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Ode to the West Wind: Shelley in Pursuit of Rest

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ABSTRACT

There were many celebrated writers in English Romantic period, one of them was Percy Bysshe Shelley. As a poet, Shelley also challenges the orthodox community establishment such as church and government. His defiance is based on the reasons about humanity and his aspiration to build the new happy community, free from despotism, and full of solidarity so that the laws and conventional institutions are no longer necessary. He tried to persuade people through logic and emotion. His resolves are expressed in his poems, one of them is Ode to the West Wind. This paper highlights the reasonable measures of Shelley's effort of setting people's mind at rest.

Keywords: celebrated, orthodox, community, government, aspiration, conventional, emotion.

Shelley emerges in the early 19th century, romantic poetry as one of the most imaginative and visionary message of his own. For Matthew Arnold, Shelley is a beautiful, but ineffectual angel, beating in the void, his luminous wings in vain. We feel that Shelley is constantly prompted by a sense of hope and vision for the happiness and prosperity of humanity on earth. Shelley is, in him the making of an idealist, a great dreamer of dreams about the glorious future of men and women. His poems like *Prometheus Unbound*, *Ode to the West Wind* are splendid instances of the point.

Ode to the West Wind consist the romanticism aspects such as imagination, nature interest, and individual freedom. As explained above, one of the Romanticism aspect is the imagination interest. The poets in English Romantic Period used their feeling as a value, and this value is based on imagination. To express his feelings and give illustration, or give the particular atmosphere, Shelley uses imagination in his poem 'Ode to the West Wind'. Shelley wants to express his love to nature by his words such as *winter, spring, air, leaves, flowers, clouds, rain*,

fair, wave, etc. He wants to remind the readers for not only seeing the particular things as a mere thing, but those also have particular values.

In the very first stanza of the poem *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelley makes an impassioned address to the wild wind of west as the breath of autumn with reference to his action on land. Thereby, he draws our attention to its twin aspects of destruction and preservation of leaves and seeds as synonymous with his own faith in regeneration, through destruction of all old, decayed and dry human institutions and establishment of an ideal world. In other words, it is in the broadcasting of visionary and revolutionary thought that Shelley identifies the ways and means of reconstruction of human beings in all spheres under the magic touch of love, consideration and justice.

After the description of the actions of the West Wind in the sky and ocean, in the second and third stanza respectively, Shelley reaches the fourth stanza, in which he conveys his thoughts and emotions of instruction and introspection of his cry to the west wind to lift him as a wave, a leaf and a cloud. It is this cry for a loan of strength from the west wind that takes him to the final stanza of the ode.

Now he expresses his prophetic and visionary thoughts and faiths. He prays to the West Wind to receive the thoughts which are lying dormant or dead in him and to spread them over in the world as it scatters the dry leaves and seeds over the soil and fosters the growth of new plants. He wants the West Wind to imbue him with its energy, so that he may be able to spread through his magical verses, his vision and messages on earth as it drives away the ashes and sparks from an unquenched hearth. Shelley understands that people in general are in a state of dormancy, torpor and insensibility, for which he is in the need of awakening them and making them conscious of their rights and privileges as inhabitants of this earth. In this missionary work, the poet wants the West Wind to act as his trumpet by which he can declare his prophetic words in order to rouse people from intellectual and spiritual slumber. He urges the West Wind to help him to inspire the suffering and toiling people with the hope of prosperous life and a happy vision of millennium. "*If winter comes, can spring be far behind?*" with this question, Shelley, the revolutionary and visionary, brings to us his positive affirmation on the never failing faith in reconstruction and regeneration. For Shelley, there is always hope for mankind. Whatever sufferings and hardships humanity may have to undergo, ultimately the dark period shall end and the golden age, the era of peace, prosperity and plenty must dawn. Just as in nature, when in autumn, the rotten things are destroyed and seeds for future growth are sown, in the same manner, even during the most depressing period of human mystery, seeds of regeneration are sown, which will blossom forth at some future date. It is therefore, the beauty of the poet to keep humanity always aware of its glorious future towards which it is evolving in a natural process. So, we find that *Ode to the West Wind* is infused with the very spirit of Shelley's personality. We find him as a prophet, a reformer, a sincere well wisher of mankind, who calls up on the West Wind, the destroying and the preserving agent in nature, to lend him his power, so that he may effectively save humanity from depression.

Like many of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems, "Ode to the West Wind" was inspired by a natural phenomenon, an autumn storm that prompted the poet to contemplate the links between the outer world of nature and the realm of the intellect. In five stanzas directly addressed to the powerful wind that Shelley paradoxically calls both "destroyer" and "preserver" (line 14), the poet explores the impact of the regenerative process that he sees occurring in the world around him and compares it to the impact of his own poetry, which he believes can have similar influence in regenerating mankind.

