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Nature As a Site of Balance and A Source of Poetic Material in Joseph Skipsey's Poems

Joseph Skipsey'nin Şiirlerinde Bir Denge Alanı ve Poetik Malzeme Kaynağı Olarak Doğa

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Öz

Derin sosyo-ekonomik dönüşümlerin etkisinde ve farklı yazınsal ses ve perspektiflerin eşliğinde gelişen Victorya dönemi şiiri, zamanın önde gelen isimlerinin yanı sıra, çeşitli meslek gruplarından adları pek duyulmamış çok sayıda işçi şairin şiirlerini de içine alır. Çoğu kendini yetiştirmiş bu şairler zorlu çalışma koşullarında yazınsal bakışlarını biçimlendirmişler, ötekiler kadar estetik değeri yüksek şiirler yazamasalar da yaşadıkları dünyayı yoğun bir duyarlılık ve içten bir dille yansıtmışlardır. Onlardan biri de yaşamının büyük bölümünü yedi yaşında girdiği kömür madenlerinde geçiren Northumberlandli kömür işçisi Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903)'dir. Onun şiirlerinde yöresinin toplumsal pratikleri ile kültürel kodlarının izleri açık biçimde görülür. Taşrada yaşaması ilk bakışta Skipsey'nin doğaya oldukça yakın durduğunu düşündürtse de onunla ilişkisi şaşırtıcı biçimde daraltılmış bir çerçevede varlık bulur ve balad ve song gibi geleneksel anlatı türlerinin sınırları içinde kalır. Bu çalışma Viktorya dönemi İngiltere'sinin sosyo-ekonomik koşullarında bir madenci şairin şiirlerinde doğa ile ilişkisinin mahiyetini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın temel savı, Skipsey'nin doğayı yüceltilen bir varlıklar bütünü olarak değil, bir denge alanı ve bireysel duyguların, insan ilişkilerinin ve madencilerin yaşam gerçeklerinin anlatımında başvurduğu bir poetik malzeme kaynağı olarak kullandığıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Viktorya Dönemi Şiiri, Joseph Skipsey, Kömür Madenciliği, Madenci Şair, Doğa

Abstract

Victorian poetry, which developed under the influence of profound socio-economic transformations and in company with diverse literary voices and perspectives, includes the poems of the leading figures of the period as well as those of many little-known labouring poets from various professional groups. These poets, most of whom were self-educated, forged their literary perspectives under harsh working conditions, and although they could not write poems with high aesthetic value like the others, they reflected the world they lived in with an intense sensitivity and a sincere language. One of them was the Northumbrian collier Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), who spent most of his life in the coal mines he entered at seven. In his poems, the traces of communal practices and cultural codes of his region are clearly seen. Even if his living in the country might evoke at first glance that Skipsey is quite close to nature, his relations with it surprisingly exist in a narrowed framework and remain within the confines of traditional narrative forms such as ballad and song. This study aims to reveal the essence of a collier poet's relationship with nature in his poems within the socio-economic conditions of Victorian England. The main argument of the study is that Skipsey uses nature not as a glorified unity of beings, but as a site of balance and a source of poetic material he refers to in narrating individual emotions, human relations and the realities of miners' life.

Keywords: Victorian Poetry, Joseph Skipsey, Coal mining, Collier Poet, Nature

Introduction

Historically, the second half of the 19th century witnessed some great socio-political and economic transformations that occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Britain grew to be the most industrial and trading country of the period and relatively became a prosperity island. This rapid and sharp change expanding in line with the new paradigms also deeply affected literature, along with other disciplines. It is possible to see the marks of that influence in the works of labouring-class poets who tried to survive under difficult conditions in a region far from the political centre. Despite being deprived of privileges and opportunities most of the leading figures of the Victorian period had, they were able to create their own voices and find a way to represent their communities.

Highlighting that a tradition of labouring-class poetry was quite common by 1860, Goodridge writes that the research group led by him has discovered 1,420 labouring-class poets in England and Ireland between 1700 and 1900, more than half of whom created their works in the second half of the 19th century (2005: 531). Given the fact that there might be some others they have missed out, labouring-class had great interest in poetry during those years. Unfortunately, most of them did not find the chance to receive a good education as the inevitable corollary of their social and financial situations. They invented distinctive poetic and intellectual voices peculiar to themselves in a meagre milieu as self-educated individuals, which makes them quite worthy.

