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Synthesizing the Sublime and Beautiful: Aesthetics in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

Abstract

As a Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley bristled at rationalistic attempts to definitively categorize the human condition. Taking Edmund Burke's treatise "On the Sublime and Beautiful" as his chief foil, Shelley explored aesthetic categories that certain strains of Enlightenment thought had held apart from one another. In my brief exegesis of his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" from 1816, I build on Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous and the work of intellectual historian Frank Ankersmit to argue that Shelley presents a holistic account of experience with the ineffable.

Keywords

Shelley, Burke, Ankersmit, sublime, aesthetics

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles | Nonfiction | Poetry | Reading and Language

Comments

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Synthesizing the Sublime and Beautiful:

Aesthetics in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

Christopher T. Lough

English 230-A: Introduction to Nineteenth-Century British Literature

Prof. Leonard Goldberg

October 9, 2020

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

In his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Percy Bysshe Shelley explores and synthesizes aesthetic categories that are traditionally held apart from one another. He speaks directly to the Spirit of Beauty in the penultimate stanza: “They know that never joy illum’d my brow / Unlink’d with hope that thou wouldst free / This world from its dark slavery, / That thou, O awful LOVELINESS, / Wouldst give whate’er these words cannot express” (ll. 68-72). We might note here that Shelley seems to approach Dostoevsky’s famous maxim that “beauty will save the world,” as he implores the Spirit to free humanity from its slavery. Yet there is something more interesting in his address: what Shelley describes is actually an experience of the sublime rather than the beautiful, as defined by Edmund Burke and other thinkers on aesthetics. We will see that Shelley’s “Hymn” fits within a quintessentially Romantic framework in this respect. In attempting to go beyond the rationalistic categorization of experience that would see the sublime and the beautiful as separate spheres of the human condition, it presents a phenomenalistic account of experience with the ineffable.

We should note at the outset the significance of Shelley’s title. That he calls his poem a hymn gives an idea of the religious significance he accords to the experience of beauty. We see this confirmed in the first lines of the second stanza, where Shelley first calls his muse by name: “Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate / With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon / Of human thought or form…” (ll. 13-15). In other words, beauty consecrates and lifts man above his natural limitations. As a religious skeptic, Shelley doubts traditional claims to truth—“Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven / Remain the records of their vain endeavour,” as he puts it in the third stanza—but not the reality or immediacy of experience (ll. 27-38). It is in this that he is chiefly interested; legitimacy is in experience itself, not some source beyond the beautiful. This will be useful to keep in mind as we go on to examine his aesthetic framework.

Edmund Burke represents Shelley's chief intellectual foil in his account of experience. Though best remembered today for his conservative critique of the French Revolution, in certain respects Burke was as much a part of the Enlightenment as Diderot and Voltaire; for his 1757 treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, the source of much modern thinking on aesthetics, represents the kind of rationalism from which the Romantics struggled to free themselves. For Burke, an encounter with the sublime provokes fear within the subject of experience. We can all think of experiences that we have difficulty in describing—we say that our words "fail us." In sublime experience, our descriptive faculties escape us because we are overwhelmed by the "greatness" of the object. It may be helpful here to think of Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, as described in his study *The Idea of the Holy* from 1917. While Otto postdated Shelley by a century and developed his theory with respect to religious experience, the "awe-inspiring mystery" of the divine bears a close resemblance to classical conceptions of the sublime—a cause both for terror and fascination.

As the title of his treatise would indicate, Burke sought to delineate the beautiful proper from the sublime, and his strict definition of separate aesthetic categories has an intimate bearing on Shelley's vision. In art, for example, a painting can be beautiful without being sublime if it lacks the aforementioned "greatness." It is easy to think how this framework might equally apply to the natural world: a rose in bloom can certainly be beautiful, but the majesty and grandeur of sweeping mountain vistas make for a truly sublime experience. Again, Otto is helpful in thinking through these categories. Although his project sought to defend prerational religious experience against a rationalism that would dismiss religion altogether, he clearly marks off the beautiful from the numinous, calling an encounter with beauty as "a quite different region of experience" than that of the numinous (Otto 5).

