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## Skylark-Image: or, the Vitality of Disappearance

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This essay explores how Shelley's distinctive deployments of "vitality" – as an immaterial force that is essential to life – punctuate the poetry and the essays, from the "mockery of vital hues" on Alastor's "cheek of death" to the "bright shape of vital stone that drew the life out of Pygmalion" in *The Witch of Atlas*. The most illuminating account of Shelley's investment in vitality appears in *A Defence of Poetry*, where the language of poets is said to be "*vitally metaphorical*," marking the before "*unapprehended* relations of things." In this paper, I examine how this "vitality of disappearance" is in play in "To a Skylark," where what Gilles Deleuze might have called the bird's literal and figurative "lines of overflight" mark the "vital" conjunction between a sensory disappearance and aesthetic vitality.

### 1. "Little Fluffy Clouds"

"Little Fluffy Clouds" is not a reference to Percy Shelley's "The Cloud," that strange verse autobiography of atmospheric formations he wrote in 1820, but the title of the best song recorded in the last millennium by Alex Paterson's British electronic project called the Orb. The record is called "the orb's adventures beyond the ultra-world" – whatever or wherever that is. The track opens with a sound-sample of an airplane and a solo harmonica, Ennio Morricone's iconic refrain from *Once Upon a Time in the West* over a recorded interview with the pop-blues singer Rickie Lee Jones recalling the sunsets of her youth. "What were the skies like when you were young?" asks the interviewer, "They went on forever," she responds. "We lived in Arizona and the skies always had little fluffy clouds... They were the most beautiful skies: the sunsets were purple and red and yellow and on fire. And the clouds would catch the colors everywhere. That's neat because I used to look at them all the time when I was little. You don't see that anymore." This sampled account of the extinction of the sunset image would seem to belong to the domain of a childhood, "apparell'd in celestial light," and in the affective register of a ballad, however lyricized. Instead it serves as the looped voice-over to one of the most vital and deliriously hypnotic ambient psychedelic dance tracks of its era, a layered bass-heavy soundtrack to the sunset's auratic demise.

I intend this reference to indicate the tension crystallized in my subtitle, "the vitality of disappearance," which is how I understand both formally and affectively the poles from and towards which Shelley's poetry orients its direction. The critical interest in biopolitics – and, more recently, in biopoetics – has prompted or at least coincided

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with important investigations of Romanticism's own formative engagement with the representations of life and vitality. And from diverse historical, theoretical, and political points of departure, the recent work of Romanticists such as Jacques Khalip, Sara Guyer, Denise Gigante, Joan Steigerwald, Ross Wilson, and Sharon Ruston has demonstrated the critical "vitality" of "life" for Romanticism. Ruston, for instance, reminds us that the word "biology" makes its first appearance in English in the lectures of Shelley's friend William Lawrence, who is translating the term from Treviranus. And Ruston goes on to argue that Shelley's interest in the debates over "vitalism" demonstrates how his politics as well as his poetics derives from his intimate engagement with the scientific debates over vitalism. I am less interested in how Shelley's poetry might be expressing one position or other of this debate than I am in exploring how Shelley understands poetry itself as a mode of radical "scientific" enquiry, one that is not invested in worldly empirical discoveries but rather precipitates adventures in lyric "outsoarings" – to use the term he invokes in *Adonais* to describe Keats's posthumous trajectory – whose destination is "far in the Unapparent" (ll. 352, 399).

Shelley's poetic "vitalism" consistently plays on the ambivalence inscribed in the term as he received it, since "vital" can mean the manifestation of life itself *or* denote an immaterial force. I will cite two representative examples from Shelley's poetic encyclopedia of "vitality" that made their way into the *OED*. The first of these passages comes from *The Witch of Atlas* where through the Witch's "strange art" "a fair Shape out of her hands did flow – / A living Image, which did far surpass / In beauty that bright shape of vital stone / Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion" (ll. 321, 325–28). The "hands" of the "Witch" give life, bringing into existence "a living Image" far more beautiful than "that bright shape of vital stone" which "drew" (in the sense of extract and create) the "heart" (with its echoes of "art") "out of Pygmalion." For Gigante, Shelley's "Witch" is a "vitalist" whose "strange art" of poetry is "its capacity to sprout new relations, and from these, organic forms" (164). And the lines from Shelley's *Witch* offer a delirious, chiasmic – perhaps even rhizomatic – convolution of the transfers and echoes that "art" activates between the immaterial and the material.