The Northumbrian collier Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), who spent almost fifty years in coal mines where he began working at the age of seven, was "one of the last flowerings of working-class poetry in the century" (Armstrong, 1996: 390). He told the difficulties and dangers of coal mining by using the poetic forms of local culture such as ballad and song, and depicted the simplicity, sincerity and inside facts of a community out of the periphery of the artificial and pragmatist metropolitan mindset. In doing so, he acted as a natural participant of that lifestyle rather than being an observer watching his locale and people from outside. To put it in Bunting's words, "he is inside the pit village, part of it, and but for a certain dignity of bearing, we might say he was the village itself composing" (1976: 14).

Undoubtedly, it is not something to be expected from a collier poet to view the outer world from the perspective of the others. Since Skipsey lived in the country, he was closer to nature, but his job allowed him to see the daylight only during holidays and long summer days. Therefore, his relation with nature, which he created in an environment where spatial and temporal restrictions were intertwined, is worth examining. This study, by trying to develop a perspective through the socio-economic realities of Victorian age, aims to investigate how nature looks like from the eyes of the collier poet Joseph Skipsey and to reveal its functions in his poems. The study first summarizes the 19th century coal mining activities in a historical context to ground the problem, and then discusses Skipsey's approach to nature by focusing on his poems written during the great transformation caused by the Industrial Revolution. Its main argument is that Skipsey uses nature as a means of balance for the tensions between the underground and aboveground, and as a source of poetic material he refers to in narrating personal emotions, human relations and the facts about the miners' life.

Coal mining and English Labouring-Class Poetry in the 19th Century

The Industrial Revolution played an important role in the transformation of the established order and traditional paradigm in England of the Victorian age. It is known that the steam engine at the core of the mechanization process which made life easier and faster was one of the factors that triggered this revolution. In fact, the steam engine, "originally developed as a mining technology" (Keegan, 2008: 5), was designed to pump water out of coal mines in the early 18th century, and it spread to the whole country in a very short time due to the intense demand it received.

Both the use of steam engine in a wide network extending from agriculture to industry and the increase in the need for iron required in the manufacturing of machines such as ships and trains made coal mines extremely valuable. Until then, wood was at the centre of almost all things, including lighting and heating, but it was replaced by coal when failed to meet the potential activated by the Industrial Revolution. Thus, coal described by P. W. Sheafer as the "monarch of the modern industrial world" (as cited in Miller, 2021: 11) went beyond being a powerful alternative to wood and became one of the driving forces behind the revolution.

The economy of the past, which had been largely based on agriculture, shifted to different areas thanks to the technological opportunities provided by coal, and the land lost its centrality after leaving its place to the demands of the new world. As More points out, "in an economic sense, coal was 'land' and thus the use of coal gave Britain a supply of new land" (2000: 16). In this context, coal mining played an important role in the great progress and prosperity of Britain in the 19th century.

The fact that coal was extracted easier and brought into use more cheaply than any other countries was one of the main reasons behind Britain's economic growth and its being the world's first major coal producer. The north-east coast, where coal seams were exposed to the erosive effects of the North Sea, offered many opportunities to the mine owners concerning the total costs. The coal mines in Northumberland, Durham and the Firth of Forth were more developed than those inland because of their proximity to the ports (McCormick, 1979: 1). The strong commercial relations with London undoubtedly had a large share in this:

> *The North-East is a distinctive area of England, covering the historical counties of Durham and Northumberland. The most populous town (now city) in the region is Newcastle-upon-Tyne; a port town that sits on the north bank of the Tyne, opposite the smaller settlement of Gateshead, and that is located just over 8 miles from the North Sea. These towns once enjoyed strong maritime and mercantile links to other east coast port towns such as Peterhead, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Whitby. The shipping of coal was a major part of the town's economic life. Collier fleets travelled up and down the east coast to supply a rapid expanding London with "black diamonds" hewn from mines in the Tyneside hinterland* (Gilchrist, 2016: 30).

