

Intellectual beauty

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Summary

The speaker says that the shadow of an invisible Power floats among human beings, occasionally visiting human hearts—manifested in summer winds, or moonbeams, or the memory of music, or anything that is precious for its mysterious grace. Addressing this Spirit of Beauty, the speaker asks where it has gone, and why it leaves the world so desolate when it goes—why human hearts can feel such hope and love when it is present, and such despair and hatred when it is gone.

He asserts that religious and superstitious notions—“ Demon, Ghost, and Heaven”—are nothing more than the attempts of mortal poets and wise men to explain and express their responses to the Spirit of Beauty, which alone, the speaker says, can give “ grace and truth to life’s unquiet dream. ” Love, Hope, and Self-Esteem come and go at the whim of the Spirit, and if it would only stay in the human heart forever, instead of coming and going unpredictably, man would be “ immortal and omnipotent. The Spirit inspires lovers and nourishes thought; and the speaker implores the spirit to remain even after his life has ended, fearing that without it death will be “ a dark reality. ” The speaker recalls that when he was a boy, he “ sought for ghosts,” and traveled through caves and forests looking for “ the departed dead”; but only when the Spirit’s shadow fell across him—as he mused “ deeply on the lot / Of life” outdoors in the spring—did he experience transcendence.

At that moment, he says, “ I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy! ” He then vowed that he would dedicate his life to the Spirit of Beauty; now he

asserts that he has kept his vow—every joy he has ever had has been linked to the hope that the “ awful Loveliness” would free the world from slavery, and complete the articulation of his words. The speaker observes that after noon the day becomes “ more solemn and serene,” and in autumn there is a “ lustre in the sky” which cannot be found in summer.

The speaker asks the Spirit, whose power descended upon his youth like that truth of nature, to supply “ calm” to his “ onward life”—the life of a man who worships the Spirit and every form that contains it, and who is bound by the spells of the Spirit to “ fear himself, and love all humankind. ” Form Each of the seven long stanzas of the “ Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” follows the same, highly regular scheme. Each line has an iambic rhythm; the first four lines of each stanza are written in pentameter, the fifth line in hexameter, the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh lines in tetrameter, and the twelfth line in pentameter. The syllable pattern for each stanza, then, is 555564444445.) Each stanza is rhymed ABBAACCBDEE. Commentary This lyric hymn, written in 1816, is Shelley’s earliest focused attempt to incorporate the Romantic ideal of communion with nature into his own aesthetic philosophy. The “ Intellectual Beauty” of the poem’s title does not refer to the beauty of the mind or of the working intellect, but rather to the intellectual idea of beauty, abstracted in this poem to the “ Spirit of Beauty,” whose shadow comes and goes over human hearts.

The poem is the poet’s exploration both of the qualities of beauty (here it always resides in nature, for example), and of the qualities of the human being’s response to it (“ Love, Hope, and Self-esteem”). The poem’s process

is doubly figurative or associative, in that, once the poet abstracts the metaphor of the Spirit from the particulars of natural beauty, he then explains the workings of this Spirit by comparing it back to the very particulars of natural beauty from which it was abstracted in the first place: “Thy light alone, like mist o’er mountains driven”; “Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart...” This is an inspired technique, for it enables Shelley to illustrate the stunning experience of natural beauty time and again as the poem progresses, but to push the particulars into the background, so that the focus of the poem is always on the Spirit, the abstract intellectual ideal that the speaker claims to serve.

Of course Shelley’s atheism is a famous part of his philosophical stance, so it may seem strange that he has written a hymn of any kind. He addresses that strangeness in the third stanza, when he declares that names such as “Demon, Ghost, and Heaven” are merely the record of attempts by sages to explain the effect of the Spirit of Beauty—but that the effect has never been explained by any “voice from some sublimer world.” The Spirit of Beauty that the poet worships is not supernatural, it is a part of the world. It is not an independent entity; it is a responsive capability within the poet’s own mind.

If the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” is not among Shelley’s very greatest poems, it is only because its project falls short of the poet’s extraordinary powers; simply drawing the abstract ideal of his own experience of beauty and declaring his fidelity to that ideal seems too simple a task for Shelley. His most important statements on natural beauty and on aesthetics will take

into account a more complicated idea of his own connection to nature as an expressive artist and a poet, as we shall see in “ To a Skylark” and “ Ode to the West Wind. Nevertheless, the “ Hymn” remains an important poem from the early period of Shelley’s maturity. It shows him working to incorporate Wordsworthian ideas of nature, in some ways the most important theme of early Romanticism, into his own poetic project, and, by connecting his idea of beauty to his idea of human religion, making that theme explicitly his own. < Previous Section Themes, Motifs & Symbols Next Section > “ Ozymandias”

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