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Shelley's Secularization of the Psalms

“It acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness,” spoke Percy Shelley of poetry in his essay “A Defence of Poetry” (843). This epitomizes Shelley’s conception of the individual’s ability to perceive and interpret beauty or meaning in the external world—an ability he consistently conflates with poetic imagination. He maintains that while moral philosophy proposes methodologies and stimuli for engendering humanity’s moral improvement, poetry “acts in another and diviner matter”—awakening and expanding consciousness “by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (844). The association of the poetic imagination with divinity significantly characterizes Shelley’s philosophy, and the association features in his poem “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” with particular intensity. What distinguishes “Hymn,” however, is its adoption of biblical postures and modes of thought—particularly the psalm—to analogize the experience of his poetic faculties. Shelley deifies the poetic imagination by imitating the structure and locution of the psalmic lament, and he thereby appropriates an objective religious framework as a metaphorical means of understanding the subjective phenomenon of poetic imagination (and so subverts the objectivity of the framework). Accordingly, his imitation of the psalmic lament identifies the poetic imagination as source of life in its fullest, and it further suggests the transcendent, salvific, though seemingly fickle attributes of the poetic imagination.

The poem emulates structural elements of the psalmic lament and thereby likens the search for intellectual beauty to a spiritual exercise. J. Day indicates that the lament psalm often

contains a protestation of innocence (19). In such a protestation, the psalmist declares no fault or faithlessness (on Israel's or his own behalf) commensurate with the suffering he (or Israel as a whole) presently laments. Psalm 44:17-18 captures this sentiment well: "All this has happened though we have not forgotten you [God]. / We have not violated your covenant. / Our hearts have not deserted you. / We have not strayed from your path" (*New Living Translation*). Lamenting the absence of the personified "Spirit" of intellectual beauty and the despondency in which its absence leaves the soul, Shelley utters his own psalm-like protestation of innocence toward the Spirit: "I vowed that I would dedicate my powers / To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?" (lines 61-62). Here, Shelley informs the Spirit that he has fulfilled the obligations that the mutual relationship with poetic imagination requires of him—similar to how the psalmist often claims that Israel has held up its half of its covenant with God. For the psalmist of Psalm 44, the past is a witness to this truth. For Shelley, the past is no less of a witness, for he calls "the phantoms of a thousand hours" (64) to testify his joyful faith in the Spirit: the hope that the Spirit "wouldst free / This world from its dark slavery" (72). This faith echoes the psalmist's hope that God would free Israel from slavery—a common subject of Israel's communal laments according to Day (34-36).

Most lament psalms also contain a petition to God (19)—usually for deliverance—such as Psalm 71: "O God, do not be far from me; / O my God, hasten to my help!" (*New American Standard*). Similarly, "Hymn" contains Shelley's own supplication in the closing stanza: "Thus let thy power . . . to my onward life supply / Its calm—to one who worships thee, / And every form containing thee" (78-82). Because Shelley, like the psalmist, fails to see his deity presently at work, he requests like the psalmist that the deity would soon intervene. Indeed, in psalmic style, Shelley asks that the Spirit would come near to him, for he asks that its power intervene in his future "like the truth / Of nature on [his] passive youth descended" (78-80). Additionally,

Day explains that lament psalms commonly cite God's past acts of grace as a means of motivating God to respond to the petition or of encouraging Israel with the recognition that God has acted before (34). Psalm 143 exemplifies such practice well: "I remember the days of old. / I ponder all your great works / and think about what you have done . . . Come quickly, Lord, and answer me, / for my depression deepens" (*NLT*, Ps. 143:5-7). Likewise, Shelley cites his preterite experience of the Spirit of intellectual beauty to instigate its return and assure himself of his spiritual progress. Indeed, stanza five recounts the days of his childhood when he naively sought spiritual fulfillment and transcendence in the "poisonous names" (33) that fed his youth—the empty names of "God and ghosts and Heaven" (27). A veritable conversion experience follows when these names fail him and instead springtime rouses poetic imagination within him for the first time: "Sudden, thy shadow fell on me; / I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!" (59-60). Thus, through reflection on the past, Shelley beseeches the Spirit to bestow upon him again that feeling that assured him that he was not completely hopeless in the search for beauty. Judith Chernaik puts it aptly when she says that Shelley's "knowledge of Intellectual Beauty is not achieved by intellectual discipline...but by prayer, petition, vision—the traditional methods of apprehending the Christian God" (36). Ultimately, then, by imitating structural elements of the lament psalm, Shelley equates the object of his poem (poetic imagination) with the object of the psalms (God) and therefore underscores the spiritual gravity of the search for poetic imagination.

