

BEYOND THE SHADOWS: KEATS, SHELLEY AND THE PLATONIC QUEST FOR TRUTH

Gölgelerin Ötesinde: Keats, Shelley ve Platonik Hakikat Arayışı

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ABSTRACT: Throughout history, human beings have sought to transcend their material existence by exploring the depths of the soul. Literature, which incorporates human concerns, embodies this quest for transcendence across different periods. English Romanticism, with its deep engagement with spirituality, mysticism, imagination, and contemplation, presents poetry as a medium that reveals the mystical experiences of the poet-prophet. As leading figures of this tradition, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats have carved out a distinguished place in English poetry and portrayed the ascent of their personas from a mundane reality to a sublime and mystical realm—an elevation that also resonates with Plato’s *allegory of the cave*. However, the question of whether these Romantic departures from physical reality represent an escape or a deeper engagement with truth is closely related to the long-standing discourse on the necessity of literature. This paper argues that Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) and Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820) depict transcendence not as mere escapism but as a rebellious attempt to unveil hidden truths about the human soul that challenges the illusory nature of everyday existence, as Plato’s allegory suggests. Yet, unlike Plato’s philosopher, who reaches enlightenment through reason, Keats and Shelley’s personas achieve liberation through artistic creativity, symbolized by the nightingale and skylark. In this sense, this article examines the duality of the physical and spiritual realms, the transcendental experiences of the poems’ personas, and the role of poetic creativity as an emancipatory force against Plato’s scepticism of art.

Keywords: Keats, Shelley, cave allegory, transcendence, artistic creativity

ÖZ: Tarih boyunca, insanoğlu ruhunun derinliklerini keşfederek maddi varlığını aşmaya çalışmıştır. İnsanın kaygılarıyla hem şekillenen hem de yansıtan edebiyat, farklı dönemlerde bu aşkınlık arayışını somutlaştırmıştır. Özellikle İngiliz Romantizmi, maneviyat, mistisizm, hayal gücü ve tefekkür ile olan derin ilişkisiyle, şiiri şair-kâhinin mistik deneyimlerini ortaya koyan bir araç olarak sunar. Bu geleneğin önde gelen temsilcilerinden Percy Bysshe Shelley ve John Keats, İngiliz şiirinde önemli bir yer edinmiş ve şiir kişilerinin sıradan bir

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gerçeklikten ulvi ve mistik bir âleme yükselişini tasvir etmişlerdir—ki bu yükseliş, Platon’un *mağara alegorisi* ile de örtüşmektedir. Ne var ki, bu Romantik kopuşların fiziksel gerçeklikten bir kaçış mı, yoksa hakikatle daha derin bir ilişki mi kurduğu sorusu, edebiyatın gerekliliğine dair süregelen tartışmalarla yakından ilişkilidir. Bu bağlamda, bu makale, Keats’in “Bülbüle Övgü” (1819) ve Shelley’nin “Bir Tarla Kuşuna” (1820) adlı şiirlerinin, aşkınlığı salt bir kaçış olarak değil, Platon’un alegorisinin öne sürdüğü gibi, gündelik varoluşun yanıltıcı doğasına meydan okuyan ve insan ruhuna dair gizli hakikatleri açığa çıkarmaya yönelik isyankâr bir girişim olarak tasvir ettiğini savunmaktadır. Ancak, Platon’un akıl yoluyla aydınlanmaya ulaşan filozofundan farklı olarak, Keats ve Shelley’nin şiirsel kişileri bülbül ve tarla kuşu ile sembolize edilen sanatsal yaratıcılık aracılığıyla özgürlüğe erişir. Bu anlamda, bu makale fiziksel ve ruhsal âlemlerin ikiliğini, şiir kişilerinin aşkın deneyimlerini ve Platon’un sanata yönelik şüpheciliğine karşı şiirsel yaratıcılığın özgürleştirici bir güç olarak rolünü ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Keats, Shelley, mağara alegorisi, aşkınlık, sanatsal yaratıcılık

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Introduction

*“Look within you, you are what you seek”
(Rumi, Trans. Shahin Motallebi, 2012, 57)*