In each stanza, Shelley speaks to the West Wind as if it is an animate power. The first three stanzas form a logical unit; in them the poet looks at how the wind influences the natural terrain over which it moves. The opening lines describe the way the wind sweeps away the autumn leaves and carries off seeds of vegetation, which will lie dormant through winter until the spring comes to give them new life as plants. In the second stanza, the poet describes the clouds that whisk across the autumn sky, driven by the same fierce wind and twisted into shapes that remind him of Maenads, Greek maidens known for their wild behavior. Shelley calls the wind the harbinger of the dying year, a visible sign that a cycle of nature's life is coming to a close. The poet uses the third stanza to describe the impact of the wind on the Mediterranean coast line and the Atlantic ocean; the wind, Shelley says, moves the waters and the undersea vegetation in much the same way it shifts the landscape.

The poem "Ode to the West Wind" directly conforms to Shelley's poetic creed. Poetry, Shelley writes in "A Defence of Poetry," "...awakens and enlarges the mind by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combination of thought. Poetry lifts its veil from the hidden beauty of the world." Consistent with this theory of poetic creation, Shelley's Romanticism is filled with "vehement feelings, ecstatic, mournful, passionate, desperate or fiercely indignant". Sometimes he makes a sudden turn of the theme and talks about himself just like the movements in Beethoven's symphonies. It is in this that he is unique among the Romantics—looking for a better world of liberty, equality and fraternity in his idealistic project of life. For this, he is seen to be pessimistic about the present but highly optimistic about the future to come.

The Romantic poets made frequent use of the wind as a soothing symbol. But in Shelley's treatment it is not a "correspondent breeze"; it is rather ferocious in its energy. M.H. Abrams says "because of the ferocity the wind becomes a vast impersonal force, which the poet needs as a symbol of both destruction and creation". Herein lies the importance of the wind as the metaphor for revolutionary social change.

The West Wind is the breath of personified Autumn. When Shelley invokes this breath, "dirge", and "voice", he has in mind a fellow traveler, a "comrade" like himself, no less a human being for being a season of the year, no less an individual than the "close bosom-friend" in Keats' "To Autumn." Two other figures recur to Shelley in the Arno forest that day. The stormy cirrus clouds driven by the wind remind him of the "bright hair" and "locks" of "some fierce Maenad." He imagines the wind waking a male and dreaming "blue Mediterranean." Like Shelley the

boy, these minor fellow travelers help humanize Autumn and his speaking power. In the first section, Shelley characterizes him as “an enchanter” and a charioteer to make that personification vivid. Then, by repeatedly addressing the West Wind in the second person as “thou” and “thee,” Shelley works towards achieving his purpose, his “sore need.” That would identify himself, not just with the leaves of the forest, the wind’s victims, but as “One too like thee”, like Autumn, music maker, composer of “mighty harmonies.” Shelley imagines himself first as Autumn’s lyre but, made bolder by the moment, claims the composer’s own voice with “Be thou me, impetuous one!” He associates himself with Autumn, the “enchanter,” in the phrase, “by the incantation of this verse.” *Ode to the West Wind*, in Shelley’s mind, possesses the wind’s own driving power at its close.

Shelley’s overreaching is not quite done. The Autumn wind does not create, but only destroys and preserves. It drives ghosts and “Pestilence-stricken multitudes”, causes “Angels of rain and lightning” to fall from heaven, releases “Black rain, and fire, and hail”, and brings fear to the oceans. It is not enough to be “a wave, a leaf, a cloud,” at the mercy of Autumn’s means in the “dying year.” The last stanza disregards Autumn and its successor season, Winter, for the last of the poem’s characters, Autumn’s “azure sister of the spring.” Shelley anticipates that spring will “blow / Her clarion” for a good reason. At the most poignant moment of recognition of the poem, in the last two lines we all remember and do not know why, Spring’s life-giving clarion becomes “The trumpet of a prophecy” Shelley determines to blow. Though “dead” and “withered,” though reduced to scattered “Ashes,” he will return, his “lips” blowing the trumpet, *like the voice of the Spring*. In shifting from clarion to trumpet, he brings the poem’s harmonies to a climax. *Ode to the West Wind* ends with faith in a poet’s resurrection, not with a weather forecast.

The wispy, fluid terza rima of "Ode to the West Wind" finds Shelley taking a long thematic leap beyond the scope of "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," and incorporating his own art into his meditation on beauty and the natural world. Shelley invokes the wind magically, describing its power and its role as both "destroyer and preserver," and asks the wind to sweep him out of his torpor "as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" In the fifth section, the poet then takes a remarkable turn, transforming the wind into a metaphor for his own art, the expressive capacity that drives "dead thoughts" like "withered leaves" over the universe, to "quicken a new birth"--that is, to quicken the coming of the spring. Here the spring season is a metaphor for a "spring" of human consciousness, imagination, liberty, or morality--all the things Shelley hoped his art could help to bring about in the human mind.

Shelley asks the wind to be his spirit, and in the same movement he makes it his metaphorical spirit, his poetic faculty, which will play him like a musical instrument, the way the wind strums the leaves of the trees. The thematic implication is significant: whereas the older generation of Romantic poets viewed nature as a source of truth and authentic experience, the younger generation largely viewed nature as a source of beauty and aesthetic experience. In this poem, Shelley explicitly links nature with art by finding powerful natural metaphors with which to express his ideas about the power, import, quality, and ultimate effect of aesthetic expression.

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