

Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

Summary

Shelley

The shadow of a strange power floats unseen throughout the world, entering into man, coming and going mysteriously. Shelley asks this shadow, which he calls a "Spirit of Beauty," where it has gone and why it disappears and leaves us desolate. Then he acknowledges that it is vain to ask this question; one might as well ask why rainbows disappear or why man can both love and hate, despair and hope. No voice from another world has ever answered these questions. The "names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven" are the record of men's vain attempts to get answers to such questions. Only the light of the Spirit of Beauty gives grace and truth to the restless dream which life is. If the Spirit of Beauty remained constantly with man, man would be immortal and omnipotent. It nourishes human thought. The poet beseeches this spirit not to depart from the world. Without it, death would be an experience to be feared.

When Shelley was a boy, he sought spiritual reality in ghosts and the dead. In his search, the shadow of the Spirit of Beauty suddenly fell on him and filled him with elation. He vowed that he would dedicate himself to this Spirit and he has kept his vow. He is convinced that it will free the world from the state of slavery in which it is. He prays that this power will bring calm to his life, for he worships it. It has taught him to fear himself and love all mankind.

Analysis

The "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" was conceived and written during a boating excursion with Byron on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1816. The beauty of the lake and of the Swiss Alps is responsible for Shelley's elevating what he calls "Intellectual Beauty" to the ruling principle of the universe.

Alpine scenery was new to Shelley and unutterably beautiful. He was profoundly moved by it, and the poem, he wrote to Leigh Hunt, was "composed under the influence of feelings which agitated me even to tears." Thanks to the Alps, Shelley, who had given up Christianity, had at last found a deity which he could wholeheartedly adore. The worship of beauty is Shelley's new religion, and it is significant that he calls his poem a hymn, a term used almost exclusively for religious verse. Later, in August 1817, Shelley read Plato's *Symposium* and his faith in beauty was no doubt strengthened by Plato's discussion of abstract beauty in that work and in the *Phaedrus*, which Shelley read in August 1818. It was daily intercourse with stunning beauty, not Plato, however, that brought Shelley to his new faith. Joseph Barrell, in his *Shelley and the Thought of His Time: A Study in the History of Ideas*, makes it abundantly clear that the "Hymn" is not Platonic.

The central thought of "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is that there is a spiritual power that stands apart from both the physical world and the heart of man. This power is unknown to man and invisible, but its shadow visits "this various world with as inconstant wing / As summer winds that creep from flower to flower" and it visits also "with inconstant glance / Each human heart and countenance." When it passes away it leaves "our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate." Shelley does not profess to know why Intellectual Beauty, which he calls "unknown and awful," is an inconstant visitor, but he is convinced that if it kept "with [its] glorious train firm state" within man's heart, man would be "immortal and omnipotent." But since the Spirit of Beauty visits the world and man's heart with such irregularity, Shelley pleads with his deity rather than praises it. It remains remote and inaccessible. In the concluding stanza Shelley is a suppliant praying that the power of the Spirit of Beauty will continue to supply its calm "to one who worships thee, / And every form containing thee."

In Stanza V, Shelley confesses that as a boy, while he was searching for spiritual reality (chiefly by reading Gothic romances, it would appear), the shadow of Intellectual Beauty suddenly fell on him. He shrieked and clasped his hands in ecstasy. As a consequence of this experience, he tells us in Stanza VI, he vowed that he would dedicate his "powers / To thee and thine," and he has kept his vow. The experience also left him with the hope that the Spirit of Beauty would free "this world from its dark slavery." In this stanza, Shelley seems to combine two of the major interests of his life, love of beauty and love of freedom.

In regard to the "Intellectual Beauty" of the title, Barrell remarks that it implies an approach by means of the mental faculties but that Shelley probably meant to convey the idea that his concept of beauty was abstract rather than concrete. His approach is romantic and emotional. Shelley, however, seems to think of his Spirit of Beauty as personal, like the God of Christianity. He addresses it, pleads with it, worships it, but he may be using only the rhetorical device of personification.

The "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is more remarkable for what it tells us about Shelley than it is as a work of art. By his very nature, Shelley was an idealist and no form of materialism could appeal to him more than temporarily.