Since antiquity, the tension between the world of appearances and the pursuit of higher realities has preoccupied thinkers, artists and poets. Literature has often gone beyond mirroring the world as it seems and imagined ways of transcending its limits. In the Romantic era, this search for transcendence took a new turn with poets who turned to imagination, emotions and nature as sources of deeper truth. John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, two leading figures of English Romanticism, address these ideas in “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To a Skylark,” in which the birds stand for a realm of freedom and knowledge beyond human suffering and mortality. The personas express a longing to escape the illusions of everyday life and connect with something purer and more enduring. Drawing on Plato’s allegory of the cave, Keats and Shelley’s poems suggest that art, like philosophy, can reveal truths that lie behind the ordinary. However, unlike Plato’s emphasis on rational enlightenment, they highlight the power of artistic imagination and emotional experience as fundamental means of reaching truth. Transcendence, for these poets, is not an escape from reality but an active, creative engagement with the mysteries of existence. Thus, this article examines “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) and “To a Skylark” (1820) as poetic reconfigurations of Plato’s allegory of the cave. In contrast to Plato’s freed prisoner who attains truth through rational contemplation, the personas in these poems achieve transcendence through their imaginative and creative powers symbolized by the nightingale and the skylark. By analysing how poetic imagination bridges physical existence and

metaphysical reality, this study seeks to contribute to the discussions on the philosophical role of art and highlight the transformative potential of poetic creativity as a means of liberation from the illusions of material life.

A deeper understanding of how Keats and Shelley explore these philosophical themes requires a return to Plato's philosophical framework, particularly his allegory of the cave, and its profound influence on literary thought.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave: Perception and Reality

As one of the founders of Western thought, Plato produced works of unparalleled influence addressing ontological, aesthetic, social, and philosophical issues. His philosophy, known as Platonism, has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. At its core, he asserts the existence of a higher realm of reality and regards the physical world as merely a world of appearances or shadows. In other words, as Bertrand Russell also suggests, "Plato's philosophy rests on the distinction between reality and appearance" (Russell, 1972, p. 119). The world we live in and the reality we perceive through our five senses are merely illusions, by no means as enduring as the timeless, absolute ideas residing in the world of Forms for Plato. In this sense, he regards the world of Forms as the only true and unchanging reality. True, unchanging forms exist in this higher realm, while the "everyday world of particular things accessible to sense-perception" stand as copies of the "Forms" which "are the only true objects of knowledge and truly real" (Shephard, 1994, p. 6). To illustrate the illusory nature of human existence, Plato presents a cave analogy in Book VII of *the Republic*. In this analogy, a group of people, "prisoners" who are "like to us," have been chained in an underground cave from birth, unable to move or see anything beyond the wall in front of them (Plato, 1997, p. 1133). A fire behind them cast shadows of statues carried along, which they perceive as reality. In fact, "the prisoners [...] in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts" (1997, p. 1133). If freed, a prisoner could turn to see the fire and statues behind him and eventually leave the cave to perceive the true world above. Thus, for Plato, beyond this illusion lies a higher realm, the World of Forms, which embodies the ultimate truth and perfect beauty the prisoners are unaware of—the true forms of beings.

While Plato's allegory has been applied to diverse literary contexts, including recent studies in Türkiye that explore its influence on Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy (Yıldız & Torusdağ, 2022), on the modernist

poetry of Yeats and Eliot (Örmengül, 2019) and on representations of the female body in Platonic discourse (Ekmekçi, 2019), this article specifically explores how Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley reimagine the journey from illusion to truth. Unlike Plato's emphasis on rational enlightenment, Keats and Shelley render transcendence an aesthetic and emotional experience, led not by reason but by artistic imagination. Their works portray the ascent from darkness to light as a journey enabled by the transformative power of poetic creativity rather than by rational and philosophical inquiry.

