

In Pursuit of an Ideal : an Aesthetic Quest For Shelley's Poetic Thought

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Abstract: The present study purports to investigate Shelley's poetic – aesthetic paradigm . The study falls into three parts and a conclusion. Part one considers some fundamental concepts such as " Poetics " , " Aesthetics " , " World-view" and explores the fountains of the Shelleyan aesthetic philosophy. In theory , Shelley is a Platonist and his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty " is taken as a poetic manifestation of his romantic idealism . Part two purports to analyze Shelley's longer poems . i.e. "Alastor ; or , The Spirit of Solitude " and "Epipsychidion" as illustrations of the poet's

aesthetic pursuit . Then , it concedes to investigate two more poems , that is, "The Sensitive Plant" and the lyrical drama "Prometheus Unbound" . The allegorization of Love and Beauty sustains the poet to build up his dream – like world and to realize his world – view . Part three embraces Shelley's heroines as imaged in the works analyzed . It also discusses poetic imagination , the faculty that poetry works on . This human power is explored in relation to the doctrine of Love . The study is rounded up with concluding remarks deduced from the Shelleyan basic poetic works

1. Introduction: Western Culture witnessed dramatic changes in the aesthetic and literary sensitivity in the late eighteenth century . The new intellectual orientation or Romanticism is realized as a reaction against the rigid premises and conventions of Classicism. What characterize the new cultural impulse are the strong emotion and the ravish appeal to imagination. There is a tendency to have insight into the beauty of nature, the glamour of childhood and the triumph of liberty . The philosophers and poets of the age put an immensely higher appreciation on man's intellectual facilities and on his visionary dreams. They speculate that man has insight beyond sense to the infinite by and through the power of imagination. In theory, the Romantics exalt the subjective, the imaginative, the supernatural, the spontaneous and the visionary. The poets are mostly preoccupied with the issues of poetics and politics . They consider the human situation their own . Of the Romantics in English literature who glorifies Beauty as a doctrine for universal union and Love as a supreme power to liberate mankind is Shelley .

Part One : Shelley's fountains of aesthetic philosophy:

A focus reading on Shelley's poetic works will indicate the degree to which the philosophical concepts of love and beauty become his primary poetic subject. The romantic poet ; however, couldn't develop his poetic – aesthetic paradigm without recourse to the premises of the philosophers whom he mainly preoccupied with such as Plato and Berkeley . But before going a step further , it is plausible to identify the terms which form the poles of the study , namely , " Poetics " and " Aesthetics " .

Poetics is traditionally a systematic theory or doctrine of poetry . It defines its various branches and subdivisions , forms and technical recourses , and discusses it from other creative activities (see Preminger etal , 1974 : 636 – 639) .

Aesthetics is viewed as the branch of philosophy that studies the principles of beauty, especially in art . The term still refers to the first aesthetic theory of Plato who believed that reality consists of archetypes or forms beyond human sensation, which are the models for all things that exist in human experience (see Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary , 2004:20) . Relevant to these terms is the notion of world – view . World – view is a key – concept in cultural anthropology , philosophy, literary studies and other fields . The concept basically refers to the sum of ideas which an individual within a group or that group have of the universe in and around them . (See International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences , Vol.15 , 19 68) . In philosophy , world – view is considered as " a system of views , concepts and notions about the surrounding world (Rosenthal and Yudin , 1967 : 482-483) . Redfield (in Bauman , 1973: 30) states that " every world-view is made of the stuff of philosophy , the mature of all things and their interrelations." In literary analysis, the term refers to the philosophy of an individual or a group to one's conception of world civilization and one's relation to it .

Plato's idealism is realized by and through certain doctrines . Harmon and Holman (1996 : 322) speculate that the doctrine of ideas (or " forms ") insights that true reality is found not in the mutable realm of sense but in the higher , spiritual realm of the ideal and universal . To Plato , there are two kinds of love and beauty , a lower and a higher . The soul of the lover of beauty in its quest

for the perfect beauty ascends gradually from the sensual . . . to the spiritual and thereby develops all the virtues both of thought and action . Beauty and virtue become identified (Ibid.) .

Bishop Berkeley , likewise , believes that the nature of everything that exists is spiritual . That intellectual system leads to the view that nothing whatever exists except a single mind . It is the very idea that the poet found in Plato's dialogues. The whole universe is but one spirit. So, all the beauties of the human love on earth are partial manifestations of an absolute beauty or goodness which exists eternal and unchanging.

The notion of the universal spirit or the One Mind is explicitly illustrated in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty "(1816). The opening lines of verse describe Intellectual Beauty as something transcends the sense , apart of the ideal realm that visits this world from time to time :

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats tho' unseen amongst us , - visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower , -
(Raine , II . 44 – 47) .