The second of these dictionary examples of Shelleyan vitalism belongs to the opposite end of the affective register: the brief invocations of vitality in those great wailing lamentations that overwhelm the beginning of *Adonais*: "Oh dream not," sighs the speaker, "that the amorous deep / Will yet restore him to the vital air" (ll. 25–26). Here, early in the course of the elegy and long before the death of Death, the gap between the emphatic pronouncement of *Adonais*'s disappearance – which "feeds on his mute voice" – and the dream of the "vital air" of its "restoration" is reiterated without prospect of relief.

But for my understanding of Shelley's poetics, nothing has been more instructive than the passage in the *Defense* where he describes the language of poets – those in whom a sensitivity to the operations of language "exists in excess" – as "vitally metaphorical." And it is this understanding of poetry as the language of the "*vitally metaphorical*" that informs Shelley's poetics: the language of the poets "marks the before unapprehended relations of things." Conventional metaphors may establish "relations" – likenesses even – between things that have already been apprehended, but for the *poesis* of "vital" metaphoricity to occur, those relations remain as yet unapprehended. Poetry *produces* – or kindles – the apprehension of that which has not appeared to the senses. In other words, poetic apprehension is itself the mode of vitality that leaves worldly life behind. This Shelleyan gap between "life" and the "apprehension of

life” is Ross Wilson’s point of departure in his subtle and detailed account of the way in which poetry, as Shelley understands it, “is specifically concerned with fostering apprehension” (14).

My interest here is not in the nature of Shelley’s influence by or participation in the debates over vitalism that were certainly decisive, but in something that is much more limited and, from the perspective of the debates over vitalism, perhaps even perverse. I am interested not in the disappearance of vitality – either as a term relevant to philosophical or bioscientific or poetic discourse – but in the *vitality* of disappearance as an aspect of Shelley’s poetry where affect and epistemology converge, where his poetics of vacancy releases an image that ascends “far in the Unapparent.” My reading is prompted by Jacques Khalip’s game-changing account of Romanticism’s poetics of anonymity, modes of life dislocated or “dispossessed” from a constitutive or expressive subjectivity. Khalip’s *Anonymous Life* takes its title and perhaps its inspiration from Gilles Deleuze: the eruptive, non-subjective agency that withdraws itself in the moment of its assertion. Khalip’s book begins and ends with Shelley’s poetics and politics of dispossession: “what remains for Shelley is something like an ‘anonymous life’ – a life that evokes a decidedly immanent approach to the poetics and politics of the romantic subject, one whose pronominal negligence, moreover, shares much with Deleuze’s own thoughts on the ‘indefinite’ article” (2). “We will say of pure immanence,” says Deleuze, “that it is A LIFE, and nothing else” (quoted in Khalip 189). Though I recognize that this remains a bit cryptic, the same “pronominal negligence” is a necessary condition for Shelleyan disappearance to achieve the vitality that may result in “pure immanence.”

Shelley’s depictions of disappearance are usually far removed from any meaning of the word vital: they seem, rather, to belong to the course of expiration, as if the “paths of departure” that mark the itineraries of so many of the poems feel as if they also belong to the *pathos* of disappearance. It is “the character of all life and being,” Shelley writes in the fragment “On Life,” for “a spirit” within man to be “at enmity with change and extinction [nothingness and dissolution]” (506). Shelley’s accounts of spirits or beings that – human or otherwise – are vanishing or disappearing seem inevitably to invoke the aura of desolation as when in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” the “spirit of BEAUTY” “passes away and leaves our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate.” When John Keats – that singular “spirit of beauty” – passed away and left our state in this same desolation, it not only prompted Shelley to mourn his death in verse but to contemplate in 55 “Spenser stanzas” the extinction of a species of poet. Some new mode of vitality can be said to return when, 40 stanzas into the poem, Shelley’s speaker declares that “Death is dead,” but when in the last stanza “the sphered skies are riven” and the speaker announces his path of disembarkation, “borne darkly, fearfully afar,” the *poetry* may well be as alive as anything Shelley wrote but there seems to be nothing vital about the tone or the trajectory which might well be described, via Thom Yorke, as “how to disappear completely.”