Romanticism and the Poetic Imagination: Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Shelley's "To a Skylark"

Plato's theory that the beauty of nature is merely a reflection of a more profound, timeless truth presents a paradox; it underscores the value of the physical world while simultaneously elevating it, as nature serves as a bridge to something more divine. According to Jenkyns, the Romantics "with their taste both for grand abstractions and for the particularities of the natural world" were deeply fascinated by this "Platonic paradox", which designates nature not only as beautiful but also as a means to higher truth, "the transcendent" (Jenkyns, 1994, p. 206). Many Romantic poems, while portraying "an individual life journey as personal exile or journey in search of 'the unknown point of origin,'" explore the depths of the human soul to perceive beyond its dark obscurity by transcending the materiality of the world, much like Plato's prisoner who escapes the cave (Ciecko, 2009, p. 6). The poetry of the era suggests that, similar to the prisoners of the cave, the human soul is also imprisoned within the corporeal presence and constraints of everyday existence, which people mistakenly perceive as the only and ultimate reality. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Shelley's "To a Skylark" challenge this false conviction by complicating the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Both poets present the soul not as seeking a separate, mystical realm but as the very source of ultimate reality. In other words, both poems situate Plato's World of Forms within the human soul rather than portraying transcendence as a journey to an external metaphysical sphere.

Recent scholarship further supports this internalization of transcendence through nature and imagination. Golban (2021) highlights that Romantic poets portray nature as a spiritual and imaginative mode of existence shaped by dualism, escapism, pantheism, and co-authorship. Similarly, Ayyıldız (2017) addresses how Shelley's poetry expresses Romantic rebellion through aestheticism, while Uslu (1990) explores the Romantic elements in Keats's

odes, highlighting his sensory intensity, personal emotion, and philosophical reflections on beauty, death, and desire. Guven & Erdogan (2021) also argue that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" explores the contrast between eternal art and fleeting life through a Romantic lens. These studies all suggest that for Romantic poets, nature and imagination are not mere means to escape but crucial pathways to higher truths beyond the confines of material existence.

In relation to Keats' exploration of Platonic longing of the soul for ineffable truths beyond the material world, "Ode to a Nightingale" elaborates on "the search for lasting beauty and happiness and for permanent meanings in a world where everything fades and dies" through a nightingale, which the persona admires for its tranquil and peaceful world untainted with human concerns or suffering (Carter & McRae, 1996, p. 113). However, the poem also suggests deeper, transcendental layers of meaning that bring Keats' work closer to Plato's concept of the Forms. The world of the nightingale is not merely an external paradise but also a manifestation of the persona's vision, allowing for the exploration of the soul's deeper knowledge. The persona longs to embark on a spiritual journey toward his soul with the nightingale and declares "Away! away! for I will fly to thee," which also reinforces the Romantic notion that the "spiritual quest finding one's way in this world is not to be realized via the external world, but in the inner landscape of the soul" since, the "path" to true understanding "works from within, from the self which lives in the very depths of the unconscious, with secret recesses of the heart" (Keats, 1993, p. 790; Fogle, 1953, p. 213). Accordingly, "Ode to a Nightingale" renders the nightingale "a winged, light, and divine creature," much like the poet Plato depicts in his works (Mamatha & Anurita, 2021, p. 221). The bird stands for the poet's gifted, mystical self—the poetic imagination and artistic creativity—that bring him closer to the divine, the absolute. Similarly, while acknowledging the fleeting nature of pleasure, the poem conveys the persona's desire "to depart from the world" in "search for the eternally beautiful and the transcendent" (Rao, 2023, p. 353). Through poetic creativity and imagination, the persona attempts to become one with the eternal and the timeless. In the third stanza, the persona delineates the outer reality as cruel and expresses his yearning to "fade away in the forest dim" alongside the nightingale, as he seeks refuge from "the melancholy dissolutions of change and physical decay" (Fogle, 1953, p. 213). Against the backdrop of "the groan" and suffering of human beings, the bird's song "of summer," symbolizing the infinite and spiritual, stands in stark contrast to life's harsh realities. Finally, the persona questions whether what he has seen and felt has been "a vision, or a waking dream,"

which reflects the central tension of the poem between material reality and divine transcendence (Keats, 1993, p. 790). This contradiction echoes the Platonic distinction between the illusory world of appearances and the eternal truths of the soul.