Thus, the spirit of beauty is invisible. What the poet refers to is not the thing itself but its floating shadow . This recalls to the mind the Platonic doctrine of forms . The mental picture of the world in this seven twelve – line stanza is built up by a sequence of similes . Similes and metaphors are common structural devices in poetry of all kind . What is surprising , here , is the frequency with which such comparisons are elaborated in the poem :

Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower
,
It visits with inconstant glance

Each human heart and countenance ;
Like hues and harmonies of evening , -
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,-
Like memory of music fled , -
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear , and yet dearer for its mystery .

(Ibid. : 9 – 12)

Part Two : " Alastor " and " Epipsychidion "

In his longer poem " Alastor ; or , The Spirit of Solitude " (1815) , Shelley sets up his poetic – aesthetic paradigm by using the allegorical style to express his world-view . " Alastor " is the pursuit of a handsome young poet seeking " strange truth in undiscovered lands". Epistemologically, he drinks deep of the fountain of knowledge :

The fountain of divine philosophy
Fled not his thirsting lips , and all of great ,
Or good , or lovely , which the sacred past
In truth or Fable consecrates , he felt
And knew.

(Ibid. :71 – 75)

In his prefatory note to his poem (Ibid.) , Shelley considers " Alastor " " as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind – ". The spirit of sweet human love has sent a Vision to the hero of "Alastor " who aspires beyond worldly beauty and loves " even like Love " :

Two starry eyes , hung in the glow of thought ,
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles
To beckon him .

(Ibid.: 430 – 432)

The romantic – wanderer , on his side , is eager to participate the Vision . But this ideal romantic pursuit has proven fruitless . Even the Arab Maid , a reality in flesh

and blood , seems but a step in his quest for the perfect ascending from the sensual . The irreconciliation of the poet's mortal state to be one with the immortal or the visionary self may explain the source of wandering and sorrow of Shelly's Alastor .

Stylistically , the poetic structures are charged with the phrases of dimness , stillness, vastness and death , as in "black gulps " , " beautiful shade " , lustrous gloom " , " love tranquility " , unbounded atmosphere ' , stillness of its solitude " .

In Epipsychedion (1821) , Shelley develops the theme of the romantic – wanderer searching for the ideal and the effect of the secret vision of perfection on the human spirit . The vision comes this time in a human feminine form . It is Lady Emilia , Shelley's model and inspiration . The dual status of humanity , the mortal vs immortal becomes more grotesque and picturesque . The prominent image of the finite / infinite self is still the poetic realization of Platonism . The image of the woman is elaborated by a flow of vigorous language and vividness of imagination :

Seraph of Heaven ! too gentle to be human ,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
All that is insupportable in thee
Of light , and love , and immortality.

(Ibid. : 21 – 24)

That " Seraph of Heaven " becomes " the soul out of my soul " . The Lady is attributed with a set of epithets of fairness and gladness throughout the whole poem. But the philosophical problem still exists : there is nothing a fine Womanliness about Emily . Even the reality of flesh and blood is turned into a shadowy , ethereal creation . Albeit the poet appeals for an immortal union , this desire can not be fulfilled in a mortal context without " the annihilation of

identity" . Though Shelley considers the Lady as a human model of his poetic design , the concrete feminine beauty is transferred into an ethereal figure by and through these spontaneous images . Emilia becomes a metaphor herself . So the physical beauty is transfigured into an " image ' , a " shadow " , a " pleasure " and a " reflection " . She is , in Shelley's words , "An image of some bright Eternity / A shadow of some golden dream ; a Splendor (Ibid. :115 – 116) .

Thus , by the power of imagination , the portions of the material existence are transformed into intangible " thingness " that the poetic structure reflects . The poet , as in " Alastor " , eventually realizes that what he really seeks is something inside his thought . The Vision is but the creation of his spiritual perfection . The poet aspires to the identification of the finite and the infinite which is not in life . There is a self – reflection in the poem: Shelley doesn't achieve that fortunate union of the aesthetically ideal with the reality because the reality itself is transformed into a vision .

The allegorization of Love and Beauty develops in Shelley's more significant poem " The Sensitive Plant " (1820) . Apparently, the poet describes a lovely Italian garden where a plant grows . But as it is frequently the case with Shelley , the natural elements are soon transfigured . The sensitive plant in the opening lines of verse represents the poet himself . Once more , the poem is charged with self – reflection . While going deeper into the aesthetic insight , the plant becomes the symbol of beauty-lover , which thirsts for the ideal :

For the sensitive plant has no bright flower ,
Radiance and odor are not its dower ;
It loves , even like Love , its deep heart is full ,
It desires what it has not , the Beautiful !