This mode of disappearance calls to mind Adorno’s notion a “reconciliation under duress,” an exquisitely extorted accommodation to the fate of permanent exile. But to describe it as “reconciliation” restricts the poem to the course of its narrative and is not commensurate with the eruptive poetic possibilities introduced by the last stanzas of that elegy. Forty stanzas into this meditation on the disappearance of vitality, a new possibility appears that we overlook if we remain focused exclusively on the final sublime setting to sea of the already dead man. Adonais, that “splendour of the firmament of time,” “has outsoared the shadow of our night.” This is an invocation of a

poetic vitality that has left *life* behind, an “outsoaring” that has abandoned the earth-bound and, by way of the extinction of a poet, kindled a new and immaterial mode of the vital. It is the untethered poetry of the line of flight: poetry’s own adventures beyond the “ultraworld.”

## 2. Skylark-Image

“Not only does art not wait for human beings to begin,” write Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “but we may ask if art ever appears among human beings” (320). This is the same question Shelley asks with “To a Skylark”; and the poem poses this question of art’s vital disappearance from the human world in the context of birdsong, that non-human form of structured sonority that runs like a refrain throughout Deleuze’s work. Birdsong appears in *A Thousand Plateaus* not merely as a motif or a conceit but as a developed artistic genre to be explored, such as “the three distinct phases” of the song of the chaffinch (330). But when Deleuze and Guattari turn in the same chapter to romanticism’s relation to birdsong, their description bears no resemblance to Shelley’s poem or his project: “the romantic artist . . . no longer confronts the gaping of chaos but the pull of the Ground (*Fond*). The little tune, the bird refrain, has changed: it is no longer the beginning of a world but draws a territorial assemblage upon the earth” (339). “A Skylark” in Shelley’s poem is a “Scorner of the ground” and conjurer of a world to come; and thus the encounter is missed at which we might most expect the convergence of British Romantic poet and French neo-romantic philosopher.

It is not the motif of birdsong but the cinematic poetry of Shelley’s skies that alerts us to a rare species of the genus Deleuze calls the “time-image.” I call it “Skylark-Image,” the “harmonious madness” of the image’s vanishing, oversong to its disappearance. While I am not proposing a “Deleuzian” reading of Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” there is nothing about Deleuze’s philosophical project that prevents others from using its elements to perform these interpretations, such as Rob Mitchell’s Deleuzian examination of the rhythmic and rhyming forces at work in “Mont Blanc.” Deleuze is explicit about the fact that he does not “read” texts but uses them for the purposes of his own philosophical fabrications; and here I am more interested in how Shelley’s poem shares a Deleuzian “logic of sensation” and is linked by a kind of “historico-electric wiring” to Deleuze’s own vitalism. “A vital power,” he calls it in his book on Francis Bacon, “that exceeds every domain and traverses them all” but never appears as such: “*the action of invisible forces*” (37, 36) find perhaps their best “explanation” in Shelley’s “negligent” account of poetic agency, “some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind” (531).

