

The politics of shelley's "ode to the west wind"



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In his impassioned paean "Ode to the West Wind", Percy Bysshe Shelley focuses on nature's power and cyclical processes and, through the conceit of the wind and the social and political revolution prompted by the Peterloo massacre of August 1819, examines the poet's role therein. Although these ideas seem, on the surface, to be distinct from one another, Shelley intertwines them all by the poem's conclusion. The poet divides the ode into five stanzas, each appearing to be a sonnet. The opening two stanzas are focused on the wind and its interaction with the leaves and the clouds, while the third moves on to waves. These are then brought together in stanza IV as the poet's argument, like the storm, has gathered momentum. The opening sees the "wild west wind"; here, the alliteration echoes the wind's sound in almost onomatopoeic melodrama, acting out nature's cycle of birth, death, and regeneration, which is then contrasted with and complemented by the softer and breathier inspiration of the "breath of Autumn's being." This duality in the opening prefigures the wind's description as both "destroyer and preserver" and establishes the idea that is maintained throughout the poem. The wind drives the dead leaves, now redundant clutter, away to be replaced by the "winged seeds", whose brio and vitality bring the promise of fresh life to come. Stanza II compares the "loose clouds" to the "decaying leaves", widening the depiction of the wind's power, which is further emphasised by the comparison of the storm to "the bright hair uplifted from the head of some fierce Maenad" and the sheer scale of the storm, which reaches "even from the dim verge of the horizon to the zenith's height". Its power is restated in Stanza III where its course, gathering force, is detailed from the "blue Mediterranean" and "the Atlantic", whose "level powers cleave themselves into chasms." The two 'c' words here are deliberately

linked and emphasised by alliteration as examples of the epic size and frightening power of the wind. This is the kind of power that the poet is aspiring to embody. The "tameless...and proud" revolutionary seeks to rejuvenate his powers of art and socio-political commentary by harnessing the varied potential of Nature's force. Shelley also decorates his descriptions, writing that the storm is notable not only for its strength and size but also for its colours, such as "yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red" leaves and "black rain, and fire", and its motion, reiterated by verbs such as "burst" and "shook". Shelley's reaction to the storm is an experience of the sublime, similar to the awe-inspiring sight of Mont Blanc in its grandeur and potential danger, as well as in the enlightening effect it has upon the poet. Thus we are presented with a storm both beautiful and dangerous in its actions – much like the process of revolution. With the undertones of revolution, the poet's choice of form and setting seem apt. The ode was a traditionally lofty form used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to praise the elite statesmen and emperors. Shelley inverts this tradition by using it to write anti-establishment, pro-revolution poetry that is intended for the masses – not for the rich and powerful. Therefore, the relevance of its setting in Baiae is evident. In ancient times, emperors and their aristocratic friends would holiday there, none more famous than Julius Caesar and later Nero, who famously murdered his own mother in that very location. Thus the setting, which recalls images of plenitude and excess on behalf of the aristocracy, prompts us to look at the monarch under which this was being written, George III, who received an annual grant from parliament of £700,000, while the poor were being massacred and beaten for peacefully protesting the ever-increasing food prices which would bring starvation to them and their

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families. Shelley was disgusted by the Peterloo massacre and was further anguished by reminders of his own mortality and imminent death: he writes that his “leaves are falling” like the forest’s – a reference to his greying hair. How painful it must have been for him to be in exile and ever-conscious of his total disempowerment and transitoriness. By using terza rima Shelley not only aligns himself with greats such as Dante and Chaucer, but its rhythm of “two steps forward, one step back...and seamless blend of forward motion and backward glance” reflects the energy and motion of the wind. The rhyme scheme seems to ripple like the wind, with rhymes coming to the fore then remaining in the background throughout the poem. This energetic rhyme scheme twinned with the controlled form of the sonnet for each of the stanzas reflects the vigour of revolution, but also underscores how it has to be, according to Shelley, controlled, not anarchistic. The situation in the poem is presented like an apocalypse with the unwanted, dead leaves being “driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing” and the seeds lying buried “each like a corpse within its grave” – it is fitting, then, that when the west wind of autumn’s “azure sister of the spring” arrives to fill the earth with “living hues and odours plain and hill,” she announces her arrival with a “clarion” – a war trumpet – like that in Revelations 7 and 8. The effect is not necessarily negative, as these images recall both Judgement Day and the Resurrection. The suggestion is thus that death and decay are simply a part of life and rebirth. It is she, the feminine equivalent of autumn’s west wind, who is the “preserver”, while he is the “destroyer”. They are presented as working together as a higher power or, as Shelley calls it, an “unseen presence”. This sense of a greater power appears dangerous in its power and connection with death, but also reassuring in its capacity to preserve the

