like a rose which sprays out its fragrance.
Shelley's Skylark however does not leave mankind in despair like the nightingale of Keats. He longs for this sprite to become an objective correlative to teach him at least half the sweet thoughts that inspired its divine rapture and the ignorance of pain which lies behind its inspiration. The Skylark's joy is not tainted by any shadow. It enjoys love but does not know love's satiety. It has a more ultimate knowledge of things and of death than mortals. So its music flows out in a crystal stream.

The Skylark offers a contrast to human life like the Nightingale of Keats

"We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not,  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught  
Our sweetest songs are those that  
tell of saddest thought."

The Skylark makes man wonder whether he can achieve a little of its joy by getting rid of his mean qualities of hate, pride and fear. The skylark does not make the poet's heartache with its happiness. Neither does it make the earth 'an unsubstantial faery place' like the
cuckoo. It makes the poet desire to learn at least
half its gladness which would inspire him to write
harmoniously. Through the bird, the poet shows the
contrast between the joy of the spirit of the ideal
poet embodied in the bird and the depression of the
earthly poet."

The black "Raven" standing on the borders of
the super-natural world strikes a feeling of fear
and terror. It has a foreboding and superstitious
nature. It is "a bird of ill-omen". Unlike the
other choristers the raven speaks directly to human
beings. It has learnt a single word 'never more' and
gives this negative word as a reply to every query
of the listener. But this word is enough to kill all
joy and hope in the person. The bird tortures the
listener with its stock reply till he shuns the very
sight of the 'demon' dreads its company and wishes it
to depart. He shrinks

8. Steward C. Wilcox, "The Sources, Symbolism and Unity
of Shelley's Skylark", British Romantic Poets,
Recent Revaluations ed., Shiv Kumar (London:
University of London Press Ltd., New York: New York

9. Spitzer, p.20
"Get thee back into the tempest and the
Might's Plutonian shore
Leave no black plumes as a token of that lie thy
soul hath spoken
Leave my loneliness unbroken - quit the bust
above my door
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy
form from off my door
Quoth the Raven, "Never more"

The raven becomes a "symbol of mournful and neverending
remembrance". It offers no escape from the sad reality.
On the contrary it delights in creating an excess of
torture. It even makes the listener superstitious and
ask just those questions which when answered by 'nevermore'
will cause an excess of sorrow and will torture him.

The raven offers no respite from sad memories,
no balm from pain and no hope of union again with the
beloved departed one. But this friend and prophet who
forbodes evil will never depart. The raven makes it
appearance also, as if from a strange mysterious world.
It enters the chamber of the student at the dark stormy
hour of midnight. It first knocks at the door and then
enters through the window. It does not make the 'least
obeisance'. The Raven's word is not one of joy, inspiration and solace to humanity. Its word is final and decisive which crushes all hope and joy in the listener. It delights in inflicting torture and grief.

Whitman's mocking bird is completely different from the conventional bird images of American and English poetry. The Romantic poets idealised their favourite bird and used it to express their sad reflections on life. This romantic escapism is totally absent from Whitman's bird poetry. It reveals a "heart-rending impersonation of a bird by a poet, such a welding of bird's voice and human word and an empathy for the joy and pain expressed by nature's singers". The European poets praised the musical tone of the bird notes. But Whitman chose just those human articulate words which would correspond to birds song if these creatures had the power to speak. The first part of the tale of the birds deals with the happy life of the birds.

10. Spitzer, p.28
"Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,
And their nest, and four light green eggs
   spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest"  

But very soon this ideal life is shattered by the death
of the she bird. The he-bird wails pathetically and
awaits the return of its mate

"Blow! blow! blow!
Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore
I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me"

The death of the female mocking bird points to the stern
fact of death in all nature. The boy becomes aware that
joy and sorrow, birth and death are all a part of this
world. The boy who hears the song of the mocking bird
becomes aware of 'a thousand warbling echoes' having
'started to life within him never to die'

"O you singer solitary, singing by yourself,
   projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I
   cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the
   reverberations
Never more the cries of unsatisfied lover be
   absent from me"
The wail of the bird is the objective or relative that transports the boy into poethood and from the knowledge of death, he becomes the poet of life, of the world.