The high demand for coal required a significant increase in the number of pitmen, but as they could not find enough adults, women and children were also employed. More writes that 50,000 labourers in 1800 and 100,000 in 1830 were employed in the coal mines in Britain (2000: 54). According to Kernot, the mining areas drew about 500,000 people from the countryside of England and Wales between 1841 and 1901; as of 1851, 216,000 men and 3,000 women were working in the mines of the country (2000: 13). It should be noted that these figures include a large number of girls and boys aged six to seven working up to fourteen or sixteen-hours a day for low wages. According to the "First Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children (1842)", one of the most important parliamentary inquiries for the state of coal mines in Britain, of the 12,235 people working in forty-six collieries and several other small pits in Northumberland and Durham, 2,218 were boys between the ages of 13-18 and 1,514 under 13 (Winstanley, 2000: 53). Fish writes that children were of great value for they supported their family economy, and that there were even some jokes about the widows with many kids who were offered marriage at their husbands' funerals (1974: 30).

Under such circumstances, as the dependence on coal gradually increased, the colliers became key figures for the country's economy. They commonly developed an introverted social order in small mining villages and managed to create a culture of their own. Such villages, unlike the others, were not the living sites of the communities created naturally in the course of time, but rather the units designed and established pursuant to a certain need and mostly belonged to the owners of the pits. To establish the villages usually around isolated spots near the mines enabled employers perpetually to meet the need of labour force; actually, there were hardly any alternatives to work in such collier-centred districts.

On the other hand, it should be noted that there was a very serious sense of solidarity and interdependence among the members of mining communities as a corollary of living together for a long time. This unity allowed them to create their own literature. The north-eastern coal miners had a long-standing literary tradition, and composing songs, poems, and dialogues had been an integral part of it since the 17th century (Vicinus, 1974: 61). For example, Tyneside, an area in northeast England, was the site of songs in the local dialect in the 19th century. Those songs often about pitmen, and keelmen who transported coal in the Tyne River with boots known as keels contain important clues for the labouring class identity and solidarity of that region (Hermeston, 2017: 281).

Beside all these points, the underground disasters caused by explosion, fire, water-flooding, suffocating gases etc, mostly due to inadequate safety measures and poor working conditions, became indispensable subjects for local literature. Joseph Skipsey (1832-1903), Thomas Wilson (1773-1858), Thomas Blackah (1828-1895), Richard Watson (1833-1891), George Ridley (1835-1864), Joe Wilson (1841-1875) and Tommy Armstrong (1848-1920) were some of the poets who included those disasters in their verses in traditional forms. In doing so, they also made contact with nature to a certain extent. However, this contact was not deep and intense enough to make them poets of nature. Yet, it is undeniably clear that their poems carry some clues about the socio-economic and even political and cultural reality surrounding their locales. In short, the collier poets used nature to reflect the realities of the life flowing in and beyond the mines and enriched their narratives with the images they found there.

The Collier Poet Joseph Skipsey

Joseph Skipsey was only four months old when his father, an overman at Percy Main Colliery villages, was shot dead while trying to break up a fight between the striking pitmen and the constables. At the age of seven, he started to work in the colliery to support his family as a trapper-boy whose duty was "to regulate the ventilation

by opening and shutting a door when wagons passed through for sixteen hours a day" (Bunting, 1976: 8). After his twenty, Skipsey also worked as a railwayman in London, a schoolmaster in a colliery village, a sub-librarian at the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, a porter at Armstrong College, and a custodian at the birthplace of Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, but he never felt himself comfortable in any of them and each time returned to the coal mines.

Skipsey did not have the opportunity to go to school; he learned to read and write on his own in the darkness of the underground.[1] Beginning with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, his literary readings ranged from William Shakespeare to Robert Burns, from German romantics Heinrich Heine and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Homer and Virgil. Tait writes that, beside all those works, Skipsey internalized and memorized the ballads and popular songs sung by the adult colliers underground and carried that music into his poetry (2016: 136). Indeed, he was deeply attached to the literary tradition of his locale in which he was born, and talked about both his feelings and the life around the coalfields. Yeats, therefore, describes him as "an Englishman who was a true specimen of the tribe" (1989: 10) and finds in him the embodiment of a poet devoted to his land (Tait, 2016: 140).

