ODE TO A SKYLARK

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.

Nature is revered and regarded as spiritual and heavenly.

The bird expresses a spontaneous overflow of emotion—this is a Romantic ideal.

To Shelley (the speaker), the skylark is not even a bird; it is a series of metaphors (similes). Perhaps Shelley recognizes that we never really know nature for what it is; we see it from a human perspective (and we often personify it).
In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
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 daylight
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. -

Below is where Shelley points out how we cannot know the bird. Try as we might, all we have is metaphors.

(By the way, Shelley’s point about metaphors seems simple but is profound when one considers how fundamental metaphors are to how we talk about and perceive the world around us.)
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: -

More metaphors comparing the bird to things the speaker imagines are similar to it.

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 un beholden Its aereal 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.

Nature keeps its secrets. All we have are a series of assumptions about what it’s like.
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?

What’s going on inside that bird’s head to make it sound so cheery? What is it singing about? Nature? Love? It must be ignorant of pain, annoyance, sadness.
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 scor
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 scorners of the ground!

These lines are the highlight of the poem. They capture what Wordsworth sought—he looked before and after, and regretted what was or would be lost.
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.

The poem ends a lot like “Ode to the West Wind.” Shelley asks a favor of nature—just as he asked the wind to make him its lyre; here he asks the skylark to teach him its happiness.

Also, as at the end of “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley again ends with the idea that the world would then hear him (that’s a pretty large audience by the way).

Also, the word “now” creates a special effect. It is as if Shelley has frozen the moment in time and “preserved the day.” It is intimate. Readers feel there with him, suspended in an eternal present, listening (to Shelley though, not the bird).