The mocking bird does not depict an imaginary flight into an ideal world. It depicts the joys and sorrows which are inevitable in life. It inspires the poet to write poetry. The boy who was just an observer, becomes one with the bird. The bird's song does not instill sadness into the boy, like the Nightingale. Neither does it build up a golden vision of the past like Wordsworth's Cuckoo. The yearning for an ideal poet as shown by Shelley's Skylark is achieved through the mocking bird. It depicts reality and conveys a knowledge of ultimate things. It is a teacher to the boy. For once there is a union of the world of nature and that of humans. The music of the bird and the songs of the poet unite in a harmonious concert. The mocking bird which is the spirit become human symbolizes all earthly loveliness subject to grief and death. Its song is "an artifact of nature that teaches the human artist Whitman." 11

11. Spitzer, p.25
The thrush of Robert Frost sings in a dark, unromantic world. It sings in a wood which is too dark even for a bird to better its perch. Its song is like a call to come into the dark and 'lament'. It deploys stock Romantic images and feelings. Keats "Ode to a Nightingale" offers a parallel though a remote one. In the Ode the poet's heart aches by an excess of participation in the joy of the bird. The poet laments the weariness, the fever and the fret of the world. As the poet rises to the height of the nightingale he cannot see the flowers at his feet in the embalmed darkness. He wishes 'to cease upon the midnight with no pain'. Frost however has used the thrush to depict an anti-Romantic tough minded gesture in the last stanza. Though the thrush may send forth an alluring call, the poet is determined not to give in. He 'was out for stars'. He aspired to gain something more which was not in the world of the bird. Moreover it is ironical that the call of the bird may not be meant for the poet.

I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been
The call of the thrush does not create a golden visionary world. Neither does it remind one of the miseries of the human world. It is just an invitation to enter into the dark mysterious world, if one chooses. If man does not choose to enter the call may be taken as meant for no one in particular. Man here asserts himself. He cannot be allured by the call of the bird. He was out to achieve something and even the music of the thrush could not deter him from his purpose. Frost invokes Romantic poems, metaphors and general attitudes in order to deny them. He rejects typically Romantic attitudes. Though Frost sometimes refers to the Romantic assertion of a "sympathy from nature to man", he unsays it as seen in the poem 'Come In'.

Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" begins from the same point of view as Keats 'Ode to a Nightingale' or Shelley's 'To a Skylark'. In all three poems the birds song reveals a new, mysterious and joyful world to the poet, who is deeply unhappy and dissatisfied with the world as it is. Unhappiness, a feeling of

deadness and desolation is the point from which Hardy begins "The Darkling Thrush". Yet the overall impression of this poem is quite different from that of Keats' or Shelley's. They cannot see the bird which they feel is immortal. Both of them seem unaware that this marvellous music actually comes from a little ordinary bird. Hardy on the other hand can see the bird clearly.

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small
In blast beruffled plumes

"This bird is obviously born for death. It is old, frail, and knocked about by the winter winds, yet this does not destroy the core of happiness which makes it sing".  

Hardy's thrush does not depict a romantic world or an escape from reality. Its song of heartfelt joy rises suddenly from among its bleak surroundings. The ecstatic song offers a contrast to the winter landscape. Everything including the poet was without an enthusiasm.

The bird itself was frail and old with ruffled feathers. It had no cause to make it sing so melodiously. Yet its song rose loud and clear amidst its surroundings. It was aware of a blessed hope unknown to man.

The joy of the thrush does not cause pain or an ache. Neither does it recreate a vision of a happier golden world. It instills a hope and faith into despairing humanity. It gives rise to enthusiasm eventhough the world may be desolate and shrunken. It is a symbol of unlimited joy and a blessed hope. It is not a vague call to come into the dark and lament. It is a clear and loud call which brings life into the 'fervourless' world. The thrush emphasized that a flight into an imaginary world is not an escape from reality. The relief to humanity lies in the world itself. It has to be realised amidst the surroundings of the desolate world.

"At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs over head
In a full-hearted even song
of joy illimited"
Hopkins in "The Windhover" brings out the mystery of the world by Christ, through the image of the falcon, soaring in the sky. The brute beauty, valour and pride which are seen in the bird are "buckled" and give rise to the beauty and brightness of the Lord. Just as sheer plod makes the plough shine, similarly the bird rises and is transformed into the bright image of Christ. Unlike all the other poets Hopkins introduces a religious element in the bird. None of the other poets gives the same intimate, lovestuffed, light enfolded ever-fresh view of nature. The bird is here transformed into the divine, the figure of Christ. As in the mocking bird of Whitman, the bird inspires the hidden heart of man and kindles the love of Christ.

