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Shelley's metaphysics: An assessment

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Abstract

Shelley was an idealist by temperament. For him the creations of the mind were more important than the sensible world. Abstract ideas had a great hold on him. He believed that the ideal world or the world of the spirit is the only reality: all else is unreal. His idealistic tendencies were strengthened by his study of Plato and the Neo-Platonist philosophers. All his poetry is a yearning for the perfection of the ideal – perfect beauty, perfect love, and perfect liberty.

Keywords: Shelley's metaphysics, perfect beauty, perfect love, and perfect liberty

Introduction

Shelley believed that there is one universal mind or soul at the back of things which is the creative and animating principle of the universe. The soul or mind objectifies itself in myriad forms perceived by the senses. Every portion of the universe including the human soul is only an expression of the Universal Soul. This is Pantheism – the belief that the same universal soul dwells in all the objects of nature including man.

Like Plato, Shelley believed that the universal spirit is at once immanent, that is, present everywhere in the universe, and also transcendent, that is, above and beyond the universe. It is this spirit that creates all forms. It is the only reality while all else is merely the shadow show of reality. Like Plato, he called it by various names, beauty, wisdom, delight, but specially love. He says that the light of the Universal Spirit illuminates every object of nature. That spirit is 'sustaining love' which,

“Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of,
The fire for which all thirst.”

The entire world of nature is sustained by the power of love, and works and moves in beauty. In the poem *Adonais*, Shelley says that Keats has become one with nature. His voice is heard in the moan of the thunder and the song of the Nightingale. He has become a portion of the Universal Spirit.

“Which has withdrawn his being to its own,
Which wields the world with never-wearied love
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.”

It is this creative spirit of love which works through the universe trying to give an ideal and beautiful form to gross matter. The spirit 'sweeps through the dull, dense world' and compels unwilling dross to become lovely,

“Bursting in its beauty and its might,
From trees and beasts and men into the heavens light”.
This world is subject to change, but the universal spirit is eternal – “the one remains, the many change and pass”.

Like Plato, Shelley believes in pre-existence and immortality of the soul. The soul of the individual comes to him from this Eternal Soul. Death is only a dissolution of the flesh, after which the individual soul returns to the external. Keats is not dead; it is death who is dead, because he has been absorbed into the eternal and has become a part of nature.

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“Dust to the dust! But the pure spirit shall flow,
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow,
Through time and change”.

8. Spurgeon. Mysticism in English Poetry.

The so called death is an awakening from the dream of life; it is a withdrawal from the painted veil that separates us from the Eternal. This Platonic belief in the pre-existence of the soul and its return to immortality runs through *Adonais*. Shelley's view of Immortality is based on Platonic thought but it is modified by his own reflections on the ideal nature of love and beauty. He does not believe in the orthodox religious view of the soul going to heaven or hell after death according to a man's deeds in life. In Shelley's view the human soul is immortal in the sense that it is absorbed in the Universal Soul and lives as part of it. In life, when the Universal Soul is a prisoner of the body, it remains subject to all the illusions, dreams and nightmares of the senses. But after death it is freed from those illusions which cause sorrow and suffering, and subsets in a state either of personal consciousness or of absorption. According to Edmunds, “No man ever preached the triumph of the spiritual over the material more eloquently than he. It is the undertone of all his poetry and in *Adonais*, it bursts forth into a mighty symphony which voices all the warrants of our immortality in ever-lasting music.

Like Plato, Shelley believes that in nature there is a continuous struggle between the forces of good and evil. The evil may triumph for the time being, but it is bound to be overthrown in the long run. The critics whom Shelley chooses to make responsible for Keats' death represent the power of evil. They are like wolves, ravens, vultures, serpents and other blind and stupid forces of destruction. They are conquered by Apollo (Byron).

“The spoilers tempt no second blow,
They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low”.

The sun comes out and many reptiles are born, and when it sets they die. In the same way, a God like mind goes to Eternity, while the forces of Death and destruction are left to wallow in their own darkness.

On a personal level, Shelley is a pessimist, because his pessimism is a result of his frustrated idealism, but his belief in the victory of Good, in the Immortality of the Soul, in the future of mankind makes him an optimist. The general tone of *Adonais* is not of pessimism. His poetry never depresses. It always consoles and strengthens.

Such is Shelley's metaphysics. We may call it Mysticism, Platonism, Pantheism or a fusion of pessimism and optimism. He had a passion for the ideal which was indestructible. *Adonais* is a song of triumph of the eternal over the ephemeral (transitory), of the ideal over the illusory, of good over evil, and of the spirit over Death.

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