Like Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley attempts to “capture deep personal experiences” in his poetry (Carter & McRae, 1996, p. 113). He regards artistic imagination as the primary means of conveying these intense personal insights. Shelley asserts that “[r]eason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance” (1993a, p. 753). Thus, for the poet, imagination is a path to revealing divine truth, absolute good and perfection, as it is imagination that reinterprets the factual aspects of the perceptual world. In this regard, as Stillinger and Lynch note, Shelley’s poems largely

“show the influence of his study of Plato and the Neo-Platonist. Shelley found congenial the Platonic division of the cosmos into two worlds- the ordinary world of change, mortality, evil and suffering and the criterion world of perfect and eternal Forms, of which the world of sense experience is only a distant and illusionary reflection” (Stillinger & Lynch, 1993, p. 645).

Regarding his interest in Platonism, Shelley, in his poems, draws on idealism that “creates a higher reality and truth in the mind of the reader, the higher truth that can be seen by Plato’s Philosopher-King” (Salavati, 2013, p. 269). “To a Skylark” resonates with this idealism by exploring the tension between human suffering in the physical world and the unburdened joy of the small skylark, which, as “a symbol of the transcendental reality that exists beyond our material world,” arouses the persona’s longing for liberation from material existence into its immaterial, blissful realm (Rao, 2023, p. 354). The poem designates the dream state as a mode of being closer to truth, in contrast to physical reality— a notion that echoes in Plato’s cave allegory: “Waking or asleep, Thou of death must deem, Things more true and deep, Than we mortals dream” (Shelley, 1993b, p. 712). In this regard, much like Plato’s prisoner who mistakes shadows for reality until he perceives the true forms in the world of Forms, Shelley’s persona yearns to go beyond the worldly sorrow and attain the heavenly joy of the skylark. Thus, the infinite bliss represented by the skylark exemplifies the world of Forms, which, in Platonic terms, is the embodiment of flawless beauty and ultimate truth:

“When [the soul] focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed, changes its opinions this way and that, and seems bereft of

understanding. [...] So that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good" (Plato, 1997, p. 1129).

In this sense, the poem contrasts reality, materiality, and human weakness with the ideal, spiritual and divine perfection embodied by the skylark, which echoes Plato's distinction between the world of illusion and the world of Forms. Shelley's work portrays the skylark not as an ordinary bird but as a divine entity, a gateway to a mystical realm that the soul aspires to reach. The skylark's existence, untouched by human suffering and worldly concerns, highlights the fundamental dichotomy between the infinite ethereal spirit embodied by the bird and the flawed, transient nature of humanity. Symbolized by a small, merry skylark, Shelley's artistic vision and poetry similarly serves as a liberating force for the reader to break free from the earthly, mundane existence "from the prison of the actual" to "a higher reality ... by giving [the individual] spiritual rights in a universe of the mind that is free from the limitations of matter, time and space" (Salavati, 2013, p. 270).

Despite both poems' designating poetic imagination as a means of transcendence—manifested through their exaltation of the birds as ethereal creatures—"Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark" offer distinct perspectives and tones. Keats' poem is dreamy, introspective, and melancholic, as the persona struggles with his inability to escape the transitory nature of life and attain authentic transcendence. The persona's distress reflects Keats' exploration of the tension between immortality and the limitations of corporeal existence, as well as the dichotomies of reality and illusion, and lies and truth. On the other hand, Shelley's work conveys a more hopeful and rhapsodic tone, with the persona portraying the skylark as a wondrous creature above human frustrations and earthly struggles. Rather than sinking into sadness, the persona aspires to learn from the boundless joy of this magical being. Unlike "Ode to a Nightingale," which represents the persona as overwhelmed by insecurity and sorrow and finding peace in the bird's song as a refuge from misery and loss, "To a Skylark" celebrates the skylark as an idealistic symbol of divine happiness. In this poem, the persona embraces the bird's joy, heavenly nature, and freedom as a source of poetic inspiration. Thus, building upon the Romantic reimagining of transcendence, both Keats' and Shelley's poems illustrate how the act of artistic creation itself becomes a means of liberation. Through imagination and emotional vision, the poetic personas reflect the Platonic escape from the cave through the visionary power of poetry rather than rational inquiry.