However, it should be noted that, in his later poems, that bond gradually weakened. He went beyond the themes provided by the mining milieu by refusing to be tagged as a "pit-poet" and had an emotional and intellectual break from his locale. Klaus attributes this new penchant to his discovery of a congenial style he had been after for a long time (1985: 76). In acquiring that style, specifically after the publication of his *A Book of Miscellaneous Lyrics* (1878), he entered the London-based literary market under the patronage of the Pre-Raphaelites, and moved away from authenticity and lost his sense of community (Maidment, 1987: 327). Writing on his later poems Bunting asserts that there "Skipsey abandons the life he knew for a life he saw only distorted and on paper" (1976: 14). He preferred what he discovered to what he had.

Yet, Skipsey did not owe his reputation completely to the Pre-Raphaelites because he had been already known, at least in his locale, before he met them. After all, as Goodridge emphasizes, the reason why he found a place in Victorian anthologies was not his philosophically ambitious late poems which he seriously studied on, but the short domestic products of his early career (2005: 541). In those simple lyrics, he trenchantly narrates the emotional cost of coal mining on families and the essence of family relations. Accordingly, "Get Up" reflects the psychology of a pitman on his way to the colliery in a quite touching way through the image of the door of his cottage that he might not open again; "Mother Wept" blends the eagerness of a boy who is about to start working in the pits and the sadness of his parents who cannot stop worrying about their son, and "Willy to Jinny" reveals the voice of a young man who entered the mines at the age of seven and now dreams of his marriage. Watson states that if Skipsey had not written anything, such poems depicting pitman's life in a realistic way would be enough to remember him (1909: 32). There is "sympathy and understanding for the miners' plight" (Keegan, 2011: 184) there, and he uses nature as a site of balance and a source of poetic material to reflect it.

Nature as a Site of Balance and a Source of Poetic Material

Despite varying in depth and intensity, all romantic poets devoted a large place to nature as a central element in their works which contain traces of the literary forms of the past. Stafford emphasises this fact and states that the Romantic period was actually "an age of experimentation as well as revival" (2012: 100), in that it looked to the present and the future while making connections with the past and revived the forms practised by the old masters. The case was almost similar in Victorian poetry, which developed in the context of romantic movement. Although its poetics attempted to distance itself from the romantic tradition, the early Victorian poets inevitably remained within it. Christ draws attention to this point and argues that if the second generation of romantic poets had not died so young, there would not have been a deep and sharp sense of division between the two groups (2002: 2). Knoepflmacher, on the other hand, underlines that Victorian literature was partially disassociated from the expressions of some of the mysteries of nature, but it continued to use its symbolic representations and sometimes sacramental meanings within a quite different natural order highlighted by the scientific progress (1977: xxi). Unlike the romantics who focused on each entity, sound and image, the Victorians had a more objectified view of nature. Replacing with the former view, it developed in line with the studies of natural scientists.

Joseph Skipsey's poetry cannot be regarded either entirely in parallel with these main veins or apart from them. It contains traces of both periods. He has a deep commitment to his locale and is tightly linked with the ballad and

[1] Although much progress was made compared to the previous centuries, illiteracy was still a big problem in the 19th century. Vincent notes that the literacy rates in England at that time were below European average and in 1805 almost 40% of males and 58% of females were considered illiterate, but in 1900 these rates decreased 2% for men and 3% for women (2000: 9-10).

song tradition which is widely used in romantic poetry. However, he does not have any discussions about what nature is and where it stands in human life. From this perspective, nature is far from being the centre of his poetry. It is neither the lost paradise of the pastorals nor the site of raw materials to be processed but a source that surrounds the collier poet and provides him with opportunities to describe his inner world and communal relations.

Furthermore, Skipsey's poetry does not have a riot of colours; rather, there is a deep dullness in its general view. Although some of his poems contain joy and happiness, a pessimistic tone prevails after a while. His approach to nature is a reaction to the hard conditions in which he lived and the dark atmosphere of the job he did. An echo from nature which signifies personal feelings is heard there, but this echo also carries the characteristics and imperatives of the pit community. As Dent aptly puts it, "Skipsey is both a unique voice and a voice of a community" (2000: 158), in that he becomes a spokesman for the colliers while expressing his own privacy.