The poem also imitates *rhetorical* elements of the psalmic lament, and thereby associates his variable experience of poetic imagination with the psalmist's similar experience of God. For example, the poem adopts the psalmist's rhetoric of divine transcendence and incomprehensibility. Psalm 145:3 is a prime example of such biblical rhetoric: "Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, / And His greatness is *unsearchable* [*italics added*]" (*NAS*).

Similarly, while Shelley articulates the beauty of his moments of “psychological transcendence” (Hall 132), he doubts humanity’s ability to access such transcendence by hypothesizing noumenal realities such as God. Stanza three epitomizes this doubt; when he considers the “existential and psychological contradictions” (141) that daily affront humanity, he concludes that “no voice from some sublimer world” (line 25) has ever supplied the answer. The poisonous names that fed his youth, he continues, are a “vain endeavor” (28) to find the answer, but these names are “frail spells” that “might not avail to sever, / From all we hear and all we see, / Doubt, change, and mutability” (29-31). Moreover, Shelley never addresses the Spirit as the titular “Intellectual Beauty”; he addresses it rather with all-capital names such as, “SPIRIT” (83), “Spirit of BEAUTY” (13), and “LOVELINESS” (71). This undoubtedly emulates the Bible’s use of the deferential label “LORD,” which reflects the Hebrews’ use of the shortened version of God’s name—too holy to spell or say outright (Jackson). By using such allusive titles for the Spirit, then, Shelley not only implies the sacredness of poetic imagination, but he doubts humans’ ability to describe it objectively. Thus, he doubts at his own expense, for his doubt ironically questions even his own ability to capture poetic imagination. Even in the opening stanza, he avoids objective identification: “The awful shadow of *some* unseen Power / Floats though unseen amongst us [*italics added*]” (1-2). Not even the poet can articulate full and continuous beauty. Instead, as Gerald McNiece maintains, “Mutability must be accepted as a central mystery. If we lived unremittingly in the presence of beauty, the responsiveness to beauty might be blurred and lost” (329).

The poem also captures the psalmic theme of divine infidelity. Day indicates that lament psalms consistently contain requests for God “not to hide his face” (20). Indeed, most lament psalms contain a veritable accusation of God’s seeming fickleness toward and infidelity to his people, Israel. This accusation often takes the form of a question that uses phraseology such as