Escaping the Cave: Artistic Creativity as a Path to Transcendence

In Plato's allegory, after breaking free from his chains, the prisoner steps out into the world beyond, mesmerized by what he sees:

"At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun" (Plato, 1997, p. 1134).

This state of illumination, in which an individual goes beyond the confines of their former consciousness—his cave, in Plato's terms—, echoes in both "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark." In each poem, transcendence is a central theme illustrated through the personas that dissolve themselves into the infinite realm of the nightingale and the skylark, thereby revealing the profound mystery of the human soul. Thus, Keats and Shelley meet on a common ground in their portrayal of the human longing to embrace a true, divine self that exists beyond illusory, socially constructed, and material identities.

Regarding Romanticism's exaltation of transcendental experience over mundane everyday existence, John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" initially presents the persona in an intoxicated, disoriented state, induced by wine, opium or hemlock, and reflects his distress from dizziness: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains" (Keats, 1993, p. 790). His yearning for escape is mirrored in his desire to "drink, and leave the world unseen" as he longs to forget the evils of this world (1993, p. 790). However, as the poem unfolds, this ecstatic state shifts beyond intoxication. The persona, enchanted by the mirth of the nightingale, expresses a desire to accompany the bird to transcends his conscious self and accompany the bird into a higher, more profound realm: "Tis not through envy of thy happy lot/ But being too happy in thine happiness" (1993, p. 790). This transformation signifies a deeper form of transcendence, marked by an achieved state of "ecstasy," defined as "an intensification of emotion so powerful as to produce a trancelike dissociation from all but the single overpowering feeling" (Ecstasy Definition and Meaning, 2025). On the other hand, as Spurgeon suggests in her comprehensive book *Mysticism in English Literature*, "To a skylark" reflects Shelley's strong belief in "a Soul of the Universe" that "is unnameable, inconceivable even to man, for the deep truth is imageless" (1913, p. 35). The poem serves as a testament to "Shelley's clearest and most obvious expression of his devotion to the Spirit of Ideal

Beauty,” which, as critics argue, manifests “its reality to him” in a way that transcends ordinary perception (p.35-6). As “an idealist,” Shelley offers insights into the existence of a higher realm of “Beauty” where Ultimate Truth resides, corresponding to Plato’s World of Forms, the eternal source of beauty, joy and truth (Stillinger & Lynch, 1993, p. 645). Thus, just as Keats’s nightingale exists within and calls for access to a higher reality, Shelley’s skylark serves as a similar function as a part and means of the World of Forms. Both birds inspire the personas to fall into a trance and awaken to the existence of an ethereal, flawless reality beyond the physical world.

Despite the profundity of his allegory, Plato leaves the primary means of liberation ambiguous and refrains from clarifying how the man in the cave ultimately frees himself from his chains. In contrast, Keats and Shelley foreground poetic creativity as the key faculty that enables individuals to break free from the bonds of the illusions of the human condition and attain the absolute mystical reality symbolized through the bird imagery. It is crucial to note that neither poet entirely rejects Plato’s view that reason leads to ultimate truth. Rather, they reinterpret the Platonic quest for truth and contend that artistic creativity and imagination are equally significant means of attaining higher realities. Thus, rather than portraying their personas’ rapture as a transient ignorance of life’s harsh realities, both poems highlight the individual’s liberation through poetic genius and an authentic grasp of the world. In this light, the personas’ ecstatic embrace of a mystical reality is not an act of cowardly denial and elitist escapism. Instead, it represents a spiritual voyage into the deepest parts of the soul; a quest to unveil the self within and seek answers to fundamental questions about life and existence. With respect to the function of poetry in revealing absolute truth, Keats and Shelley challenge Plato’s view of art. In *the Republic Book X*, the philosopher criticizes art as a copy of a copy, thrice removed from reality: “the artist imitates only particulars and so produces only imitations of imitations” (Shepherd, 1994, p. 14). Keats and Shelley, however, argue that poetry is not a distortion of truth but a vehicle for illumination. They redefine it as “an expression of reality, of the creation, on the part of the artist-creator, of something which previously did not exist” (Eliopoulos, 2021, p. 6). Thus, poetry and art are seen as pathways to deeper truths that reason alone may fail to uncover. In this way, the poets suggest that reason and imagination are to collaborate to broaden the individual’s understanding of reality rather than being in conflict. In other words, truth can be

discovered through both rational thought and the insights and emotional depth that art offers.