Skipsey tries to balance the life in coal mines which evokes death, grief and sorrow with the light of the aboveground, and builds a bridge between them. Thus, love as a manifestation of ancient feelings and passions, and the courtship which is "the miners' […] great life affirming adventure" (Grieco, 1993: 267-268) become means for the collier to reach serenity against the harsh conditions of the underground. In this respect, they have an encompassing and healing potential. Describing such moods, Skipsey "hosts" nature as a complementary of miners' life. He "hosts" it because nature does not play the leading role in his poems. Relevant expressions which consist largely of tangential references do not form the essence but are interspersed among the lines.

Bunting is of the opinion that Skipsey was quite close to the anonymous ballad and folksong singers, but also had relations with romantic poets like Robert Burns, who masterfully used the traditions of his locale, and he placed himself somewhere between them (1976: 14). Indeed, his poetic trajectory bears striking similarities with that of the Scottish poet in terms of giving voice to the collective attitudes and practices. For Skipsey, Burns expresses the turmoil, triumph, sorrow and joy through his local dialect enriched with proverbs and old sayings, reflects the history and characteristics of his community and revives the memories and emotions that bound them to their homes (1885). While talking about Burns' poetry, he speaks of his own, as it were:

> *He seldom attempted description of inanimate nature on its own account, but as a setting to some sentiment or action; and beautiful as his descriptions of this kind are, they yet seldom possess the interest with which he is almost always able to invest the latter. In the beauty or sublimity of the seasons, with their variety of landscape, he undoubtedly felt a delight; but the centre of his interest as a poet lies in his humanity, and in his inimitable description of the manners and customs of his people, of passion and sentiment, and of human action. Many of these have the verisimilitude of photographs; but then they are vivified and illumined by a fire and a light which no more photograph ever possessed, or ever can* (Skipsey, 1885).

Skipsey was, of course, not as great and accomplished a poet as Burns, but he shared similar sensibilities and followed a similar poetic path as a true admirer of the Scottish poet. In his poems, the entities in nature are usually personified to exemplify human relations and are used as references to express the bond between lovers. This is evident in some of his ballads and songs in which he turns to traditional recipes to describe their physical appearances. Accordingly, the cheeks of the girl are compared to an apple as in "Mary of Crofton" (1892: 6), the breasts of a woman to "two hillocks of new-driven snow" as in "The Toast" (1892: 86), and the girl who has turned into a monument of sadness in "Young Fanny" is said to be quite cheerful and as sweet as a lily in the past (1892: 14). Likewise, in "The Merry Bee", love is described as the bee's flying to collect nectar from the flower, but this time the flower is in the lady's bosom. The bee actually does what the speaker wants to do; it is, in a sense, the poetic expression of his desires:

> *A golden bee a-cometh*
> *O'er the rigid, glassy rigid,*
> *And a merry tale he hummeth*
> *In my ear.*
>
> *How he seized and kist a blossom,*
> *From its tree, thorny tree,*
> *Pluck'd and placed in Annie's bosom,*
> *Hums the bee!* (Skipsey, 1892: 105)

Nature has always been an important source for the figurative language of poetry and has existed as a rich site of similes. The lady's bosom is only one of them; the pleasure of love and the scheme of things in nature are here brought together to create "a vehicle for describing human emotions" (Vicinus, 1974: 151). The poet, thus, finds a path from the outer world to his inner world.

In fact, Skipsey mostly gets into contact with nature through flowers and birds. They are all used to express emotions, human relations and harsh conditions of mines. In other words, nature becomes "a treasure house of symbols for the human psychic state" (Vicinus, 1974: 157). In "The Violet and the Rose", the speaker caught by two jealous flowers tries to please them, and when he finds it impossible, he mixes them together to end their conflict. He tears the violet and rose from their beds, so the poem opened with joy ends with sorrow:

The Violet invited my kiss,
I kiss'd it and called it my bride;
"Was ever one slighted like this?"
Sighed the Rose as it stood by my side.

My heart ever open to grief,
To comfort the fair one I turned;
"Of fickle ones thou art the chief!"
Frown'd the Violet, and pouted and mourned.