“There is no heaven for concepts,” says Deleuze; but “from Heaven or near it,” writes Shelley, a skylark “pourest” its “full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.” However, Shelley’s poem is *not* about the skylark, *alauda arvensis*, the visually disappointing Eurasian songbird that displays what behavioral ecologists call a “very conspicuous song flight,” suspended birdsong that can play for five minutes – about the time of one’s favorite pop song – during its vanished zenith. The skylark’s aerial displays and songflight are so energetically costly that the non-specialist or the poet can be forgiven if he or she regards them as sheer extravagance. But this is not an essay about the (non-vital) disappearance of *alauda arvensis*, its population in dramatic decline across the range of its habitat or the milieus of its territory, reduced in some estimates almost 50 percent since Shelley wrote his poem near Livorno. Or since

Thomas Hardy, visiting that same “neighborhood” in 1887, searched in vain for “the dust of the lark that Shelley heard” (l. 5). From the tragic perspective of Hardy’s earth-bound geopoetics, Shelley’s skylark “lived its meek life” “like another bird” until a poet “consecrated” his life (ll. 7, 9). Hardy’s poem is the story of the skylark’s descent, the “reterritorialization” of its perishing: it “fell / – a little ball of feather and bone,” back to “Earth’s oblivious eyeless trust” (ll. 9–10, 2). But that is the skylark *Hardy* imagines in a willed misreading which attempts to wrestle Shelley to earth formally and thematically. Shelley’s poem opens with a gloriously emphatic dismissal of the empirical status of a skylark: “Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert –” (ll. 1–2). Shelley’s revision of the opening lines of the poem are his most decisive: his earlier interrogative beginning – “What art thou, blithe Spirit / For bird thou hardly art” – is replaced with an enthusiastic salutation that severs the poem’s relationship to the empirical and therefore confirms here that for Shelley as for Deleuze “no art has ever been representational” (What is Philosophy, 193).

“Thou art unseen,” says the speaker in line 20, and with a characteristic Shelleyan pun makes art the unseen condition of a skylark’s music. Address and exhortation, “To a Skylark” hails and celebrates an image for its disappearance. In the third stanza the spirit conjured by the poem “dost float and run / Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun”; and that “unbodied joy” is not only the spirit ascending in its line of flight but the project of the poem – and perhaps Shelley’s poetry itself – a nonrepresentational poetry of sensation, *that* race “just begun.” If it is fair to say that Shelley approached every poem as the experiment of a “race just begun,” “To a Skylark” represents a different version of the experimentation we find in as diverse but representative examples as “Mont Blanc” or “Ozymandias” or *The Triumph of Life*. In “To a Skylark” there are no problems of sublimity or materiality with which the poet must reckon, no “colossal Wreck” in a “boundless” desert, no grim historical pageant reflecting “thought’s empire over thought.” “To a Skylark” poses a different mode of poetic experience, one which belongs to what Deleuze calls “a zone of indetermination” devoted to an “unbodied joy” or sheer fabulation. If the first six stanzas of Shelley’s poem invoke a phenomenology of the flight of the bird, it would be more accurate to call them a poetic anti-phenomenology, at least of the variety we have come to associate with Merleau-Ponty. If in his own *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty understands the image of the world’s appearances as inextricable from the percipient’s view of them – his or her embodied consciousness – Shelley’s skylark not only proposes an image disappearing from the percipient’s view but one that dispenses with the percipient altogether. This is what Deleuze calls “percept” without perception.

There is to be sure plenty of the visual world that Shelley’s poem offers to the percipient reader: “golden lightning / Of the sunken sun (ll. 11–12),” “cloud of fire” (l. 8), the evening of “pale purple” (l. 16). Each of these images could belong to the Rickie Lee Jones catalogue of the vanished world of recollected sunsets. A skylark-image, however, is not among them; and its ascendance moving from “perception” to “affect” dispenses with sight: “we hardly see – we *feel* that it is there” (l. 25). It is not so much the disjunction of sight and feeling that is a surprise here but the sudden turn to the plural. I would have expected the speaker, singular and Bowie-like, “alone and in his solitude, waiting for the gift of sound and vision.” Instead, we receive this rift of sight and feeling. And *our* feeling of a skylark’s presence never rises to the level of knowledge: “What thou art we know not” (l. 31). With knowledge off the table, we are given similes, a series of them, prefaced with this question: “what is most *like* thee?” As a skylark ascends, we are left with four entries on a Jakobsonian