While Plato regards poets as threats to the wellbeing of the society, the two Romantic poets present the poet as a seeker of truth through art. By portraying poetry as a bridge between the timeless and the material world, Keats and Shelley designate the poet as a gifted individual who can see beyond everyday reality, look within in Rumi's terms, and grasp the inexpressible truths of existence symbolised by the nightingale and the skylark in their poems. Thus, the poet is none other than Plato's freed prisoner, whose courage, restless mind, artistic expression, and creative genius serve to illuminate others. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) further supports this Romantic exaltation of the poet and his artistic genius. The book introduces the theory of "creative transcendence," which forms a harmonious affiliation between the ideal and the real world, and defines imagination as "a repetition of the reflection in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM" (Coleridge, 1930, p. 159). Thus, poetry forms a magical bridge between thought and being and serves to expand human consciousness by evoking the power of imagination. For Keats and Shelley, the transcendent power of poetic imagination is the greatest source of human understanding and knowledge. Like other Romantic poets, they believe that the "heightened imagination [...] leads a poet to the mystic perception of the constant behind the flux, the infinite behind the finite, the eternal behind the ephemeral, and the transcendental behind the sensory" (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 135). In other words, the poet's imagination, as the core of artistic talent, is not a means of escape but "a creative power by which the mind 'gains insight into reality, reads nature as a symbol of something behind or within nature'" (Wellek, 1949, p. 159).

Regarding the animating and liberating power of poetic imagination, Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" illustrates how the nightingale, as the symbol of the persona's poetic genius, initiates his transcendence into an intoxicated state. Keats explores "[t]he gap" that "is between an ideal of vision of life, a heaven of the imagination symbolized in the nightingale, and a grim vision of life's realities" (Stephen, 2000, p. 217). Through "a visionary flight" with the nightingale, the persona embarks on a spiritual voyage "from a sense of diminished life" to creativity, namely a "full life" (Khan, 2002, p. 83). As the poem unfolds, he loses connection to his physical self and sheds his weariness and worldly concerns. His mystical journey, stirred by the nightingale, is reflected in his desire to break free from his material self: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget, What thou among the leaves hast

never known” (Keats, 1993, p. 790). The nightingale, likened to a “dryad” and addressed as an “immortal Bird” that “was not born for death,” is a supernatural, free, and “lightwinged” being that brings joy to all (1993, p. 790). As mystical as the poetic creation itself, the nightingale represents the persona’s true but suppressed, talented and sensitive self that urges him to transcend the mundane. Inspired by the bird’s happy song and its joyousness, the persona dares to explore the spiritual realm, which underlines the notion that the nightingale, as a symbol of poetic creativity, does not numb but awakens him to a greater reality and ultimate truth through “the viewless wings of Poesy” (1993, p. 790). Initially, the persona attempts to “leave the world unseen” by dancing, singing in full joy and turning to Bacchus, the Greek god of wine. Yet, poetry embodied in the nightingale’s song, inspires him to undertake a mystical journey to attain to the perfect, joyful realm and eventually fulfils his aspiration as his exclamation “Already with thee!” suggests (1993, p. 790). The nightingale, symbolizing the bliss of artistic creation, is depicted as an invisible presence within the “embalmed darkness” of the forest, where the persona “cannot see” due to his blindness to and detachment from the physical world induced by his poetic genius (1993, p. 790). However, his lost eyesight does not diminish his experience. Poetry that intoxicates him and illuminates the depths of the sublime sharpens his inner vision and perception, enabling him to smell and sense the flowers in a state of trance.