“How long?” or “Why?”—sometimes taking “the form of a statement that God has forsaken them or the like” (34). Psalm 74 exemplifies such rhetoric well. The first verse reads, “O God, why have you rejected us so long?” Moreover, verse nine says, “We no longer see your miraculous signs,” and verse eleven asks, “Why do you hold back your strong right hand?” (*NLT*). In a very similar vein, Shelley laments the infidelity of poetic imagination’s visitations. Indeed, in the opening sentence, Shelley writes that its “shadow” (1) visits “this various world with as inconstant wing / As summer winds that creep from flower to flower” (3-4). Critic Spencer Hall adeptly notes how Shelley’s description of the shadow as “unseen” (2) dismantles the “standard paradigm of symbolic thought” that “an unknown cause can be represented by a known effect” (136). The shadow is as unintelligible as the unseen Power of the first line. Furthermore, Shelley links the world’s “various” (line 3) quality with the Spirit’s inconstancy; by using the metaphor of summer wind blowing on flowers, he educes the sense of smell—“the most indeterminate of the senses” (Hall 137). Hall continues: “When the wind ceases, a category of sensory beauty—fragrance—ceases also, just as, when the shadow departs, a condition of possible beatitude departs with it” (137). Consequently, as the psalmist may inquire God’s whereabouts, Shelley asks the Spirit, “Where art thou gone?” (13-15) and later pleads that it “depart not as [its] shadow came” (46). Shelley follows his psalm-like scrutiny of the Spirit’s inconstancy with a list of concomitants: everything fades away (line 20), the surety of the process of birth and death dims the “daylight of this earth” (22), and man’s capacity for contradictory sentiments is too large (23-24). Shelley offers this “catalogue of existential and psychological contradictions” (Hall 141) as proof that the Spirit is not faithful to humanity. Critic Noel Mawer teases out the implications of Shelley’s accusation: “We know that visitations of reverie fade and die; the ‘Hymn’ suggests that poetic ‘inspiration’ may, too” (32). Thus, though prayerfully invoking the Spirit’s gracious presence, “uncertainty and inconstancy are his certain and constant themes”

(McNiece 331). “And ironically he's probably not sure that he ought not to praise that very uncertainty and inconstancy as sources of growth and vitality,” McNiece adds (331).

Furthermore, the poem parallels the psalmist's rhetoric of divine deliverance, which often plays out slowly and inconspicuously. As Day mentions, the psalmist tends to include a plea for the salvation that he admits only God can establish, and sometimes the psalmist simply “expresses the confidence that God does” deliver His people rather than continuing to challenge God's faithfulness (52). For example, the psalmist writes in Psalm 13:5, “But I will trust in your unfailing love. / I will rejoice because you have rescued me” (NLT). Similarly, Psalm 27:13 reads, “Yet I am confident I will see the Lord's goodness / while I am here in the land of the living” (NLT). Likewise, Shelley's petitionary last stanza expresses the hope that the Spirit will indeed supply tranquility to his “onward life” (line 80) despite the “dark reality” (48) of death, and he fortifies this hope with the realization that the tranquility he seeks will take time to manifest itself. This realization comes in the form of a metaphor:

“The day becomes more solemn and serene
 When noon is past—there is a harmony
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
 Which through the summer is not heard or seen,
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been!” (73-77)

Reflecting on these truths builds his confidence in the Spirit's salvific powers, for he requests that the Spirit bestow tranquility upon him “thus” (78)—in the manner that the sky's luster, which has always been present, becomes gradually more noticeable. Thus, he can face the future hopefully, for, as Hall says, “Shelley's rhetoric of temporality shifts accordingly from the figures of mutability, ephemerality, and transience that dominate the rest of the poem to figures of growth, steadiness, and continuity” (149). By so shifting his focus, Shelley becomes a repentant

worshipper—one who is no “longer reproaching his deity for caprice” but relying on the “serene steadiness of purpose and spirit which will support a life of stable service to all forms of intellectual beauty” (McNiece 334).

Lastly, the poem borrows the psalmist’s rhetoric of evangelic mission to articulate his conception of his artistic mission. Psalm 71:15 exhibits such rhetoric: “I will tell everyone about your righteousness. / All day long I will proclaim your saving power / though I am not skilled with words” (*NLT*). Of course, Shelley inverts the psalmist’s modesty; it is through Shelley’s *proficiency* with words that he will awaken the world to Intellectual Beauty. However, Shelley imitates the rhetoric of evangelism nonetheless. As McNiece indicates, Shelley has already dedicated his poetic abilities “to the cause of man” (332), for Shelley declares that he has always shared in the hope that the Spirit “wouldst give whate’er these words cannot express” (line 72). Therefore, Shelley claims to use his words to try awakening people’s perception of intellectual beauty. Shelley furthermore describes the moral imperative he has derived from the Spirit’s influence; the Spirit bound him “To fear himself, and love all human kind” (85). As McNiece asserts, this self-fear suggests “numinous awe ... [for] perhaps the dread power in him to lead men through his imaginings” (334). This fear then leads him to love humanity, for, as Hall states, that very power’s purpose is “to reinforce man’s faith in the active, humanistic virtues of ‘Love, Hope, and Self-esteem’” (133) that Shelley spoke of in stanza four. Therefore, in addition to reverence, hope, and doubt, Shelley now has a mission he associates with his relationship to poetic imagination—akin to how the psalmist regards his relationship to God. Moreover, by paralleling the psalmist’s relationship to God, Shelley employs a framework for conceptualizing the dynamics of his interaction with his poetic faculties. As Chernaik says, “Shelley’s subject is not a definition of ‘Intellectual Beauty’ but an analysis of its relationship to human life, and to the poet who is its hierophant” (39).