Then to end all disputes, I entwined
The love-stricken blossoms in one;
But that instant their beauty declined,
And I wept for the deed I had done! (Skipsey, 1892: 40)

Tait reads this poem in the context of the loss of innocence and the destruction of beauty. According to him, the poet, who distorts and subverts pastoral images by personifying flowers, treats the rose which is the symbol of purity and love, and the violet of faithfulness or modesty, within the theme of original sin and codifies them as beings that have surrendered to lust and jealousy (2018: 179-180). Focusing on *Paradise Lost*, he argues that the poem presents the reader with an Edenic world where Satan tempted Eve, and reminding that Milton mentions violets twice in his masterpiece, he claims that in both cases the flower is associated with Satan or it represents the Fall. For him, instead of the faithful violet of tradition, Skipsey uses the Miltonic violet to undermine pastoral associations and to produce a symbol of temptation (2018: 184-185).

However, reading the poem directly related with nature, it is also possible to assert that the speaker's intention is to multiply the beauty by blending flowers together. Unfortunately, he has plucked them from their roots and made them to fade. What he has done causes the decline of beauty. The cry of the speaker is because he realizes this truth. Furthermore, his sorrow carries an echo of the difficulties of life around collieries. Even though Skipsey does not overtly express it, that negative undercurrent is always there. The rose and violet are to alleviate the insidious pessimistic mood in all respects. In fact, Skipsey's opening his poem to flowers as the symbols of beauty, to a certain extent, underlines his passion to escape the darkness he is physically in and to reach the lightness imaginatively he wants to be.

Skipsey is hardly fascinated by the beauty of an object or a view in nature. Moreover, he does not have such a desire and involve in such a quest. He knows beauty; he somehow touches it, but never sees it as an essential goal to be attained. As Wilde puts it, "[b]eauty with him seems to be an unconscious result rather than a conscious aim" (1908: 125). This result is delicate and vulnerable and is open to external effects, which makes beauty fragile. "The Butterfly", one of his most powerful poems that reflects the relationship between man and nature, is a sound example of this fragility. It is about a child who rejoices after catching a butterfly, but cries when he notices that it has died in the palm of his hand:

The butterfly from flower to flower
The urchin chased; and, when at last,
He caught it in my lady's bower,

He cried, "Ha, ha!" and held it fast.

Awhile he laugh'd; but soon he wept,
When, looking at the prize he'd caught,
He found he had to ruin swept
The very glory he had sought (Skipsey, 1892: 32).

Bringing the child and the butterfly together strengthens the emphasis on innocence and beauty. His desire to catch it is because he wants to touch that beauty. The bee that has landed on the lady's bosom in "The Merry Bee" is replaced here by a butterfly flying from flower to flower. As known, like butterflies, innocence and beauty are short-lived and transient. This transience coincides with the poet's view reminiscent of the idea of *carpe diem* and the desire of being with the beloved against the brevity of life and the gloom of mines. The heart affairs of the speaker carry a childlike enthusiasm and sensitivity, in that as the beloved runs, he will chase her. The death of the butterfly is equated with the loss of lady's chastity. There occurs a destructive end after the transformation of life into death and love into sexuality. If the lady's bower is an Edenic garden, it can be said that sadness that appears after the absence of the butterfly denotes the emotional and spiritual fall of the colliers from the aboveground to the underground.

Blending life and death, joy and grief, or happiness and sadness, Skipsey juxtaposes opposite aspects of life to stay true to reality and balance the negative atmosphere of collieries. For him, poetry should open itself to all facts in a world where the colour of the sky changes and roses have thorns, and the poet should express even the unpleasant things in his works to be faithful to the realist framework (Skipsey, 1885). The balance Skipsey strikes between the coal world and the natural world, and the transition between the two, is also revealed in "The Moth", a poem about a flying insect revolving around the candlelight. The light is the moth's beautiful love for whom he risks his life and his happiest moment is the moment he stays closest to her:

Tonight a gilded moth took wing,
And round-a-round yon wax-light flew;
And, while his flight did her enring,
He nearer to the dazzler drew.