My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, — the achieve of,
the mastery of the thing

The Falcon's ecstasy and poise become the objective correlative of the poet's own spiritual experience.
While the Skylark of Shelley is a symbol of unalloyed joy and the Nightingale of Keats one of ecstatic delight, the nightingales of Robert Bridges sing melodiously out of frustration and sorrow. Their melody symbolises an agony. It reveals unfulfilled desires and futile dreams. In spite of all their art, they are still unable to express the deep sadness in their heart. This is not a melody that creates a heartache by an excessive enjoyment of it. It is a pathetic and heart rending cry like the wail of the mocking bird. It pours out their secrets, the injustices inflicted upon them, to human beings during the nocturnal hours. These nightingales do not inhabit fertile and beautiful lands which man longs for. They come from barren mountains and sing a song of woe. Their song is not an enchanting melody but a heart-touching song of despair and sadness.

"Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
A throe of the heart
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,
For all our art".
"The Nightingales reveal that the greatest beauty does not spring from pleasure but from pain, not from happiness, but from sorrow, not from satisfaction but from desire." 14 Their song offers a direct contrast to the ecstatic song of the Nightingale, the Cuckoo and the Skylark.

In contrast to the birds of poets of the Nineteenth century, the hawk in "Hawk Roosting" depicts violence. There is no sophistry in its body. It allots death to its prey. It is determined to keep things unchanged and as it likes. It is proud to hold the entire creation in its foot. It has selected a high perch from which it proudly inspects the world. This self assertion is not present in any of the other birds.

The hawk is more akin to the raven. It has no gentility about it. It is determined to have its own way. The nightingales sing out of delight or sorrow, the skylark out of joy and the thrush to proclaim hope and faith. But the hawk just voices its self assertion. It depicts a violence which it opposes.

14. Brooks, p. 100
The hawk in its extreme hostility to it reminds us that the world of human values exists. "Menace lies in the hawk's assumption of god like powers and his utterly amoral, in human attitude". It is a nature that has nothing to do with morality, compassion or justice.

The song of the crow is one of a bird that cannot sing. It is not an enchanting melody or a painful wail. It describes a violent death ridden universe. The crow embodies the inner experience of modern man who lacks a religious explanation in which he can believe. He faces a meaningless existence of pain. The crow reveals courage. He is the essence of ruthless will power, he is amoral energy and he is the radical doubter of God's purpose and capacity.

"Crow experiences modern man's struggle to survive in a world of relentless suffering and pointlessness." After the entire creation is burnt out the Crow's


16. King, p.136
eye-pupil remains in the tower of its scorched fort. The Crow depicts a "bleak black vision. There appear to be no consolations in this kingdom. Crow takes a look at the worst man must face. It is a song of darkness." 17

Birds have been thus used to embody various feelings. The Skylark of Wordsworth is an ethereal minstrel that pours down a flood of harmony with a divine instinct. The cuckoo is a blessed bird that brings a tale of visionary hours. Shelley's skylark is an unembodied joy which gives a knowledge of ultimate things unknown to man. The Nightingale of Keats is a symbol of ecstatic delight. The wail of the mocking bird conveys the meaning of life to the poet and transports him from boyhood to poethood. The thrush of Hardy instills faith and hope even in a desolate world. The song of the thrush of Robert Frost is an alluring call to enter the woods. At the same time some birds have been used to depict sorrow and fear. The Raven forebodes evil. The Nightingales of Bridges

17. King, p.140
pour out their sorrows in a sad melody. The Hawk in "Hawk Roosting" portrays violence which is not meant for the human world. The Crow reveals the spirit of endurance and courage in the face of the most painful experiences of life.

Thus though their angles of vision differ the bird has been used by the poets as a metaphor to reflect his internal thoughts. They have the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into the bird which they contemplate. They derive the materials of their thought from their mind and avail the form of the bird to express them. Thus the bird becomes their thought and their thought becomes the bird.

The bird has been used as an objective correlative to raise feelings of either joy, sorrow, morbidity or the spirit of endurance. The thoughts of the poet are transferred to the bird and evoke the same response from the reader.