(Ibid. : 74 – 77)

The Lady , in the poem , is imaged as " God to the starry scheme." Like that of Epipsychidion , the soul of the poet – lover desires its own perfect and transcends prototypes. He couldn't love a human form . This may be the case behind the transformation of the Shelleyan heroines into images, shades and splendors . It also proves that Shelley's metaphorical language serves to express his philosophical aesthetics. In his introduction to Plato's Symposium , Hamilton (1980 : 19) , sums up the platonic doctrine of beauty . He maintains :

(1) that love . . . implies the existence of an object : (2) that

Love or at least that form of love which the Greeks called "Eros")

desires his object : (3) that desire is not felt for what is already

possessed : (4) that since the object of love . . . is beauty , Love

cannot be beautiful .

Love , here and elsewhere , interpenetrates the whole universe . The philosophical forms of love , beauty and delight become the glorious beams of that dream- like universe . Love , like , imagination that creates unity in diversity , brings the elements of mankind in one whole .

Part Three : Shelley's Poetic Heroines

In Shelley's lyrical drama " Prometheus Unbound " (1818 – 19) , the scene is allegorical . It is written in " the peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery which distinguishes the modern literature of England , " as Shelley wrote in his prefatory note to the poem . Amid the mental struggle of the champion with the oppressor springs Asia as the symbol of universal Love :

Asia , thou light of life ,

Shadow of beauty un behold : and ye ,
Fair sisters nymphs , who made long years of pain
Sweet to remember , thro' your love and care :
Henceforth we will not part .

(Opt.ic , III. iii . 8 – 12)

The reunion is a mental one : the heroine is still " light of life " and " shadow of beauty " but not an earthier element . Wasserman (1971 : 225 – 261) speculates that Asia in the lyrical drama is to perform a role somewhere like that of the Venus – lady of the Sensitive Plant . He concedes that Asia's nature is to radiate love . . . she is the ideal condition of existence. But existence, or the One Mind, is also the " living spirit in that ideally it is the identity of perceiver and perception . , and Shelley everywhere is inclined to conceive of life (in this ideal sense) and love - and light – an intimately related and energy and joy of love (Ibid.).

The concept of universality is also linked to poetry . The role of the poet in the world is not merely an entertainer , but a creator . His creations are beautiful and new . In his prefatory notes to "Prometheus Unbound " , Shelley maintains :

Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new , not because
the portions of which they are composed had no
previous
existence in the mind of man or in nature but because
the
whole produced by their combination has some
intelligible
and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotions
and
thought , and with the contemporary condition of them
: one
great poet is a masterpiece of nature which another not

only ought to study but must study (p. 82) .

Thus , the Romantic poet holds the idea that all human minds are but portions of the One Mind , so because of the interconnection and interdependence of all poems , each is a fragment of , or partial movement toward , " that great poem , which all poets , like the co-operating thought of our great mind , have built up since the beginning of the world"(Wassweman,1971 : 225 – 261) .

Shelley's poetic thought is profoundly elaborated in his prose treatise " Defense of Poetry " (1821) . To Shelley , poetry is the expression of imagination , and it has access , therefore , to this special kind of imaginative knowledge (Hough , 1967 : 122 – 155) . Shelley's treatise generates a network between imagination , love and beauty . " The great secret of morals , " as the poet has put it , " is love ; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought , action or person not ours ."The Romantic poet speculates that " the great instrument of moral good is the imagination . " So , the imagination is akin to love in the sense that it fills the universe with glorious beams and poetry ministers to the effect by acting upon the cause . " What signifies , here , is the role of the poet in leading mankind to perceive the One Mind or " Intellectual Beauty " . The poet , as Shelley has put it (Ibid .) , is " able to express essential truth in the form of beauty , from which all men of uncorrupted taste receive pleasure , " and " without him the beauty of order and beauty of holiness would never have been perceived ; and if their beauty had never been perceived , they would never have been desired."

In the treatise , the poet is attributed with prophecy . The poet , to Shelley , is " even a prophet , for by seeing the present as it really is he sees in it the seeds of the future .

The poetic thought gives a sense of a wholeness : the more modest kinds of imaginative writings are but " episodes to that great poem (Ibid.) . Shelley , then , is the universal mind who perceives the creative process as one whole . And this gives his imaginative works the deep insight of the poetic genius.

Concluding Remarks

B.P. Shelley is the universal mind who views mankind as a universal unit and his poetic – aesthetic paradigm is universal since it tackles the problematic issues of Human thought. These aesthetic views are reflected in his major poetic works . In " "Alastor " and " Epipsychnion " , the hero is the romantic poet – wonderer who seeks for the dream – vision in uninhabited lands where the natural elements serve as mirrors to his psychological traits . In " The Sensitive Plant " and "Prometheus Unbound " , the hero desires love and beauty in a dream – like world . Shelley's images encode his aesthetic world – view . These imaginative works are but the acts of self – reflection .