"So fair art thou," he cried, "to view,
I'd die upon thy lips to feed;"
And so must snatch a kiss and rue
Ah, he was murder'd for the deed! (Skipsey, 1892: 85)

On symbolic level, the 'moth' evokes the miners clustering around the candlelight in the darkness of the underground. Given that Skipsey's shift mostly started before dawn and ended after sunset, and that he spent his days without seeing daylight except on Sundays and long summer days, the relation of the moth with the light in the dark can be said to symbolise miners' life. As the 'moth' draws closer to death when he heads for light, so does the miner walk towards death in the colliery. As the 'moth', having witnessed the deaths of many of his own species, cannot hold himself back from the fire that will burn him, the miner does not stay away from pits to make his living, even though he is aware of the dangers. Thus, the sorrow and grief that overshadow the poem blend the aboveground with the meanings signified by the underworld.

There is a similar case in "The Stars are Twinkling". The poem is narrated from the point of view of a collier who is on his way to the pit for his night shift. The darkness of the coal mine is paired with the darkness of the night and the pessimistic atmosphere reinforced by the black colour is balanced by the stars in the sky. Although the speaker first focuses on the stars, then he turns his gaze to the gloom on earth:

The stars are twinkling in the sky,
As to the pit I go;
I think not of the sheen on high,
But of the gloom below.

Not rest nor peace, but toil and strife,
Do there the soul enthral;
And turn the precious cup of life
Into a cup of gall (Skipsey, 1886: 90).

Commenting on this poem, Tait points out that the miner is not concerned with the beauty of the stars but with the dangerous world he is about to enter. For him, although the opening line seems to evoke a child's lullaby, "the darkness Skipsey brings is not the unconsciousness of sleep but of death" (2018: 191). The fragility of beauty is once again emphasised here, albeit implicitly, and birth and death, joy and sadness are replaced in the mind of the miner suspended between the two worlds.

To put it simply, Skipsey's poems oscillates between opposite moods and directions. The reader is invited to descend into the world of coal and see how the darkness of the underground affects and shapes the aboveground. In both cases, his poetic voice is extremely sincere, impressive and encompassing. As Wilde aptly puts it, "[he] can find music for every mood, whether he is dealing with the real experiences of the pitman or with the imaginative experiences of the poet" (1908: 125). The elements in nature such as flowers, butterflies, birds and stars used in the composition of this music are not special beings with distinct intrinsic values, but representatives of a species. In the poet's world, the particular enters into the general and becomes part of a voice that emphasises a wider scope. Such beautiful and alluring beings personified in the relationship between man and nature represent the coal miners, and are thus used as means in narrating their world.

Conclusion

Skipsey is definitely not a nature poet. He does not move on a wide green net like the romantics who have been closely identified with nature. Sometimes, he is interested in the natural beauties, but in doing so, he avoids detailed descriptions. His relation with nature is quite limited, almost confined to a few trees, birds and flowers. Further, many common traditional images, such as mountains, are either barely used or not mentioned at all in his poems. Within this restricted context, nature stands out as a source of poetic material exploited to contribute to the development of the narrative. It is a site where the figurative language devices are created and the home of beings used in the slight description of emotions, in the depiction of human relations and in the expression of social realities.

Skipsey, who spent most of his life underground, is expected to establish a strong bond with the aboveground. But as stated, his relation with it is quite simple and loose. He uses nature as a counterbalance to the negative connotations of death, sadness and tragedy associated with collieries. That is, he tries to compensate for the darkness of the pits with the vitality and light of nature. However, he surrenders, albeit implicitly, to the realities of his job in his search for that balance. Some of his poems start with joy and happiness supported by flowers and birds but end in sadness with a sudden sorrowful change. This shows that he takes a pessimistic mindset shaped in or around the mines with him wherever he goes. Traces of that world are hidden somewhere even in his seemingly unrelated poems and occur there as an undercurrent.

All in all, since Skipsey lived in a region where spatial and temporal dynamics were restricted and intertwined, he was not able to develop a sound relationship with nature. The imperatives of socio-economic transformations caused by the Industrial Revolution and the communal and cultural structure of his locale also had a role in this loose commitment. In other words, he did not have a high level of intellectual and imaginative intimacy with nature, as his priority was to provide for his family, cope with financial problems and fill the emotional and spiritual void arisen from the dark and dangerous world of coal mines. Therefore, nature does not hold the centre of Skipsey's poetry. He hosts it through some insufficiently enriched images. It exists within the confines of traditional poetic forms and is used as a source of poetic material to express the individual emotions, human relations and the difficulties in miners' life, and as a site to balance the darkness of the underground.

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