Similarly, “To a Skylark” sets forth poetic creation and imagination through the symbol of the immortal and divine skylark that stirs the persona’s transcendent ecstasy and journey toward creativity. In the fourth stanza, the skylark flies higher and higher as the day ends, which symbolizes the bird’s elevated presence as the highest state a poet can reach: “Like a star of Heaven, In the broad day-light, Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight” (Shelley, 1993b, p. 710). The central symbols, the skylark and the nightingale in Keats’ and Shelley’s poems, are significant as they both reflect their creators’ view of poetry as the manifestation of poetic imagination and artistic creativity. As Fogle also notes, while the skylark in Shelley’s vision represents the transcendent power of imagination, Keats’ nightingale stands for the deep expression of poetic genius: “Shelley finds a fruitful source of poetic inspiration in the skylark, which soars vertically into the heavens until it disappears; Keats is impelled to write some of his finest verse by the nightingale, a dweller in trees, which does not venture far above the ground” (Fogle, 1953, pp. 38, 45). Furthermore, in his distinguished work *The Defence of Poesy* (1840) Shelley discusses the role of the poet and

compares him/her to a nightingale singing in the dark and creating beauty even in loneliness and darkness. For Shelley, a poet is the one who “participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one” and “could reform the world through poetry” thanks to its transformative power (Shelley, 1993a, p. 115; Carter & McRae, 1996):

“A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and seeks to cheer his own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel they are moved and softened yet know not whence or why.” ...‘poetry redeems from decay the visitations of divinity on man’” (Shelley, 1993a, p. 758).

Manifested through the nightingale, the poet, very much like Plato’s *caveman*, can redeem through poetry, as it is not just a mere form of entertainment but a potent power that elevates, enlightens, and preserves profound truths. Shelley’s poem also incorporates his belief that poetry’s true purpose is to transcend the limits of human consciousness and attain infinite and eternal truths. The persona reflects the poet’s desire to gain these truths, the wisdom of the bird, which hopefully reveals its “half the gladness/That [its] brain must know” and thus, frees himself from the banal and mechanical human presence (Shelley, 1993b, p. 712). Its euphoric existence and intuitive, unpremeditated, and happy song, untainted by human suffering, continue to be heard even while the bird is hidden from sight, which symbolizes the immortality of poet and the lasting impact of his poems through time. In other words, the bird’s song becomes a metaphor for the poets’ imprints and impacts, as their poetry, like the song, endures beyond their physical existence. Furthermore, in the eighth stanza of “To A Skylark”, Shelley’s comparison of the bird to “a Poet hidden, In the light of thought, Singing hymns unbidden, Till the world is wrought” suggests that, like the skylark’s song, the poet’s poetic genius and creativity, namely his music, has the power to shape the world, stir unique emotions, and reveal hidden truths about the soul and existence (1993, pp. 710–11). The poet’s ability to uncover deep truths about life and cosmos, the “eternal reality” which “exists beyond time and space” as Plato’s Forms, points out the transformative power of art to change people’s hearts and minds (Salavati, 2013, p. 270). The skylark, described as a divine star, a glow-worm’s light, and a rose with a nice scent, accordingly embodies the perfect, pure beauty of the ideal and eternal in Platonic terms. Furthermore, as a mediator between the mystical and physical realities, the bird represents human attributes such as “a Poet’s verses” and “a maiden’s song,” compared to the “[s]ound of vernal showers, [o]n the twinkling grass,” which portrays the bird as an intermediary between the transcendent and the concrete (1993b, p.