axis of verticality: four stanzas of similes that, all failed, leave their traces in the wake of an untethering flight. A skylark is like “a Poet hidden,” “a high-born maiden,” “a glow-worm golden,” “a rose embowered.” I call them failed similes not only because their likenesses are all undone – “unheeded,” “overflowing,” “unbeholden,” “deflowered” – but because they were ruled out from the start by the declaration of the opening lines. Not even a poet “hidden in the light of thought / Singing hymns unbidden/ till the world is wrought to sympathy” (ll. 36–40) – Shelley’s own project, at least prior to the encounter with a skylark-image – can be likened to the extravagance of this “sprite’s” song: “All that ever was / Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music dost surpass” (59–60), a new and delirious threshold of intensity.

My speculations about the poem’s untethering find some unlikely corroboration in William Empson’s reading of the poem in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, where Shelley in general and “To a Skylark” in particular seem to have been the primary motivations for the “fifth type” of ambiguity, defined as “a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing” (vi). The first few pages of Empson’s chapter are a spirited response to “Mr. Eliot’s” “unappreciative” conclusion that “the Shelley Skylark” in particular and perhaps Shelley in general amounted to nothing more than a “shabby” and *unfortunate confusion* (159). Empson contorts himself, understandably, to defend the viability of the simile that in “the Shelley Skylark,” “applies to nothing exactly” but “goes tumbling” into yet another simile (155, 157). Empson’s awareness of the futility of this defense is evident when he identifies the “self-inwoven” simile employed by Shelley, one that “points out that it is its own nature” (161). As Empson rightly observes, this “destroys the simile”; and here his defense of the figure of speech trumps his defense of the poet: “Shelley seldom perceived profitable relations between two things, he was too helplessly excited by one thing at a time” (161).

“Skylark-Image” belongs to Shelley’s realm of fabulation, where to be “helplessly excited by one thing at a time” and to vanish from sight is a good thing, the source and point of vitality. “To a Skylark,” that textual “Scorner of ground,” leaves behind the land of likenesses and similitudes as it ascends on the thread of a tune, casting off the world of “profitable relations between two things.” At the moment of that disappearance, a skylark-image is not “like” what Deleuze calls the cinematic time-image; rather, it *performs* what the time-image does: “it disjoins sound and image and in . . . the aberration of movement carries out a *suspension of the world* or affects the visible with a disturbance . . . which does not let itself be seen in vision . . .” (*Cinema* 2, 278). For Deleuze, this particular “condition of cinema” is no longer that of an “imaginary participation” with the screened image (or in Shelley’s case a participation with the poetic bird-image) “but the lively and disquieting projection of a world to come.”

Long ago I tried to come to terms with the politics and poetics of the figure of vacancy in Shelley by describing it as “the blank opening onto futurity.” But that was before Lee Edelman’s work disrupted my investments in the proleptic appeal to the future. So now when I read Cesare Casarino arguing that for Deleuze “the political vocation of the time-image consists “not of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people to come” (166), it seems to assert a diachrony that has vanished in the wake of a “skylark.” As has the sense of viscosity itself: in the last urgent stanza of “To a Skylark,” there are no more visual images, only the music of a transversal line that reverses and enfolds the “then” into the “now” in the last lines of Shelley’s poem:

Teach me half the gladness  
 That thy brain must know,  
 Such harmonious madness  
 From my lips would flow,  
 The world would listen then – as I am listening now. (ll. 101–5)

The vitality, the “gladness,” in this final stanza of a skylark-image in its vanishing musical ascension is not the *lesson* that a “harmonious madness” would flow as *content* from the speaker’s lips. Nor is it the case that the poetry of “harmonious madness” would “then” make this world listen. Instead, we are presented with the delirious image of a “then-world” the poem invokes. As Deleuze conjectures, “art may not wait for human beings to begin,” but Shelley’s poem listens to the music of its vanishing. Thus, the “harmonious madness” of a skylark-image is itself the simultaneous transversal soundtrack of the I *and* the world, the *then* with the *now* – adventures, in other words, beyond the ultraworld.

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