natural order. This "spirit" which is "moving everywhere" is not the pantheistic Christian God whom Wordsworth is concerned with in works such as "Tintern Abbey". In fact, in their dual roles as "destroyer and preserver" respectively, Richard Harter Fogle suggests they appear more like Shiva and Vishnu, two parts of the Hindu trinity who share the associations of death as necessary for change and the balance required to maintain life and order, or dharma, as it is called in Hindu doctrine. In Fogle's essay, however, Brahma, the creator, is not present to complete the trinity. In his place, I believe we have the poet, the original creator, whose role is presented as not existing in nature, but rather in revolution to complete the triad. In the final two stanzas the focus switches to the poet who, like the wind, gradually gains force and becomes more and more unified with the power of the wind. He begs to be lifted "as a wave, a leaf, a cloud" by the wind, recalling the subjects of the first three stanzas, as a passive companion, and then, like a passive accomplice, asks to be made his "lyre" – a great Romantic image of mutability and the beauty of sound, and inherently related to nature and the wind. The power comes with the cohesion of poet and wind, first in terms of spirit, and then in terms of a transcendence and metamorphosis of identity: "Be thou, spirit fierce, my spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" Empowered by this unification of forces, the poet demands that the wind drive his "dead thoughts", which through the power of nature can now become the "winged seeds" of the first stanza, "over the universe like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" Shelley, the creator, can provide the "sparks" for this revolution by "the incantation of this verse" – and perhaps others such as the radical "England in 1819", which condemned the current monarch, George III. This explains why the tone of Shelley's cry to "unawakened

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earth" for revolution is "sweet though in sadness", as this revolution must come without violence and anarchy, which harmed the government but also the populace. Indeed, the populace features here as "pestilence-stricken multitudes" plagued by poverty and famine due to their "old, mad and... leech-like" King, who left the country with a huge war debt following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Indeed, in invoking the wind in an almost prayer-like way, with the repetition of "oh" that is typical of such a medium, Shelley attempts to position the wind as similar to the publisher he could never find. That is to say, one who could spread his word throughout the masses, but was also untouchable by law. Leigh Hunt published as much as he could of Shelley's work, but feared prosecution if he published anything criticising the current monarchy. By the end of 1819, Shelley had thus resigned himself to not seeing his more political works, such as "England in 1819", in print. Just as Shelley was witness to the west wind ushering in a new season with her clarion, it is the poet now who comes armed with "the trumpet of prophecy", the hope of a new spring for England, and the hope that his poems and essays can bring about a new age. The rational thinking brought about through his friendship with William Godwin, who envisaged a utopian society governed entirely by reason," is evident in the poem's closing question: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" A question, although lacking in the decisiveness one may expect from a radical political revolutionary, full of hope and faith in the preservation of a natural order and the belief that through his promotion of imagination, those in power may be able to sympathise with the common man, who in turn will not stand for further oppression. As Shelley wrote of poetic inspiration in his *Defense of Poetry*, "The mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like <https://assignbuster.com/the-politics-of-shelleys-ode-to-the-west-wind/>

an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness." He hopes in his " Ode to the West Wind" that his poetic " sparks" and this wind can enlighten the world.