The present study has shown that there is no way for the immortal union of the finite and the infinite self . And this is the self – oriented motif of the romantic sorrow in Shelley's works . The ethereal visions of his mind seem disconnected from reality . They are the imaginative aspects of observation of nature , of human situation , and of his intellectual insights . The irreconciliation is the fundamental paradox of the transcendental and the mortal . Hence , it reveals the main characteristic of the Platonic – Shelleyan thought .

Shelley's experience is mostly metaphorical . So the study has shown that the poet's aesthetic idealism is encoded in his metaphorical modes of expression. By and through his imagery , Shelley even has transfigured his heroines

from their human feminine forms into ethereal visions of love and beauty .

The study has pointed out that not only the philosophical doctrines have the sense of universality , but also the poetic creation itself . Shelley emphasizes the role of the poet as a leader of mankind to the splendor of beauty and love as a supreme power for the liberation of the human race .

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البحث عن المثال : مساءلة جمالية في فكر (شلي) الشعري

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الملخص : يعد هذا البحث في رصد المنظومة الجمالية الشعرية في الأعمال العظام للشاعر الانكليزي بيرسي بيشي شلي (١٨٢٢ - ١٧٩٢) . فالتقافة الأوربية قد شهدت تحولات درامية في الحساسية الجمالية منذ نهايات القرن الثامن عشر والنصف الأول من القرن التاسع عشر . وقد مارست هذه التحولات تأثيرها في حقول الأدب والفن والفلسفة . إن ما يميز هذا الروح الجديد هو العاطفة الهادرة ومعاقرة الخيال . فالشعراء والفلاسفة قد رفعوا من شأن القدرة الخالقة للشاعر وحلمه الرؤيوي . فكانت الرومانسية تبجلاً للذاتوي والتلقائي والخارقي مثلما أعلنت قداسة الحب والجمال والحرية . يأتي (شلي) في مقدمة الشعراء الذين تغنوا بمجد الجمال بوصفة كلية كونائية والحب بكونه القوة القادرة على تحرير الإنسان .

حلفت شعرية(شلي) بأفكار الحب والجمال الفلسفية ، غير أن هذه الأفكار ما كانت لتتخذ هذه المنظومة الجمالية المتعالية لولا قراءات الشاعر في تصورات (أفلاطون) (وبريكلي) الفلسفية . مثل هذه التصورات والرموز والرؤى تجد طريقها إلى قصائده كما في مفهوم (الروح الكوني) في (أنشودة إلى الجمال الفكري) (١٨١٦) حيث الجمال يبدو لا مرئياً أما (الآستور او روح العزلة) ١٨١٦ فهي سعي الشاعر الجمالي صوب المثال عبر أسلوبية ترميزية ، حيث الشاعر يرود أفانيم المجهول من اجل إن يسقى من ينابيع المعرفة هذا الترميز

الشعري يتطور في النبتة مرهفة الحس) (١٨٢٠) يرسم الشاعر شلي بالكلمات حديقة زهرية التكوين ترودها سيدة بارعة الحسن ، فيما تظل النبتة مرهفة الحس (روح الشاعر) تهفو إلى ما ليس فيها ذلكم هو الجميل . وتظل رائعة (شلي) (برومثيوس طليقاً) (١٨١٩ - ١٨١٨) مطولة شعرية يتأمل فيها الشاعر الصورة الترميزية (آسيا) بوصفها الوضع المثالي للإنسانية حيث توحدن الجنس البشري بكليته في صورة متخلية .

يقدم البحث فرضية مفادها أن صبوة الشاعر صوب توحدن المتناهي (البشري) باللامتناهي (المثالي) هي إحدى تجليات فكر (شلي) الشعري وان هذا الإدماج لا يقوم الا في مخلية الشاعر كما تشف عنه صورته المحلقة . أن من مقاصد البحث الكشف عن إن الفشل المحتوم الذي مني به سعي الشاعر ينبع من ذلك الكد اللامجدي في الإدماج بين النفس المتناهية والمثال غير القابل للنفاد . غير أن العقل الشعري لدى (شلي) يبرهن إن ليس الحب والجمال من الجواهر ذات الصبغة الكونائية حسب ، إنما الخلق الشعري برمته هو ذو بعد كوني أيضاً ولذا ، فالقيمة الجادة للبحث تتأتى من إضاءة الجوانب الكونية في تجربة شلي الجمالية كما تتجلى في قصائد من قبيل (الآستور او روح العزلة ، أنشودة إلى الجمال الفكري) ،(النبتة مرهفة الحس والدراما الغنائية (برومثيوس طليقاً) .