711). Therefore, the poem conveys the idea that the skylark's music is beyond any earthly beauty, song, or bliss and represents a heavenly and sublime form of expression. The skylark, named as "Sprite" to signify spirit, regenerates the world much like poetry, with its divine, unearthly music, free from flaw or fragility. This idea about the necessity of poetic imagination is also asserted by Shelley who "believed that it is through the power of creative imagination that the world and the society will be reformed, and through the enhanced perception of beauty" (Shelley, 1993b, p. 711; Stephen, 2000, p. 214). Similarly, Eliopoulos argues that for Shelley, "poetic imagination exceeds the borders of reason, thus being rendered the only human faculty that can not only see the ideal forms that Plato is enthusiastic about but also is capable of competently expressing the 'eternal truth of life'" (2021, p. 1). Thus, the poem incorporates the conviction that both the world and the individual can be transformed through artistic creativity, imagination, and an elevated sense of beauty, which suggests the metamorphic power of art. As the skylark soars "[h]igher still and higher, [f]rom the earth," full of love for life and producing music beyond all earthly creations, it stands in contrast to human beings, who, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, lead illusory, frustrated lives and feel despair even in their happiest moments (Shelley, 1993b, p. 710). The skylark, likened to "a cloud of fire, a star of Heaven, a rose," therefore represents a Form or divine being whose songs, as the expression of the ethereal, the spiritual and the eternal, transcend the boundaries of physical realm (1993b, pp. 710–711). The poet renders the bird's song as a reflection of the eternal truth, absolute beauty and "pure Forms" in Platonic terms, "which can only be understood by the imagination" (Rao, 2023, p. 355). The bird, as "the manifestation of that ideal beauty of the creator," also stands for the poet, whose poetry uplifts humanity spiritually and offers wisdom and guidance against collective ignorance and self-alienation (Salavati, 2013, p. 270). In other words, "To a Skylark" highlights the erudition of the skylark as a spiritual ideal for humanity, which embodies "the Platonic quest for union with the absolute good" that Shelley embraces (2013, p. 270): "What thou art we know not; What is most like thee?" (1993b, p. 710).

Conclusion

In revisiting "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To a Skylark" through Plato's allegory, this study contributes to Romantic literary scholarship by emphasizing poetic imagination as a means of philosophical and spiritual liberation. Unlike studies that portray Romantic transcendence as mere nostalgic yearning for a lost ideal or melancholic withdrawal, this analysis

foregrounds the rebellious, transformative power of artistic creativity. For Keats and Shelley, poetry is not a consolation but an emancipatory force challenging and transcending the illusions of material existence. Both poems portray the poetic personas' longing to accompany the divine birds not as an escape from earthly reality, but as a transcendental journey toward hidden truths, much like the prisoner in Plato's cave. The nightingale and skylark, as embodiments of artistic imagination and creative vision, inspire the personas to move beyond ordinary existence. In this sense, rather than a refuge from suffering and harsh realities poetry is rendered as a redemptive force that guides both the poet and the reader out of the cave to see the unseen.

While Plato criticizes poetry as mere imitation, compares it to shadows on a cave wall, and dismisses poets from the state for their divinely inspired states of ecstasy, he also admits poetry's power to evoke the soul. Keats and Shelley reclaim this transcendent force of poetry and illustrate how poems as works of art can break us free from intellectual and perceptual restraints and remind us of our shared human experience. Their works, as the poets' wake-up calls for humanity, to look back and unchain ourselves through art to realize that what we esteem as real may, in fact, be mere shadows and illusions lulling us to sleep

By highlighting how these poems subvert Plato's traditional hierarchy, which privileges reason over imagination and art, this article offers a new understanding of the philosophical function of poetry. It also seeks to open a path for future research that may further explore how later Romantic or modernist poets continue this legacy and redefine the role of imagination in the ongoing interplay between poetry and the human pursuit of truth.

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Appendix:

John Keats – *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819)

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, —

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

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 musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Percy Bysshe Shelley – *To a Skylark* (1820)

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert—
That from Heaven, or near it
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;

The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun—
O'er which clouds are brightning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven,
In the broad day-light
Thou art unseen,—but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear
Until we hardly see,—we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when Night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams,—and Heaven is overflowed.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see,
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour,
With music sweet as love,—which overflows her bower:

Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden

Its aerial hue
Among the flowers and grass which screen it from the view:
Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves—
By warm winds deflowered—
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves:
Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass.
Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine:
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.
Chorus hymeneal,
Or triumphal chant,
Matched with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.
What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? What ignorance of pain?
With thy clear keen joyance,
Languor cannot be—
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest — but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.
Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?
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.

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.

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!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then—as I am listening now.