By using the model of an objective spiritual reality to articulate the inherently subjective reality of poetic imagination, Shelley subverts the objectivity of the model—questioning the capacity of human institutions to offer the ultimate explanation for the human condition. The very fact that he refers to the Spirit as an *intellectual* beauty suggests that this ostensibly external force is actually a facet of his own being—a mere subjective experience. Therefore, when Shelley attempts to re-channel his poetic imagination, the problem, as Mawer puts it, is that what he must channel “is largely imperceptible, and, even when perceived, is always in the act of changing” (29). “What is to be captured,” Mawer continues, “is the poet's own reverie—his poetic imagination—figured as a spirit” (29). In the third stanza, Shelley denotes clearly that the traditional methods of identifying beauty and meaning (viz. religion and philosophy) fail at capturing this reverie; they fail to eradicate the doubt and mutability that permeate the world. However, by the end of the poem, even Shelley's own subjective and humanistic stance fails to solve these problems. Though his own poetic imagination may give him the greater amount of joyful and transcendental experiences, those experiences are fleeting and inconsistent. His only hope, therefore, is to stay his course as a poet-prophet and trust that his efforts will bear fruit over time. To treat intellectual beauty as a divine and objective reality will help him to this end, for such a stance allows him to prayerfully sort through his doubts, remember the formative experiences of his past, and rekindle a faith in humanity's capacity for good. It is no wonder, therefore, that Shelley would appropriate the lament psalm as a fabric for his own personal hymn. Indeed, as Chernaik summates, “The poem is one of Shelley's first attempts . . . to deny the authority of dogma or scriptural revelation . . . while implicitly granting the validity of the irrational yet profound human needs that traditional religion aims to satisfy” (36). In so granting, Shelley forms an image of Beauty that may be “nothing more than a wishful projection that . . . serves only to hide the metaphysical void” (Hall 145). Therefore, by relying—as a poet—

on an extrinsic power that remains theoretical, he implies the defectiveness of dogmatism, yet he concedes the necessity for humans to hypothesize about reality as a mode of self-understanding.

The parallels between Shelley's "Hymn" and the genre of the lament psalm are palpable. Shelley appropriates structural and phraseological elements of this psalmic genre to suggest the supremacy of poetic imagination and to provide a topos for understanding the dynamics of man's relation to his imaginative facet. Thus, Shelley "undermines, validates, and redefines religious modes of experience" (Hall 128) by making himself, as poet, the locus of imagination and inspiration. Inasmuch as he thus views himself, Shelley finds hope for the world; by the end of the poem, he optimistically revives his faith that he can imbue human life with beauty and meaning through the medium of his poetry. This view of the poetic mission and power of poetry to redeem humanity typifies Shelley's philosophy: "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man," he writes in "Defence" (847). Likewise, he holds that "poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" (850). For Shelley, consciousness will forever be as much a burden as it is a blessing, for imagination is fraught with discontinuity. This discontinuity cannot help but create doubt and inspire lament. However, in "Hymn," Shelley, like the psalmist, balances doubt with faith, and to work through his faith, Shelley needed an applicable framework. It is no wonder that he chose to secularize the psalm.

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