

Love, the political mind

A vignette in honor of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Lausanne, 1984

Should we have to represent Shelley in an anthology we would have to consider three basic aspects or rather three basic and recurrent themes of his poetry, namely: love, politics, and intellect.

Such a choice is difficult to realize because Shelley's poems present on the one hand a certain continuity and development of thought that takes place chronologically from poem to poem and on the other there are really few short poems that summarize in a way his ideas on a specific subject for he needed space and great number of words to express his inner world

Notwithstanding these difficulties an honest choice would be Ode to the West Wind or Epipsychidion representative of the theme love; Ozymandias representative of his political views; Hymn to Intellectual Beauty showing what should be a mind and finally for the sake of synthesis, Prometheus Unbound.

Considering Ode to the West Wind, one understands by the title that Shelley's poem is going to be in praise of the wind, the ethereal element that carries all previous sins and selfhood thus purifying not only the mind and heart but also the soul. It is also thus that we are prepared to accept the essence of life: love. Unless it happens so, a human entity will not be able to meditate on his fellowmen because of being negatively introverted. Therefore, in accordance with Christ's teaching and only that – not to Christian dogmas, does Shelley establish the foundations of his philosophy.

Ozymandias conveys a clear message: those who exert power from power will perish. Ozymandias is a king of many a might and other qualities of whom an unknown artist made a mockery by creating a statue – the image of the king, in the middle of the desert – of nowhere with an epigram: 'my name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: look on my works, ye mighty and despair!' this short pithy poem shows that violence is never the best solution. Moreover, it shows that should a certain establishment – anarchy – exert power and oppression by rule and compulsory obedience, the reaction should not be of the same kind, for the result of this confrontation would be disastrous: the desert.

The second pillar is the mind, in other words, how must a mind be to be positive, constructive and helpful. In the Hymn to Intellectual Beauty Shelley praises the mind, its power, its mutability, its beauty but also the dualism good v. evil. Shelley considered that under anarchy mind is blind. Added to this, he thought that a mind should be the vehicle of human greatness and therefore

needing love, hope and self-esteem. Such qualities, be they all human qualities, enable the mind to be the avenue of pure thoughts

Finally, we reach the climax of his thought: Prometheus Unbound. It is in this poem that one finds a harmonious interaction between mind, love and social enlightenment: ethics.

Prometheus being chained to a rock by Jupiter thinks of freeing himself and taking his revenge. He understands that by doing so he perpetuates the system already put in place by Jupiter. So he does the contrary: it is through love that his mind is clear and his heart light, thus he starts to think positively which leads him to have a non-violent reaction to Jupiter. The climax of the story is his union with Asia who represents love.

Thus, the only possible social enlightenment is achieved when love may liberate the mind and reverse the established power.

For reference:

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