With all this in mind, we can see how Shelley synthesizes these categories of experience in his poetry. In "Mont Blanc," written around the same time as the "Hymn," he describes his impression of the highest mountain in the Alps as one of both awe and terror. His imagery more or less lines up with classical accounts of the sublime: "When I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange… Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl'd / The veil of life and death?" (ll. 35-36, 53-54). Turning to the "Hymn," we see the same type of description applied to the beautiful. Just as sublime experience transcends the capacity for speech, so Shelley asks the Spirit of Beauty, the "awful loveliness," to "give whate'er these words cannot express" (l. 71-72). Witness, too, his reaction in the fifth stanza: "Sudden, thy shadow fell on me; / I shriek'd, and clasp'd my hands in ecstasy!" (ll. 59-60). It is significant that he applies the overwhelming power of the sublime, one that causes him to cry out, to the beautiful: by mixing the two categories that Burke and thinkers after him held apart, he rebels against the idea that we should consider two experiences that are closely intertwined with one another as really distinct.

When Shelley calls Beauty "awful," we can take him in both senses of the word, literally terrible as well as awe-inducing. This fits neatly with Burke's framework of the sublime.
We should also note Shelley's biblical reference in this discussion. The Spirit of Beauty filling up what our words lack might bring to mind Paul's Letter to the Romans, where the apostle describes the Holy Spirit as an intercessor when "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Shelley's evocation of religious imagery thereby draws a parallel between the Spirit of Beauty and God himself. It is tempting here to think of the concept of transcendentals in classical Christian philosophy: the good, the true, and the beautiful exist independently of the human capacity to receive them, and give glimpses of God because they flow from his nature. As the neo-Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote in *Art and*

Scholasticism, the love of God "causes the beauty of what he loves, whereas our love is caused by the beauty of what he loves" (Maritain 22). Again the connection is drawn between the experience of God and an experience of the beautiful, described in terms of the sublime—precisely the phenomenon that Otto elucidated with his concept of the numinous and the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The key difference is that Shelley locates the significance of this encounter horizontally rather than vertically.

Beauty's quasi-divine role is reinforced when Shelley calls the human estate as a "dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate" in the second stanza (l. 17). It is impossible not to call to mind the Salve Regina, wherein Catholics pray for the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary *in hac lacrimarum valle*. Yet there is another aspect of Shelley's religious association with the beautiful, not least because of the poet's own skepticism. In his 2005 study *Sublime Historical Experience*, intellectual historian Frank Ankersmit describes sublime experience as fundamentally one of loss—for we lose our very selves in the moment we encounter the object of experience, and walk away knowing that we no longer are as we once were (Ankersmit 176). The Aristotelian conception of experience that this reflection requires (i.e., that we are formed by our experiences as our hands form to the objects that they grasp) strengthens the agency, as it were, of the object of experience. For Ankersmit, since the sublime strips us of something of ourselves, it stands as an "experience without a subject of experience"—it affects the subject regardless of his or her identity or collection of personal experiences (227). Thus beauty in Shelley's "Hymn," already identified with the sublime in its "awful loveliness," takes on another transcendental, and almost providential, capacity.

Shelley's conception of the beautiful further comports with Ankersmit's account of sublime experience when he describes the Spirit's effect on the mind. At the opening of the

fourth stanza, he writes: "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart / And come, for some uncertain moments lent" (ll. 37-38). Here we see those qualities and orientations of the will that make ourselves ourselves—that which makes us uniquely us—stripped away in the encounter with the beautiful. This is strikingly similar to the idea of sublime experience as one without a real subject, because every individuation of the subject is irrelevant when he or she is overcome with the sublime. Going back to Shelley's religious references, we also see the Spirit of Beauty take on a catechetical role. It adds the same qualities that it takes away, if only for the few moments of direct experience. With this man is made "immortal and omnipotent," should beauty "keep… firm state within his heart" (ll. 39-41). Of course, we must recall again that Shelley's self-professed atheism prevents us from reading the "Hymn" as a document reflective of Christian orthodoxy. Yet we can see how his fusion of the beautiful with the sublime is accompanied by his appropriation of religious imagery in describing the experience of the ineffable.

Theories of the sublime touched on by Burke, Otto, and Ankersmit all show us how Shelley reached beyond the rigid categorization of human experience. As a Romantic, he bristled against the Enlightenment rationalism that would see beauty and the sublime separated from one another, and synthesized them for a holistic account of human experience. In this, I believe Shelley's paradigm allows us to understand the true power of the beautiful—as well as the sublime, should one indeed insist on hard and fast categorization. He envisions a liberation from the confines of subjectivity, a glimpse behind and beyond the "dark slavery" of human suffering. The paradox of the beautiful is that it fills us up where we lack while stripping us of our shattered selves. For Shelley, this is a project only achieved when the Spirit of Beauty returns to the earth, in its own second coming to make all things new.

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