



Spiritual Shelley: A Study of the Ideological Sublime in Percy B. Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

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Abstract

Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" has suffered a critical overlook compared with the immense bulk of studies dedicated to his poetical and philosophical works. The reason behind the poem's resistance to understanding is that it stands in stark contrast to Shelley's theological and philosophical opinions which he held throughout his life. Shelley's poem is torn between the need for a transcendental signified which would bestow meaning on human existence and the tragic realization that no such an ultimate guarantee can ever exist, that the lack in the Other is ontological and, as such, can never be compensated for. Availing itself of the theories of Slavoj Žižek, the present article argues that Shelley's illusion is twofold: besides his opinion that a full access to Beauty will eradicate uncertainty and inconstancy from the human life, he locates the roots of the present universal discontent and suffering in the absence of the Spirit, rather than seeking the causes of failure in the very essential defectiveness of the symbolic reality.

Keywords: Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", Romanticism, Žižek, ideological sublime

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Sunday, September, 5, 2021

Accepted: Friday, April 15, 2022

Published: Sunday, May 1, 2022

Available Online: Friday, April, 15, 2022

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2022.27401.1348>

Online ISSN: 2821-0204; Print ISSN: 2820-8986



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Introduction

Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" has suffered a critical overlook compared with the immense bulk of studies dedicated to his poetical and philosophical works. As McNiece (1975) points out, it "has been less studied and perhaps little understood" (p. 311). Probably, the reason behind the poem's resistance to understanding is that it stands in stark contrast to Shelley's theological and philosophical opinions which he held throughout his life. The poem abounds with terms and concepts borrowed from Christianity, and the reader becomes quite curious once they take into consideration Shelley's life-long aversion to theistic and religious beliefs. "[Shelley] borrows subversively the language of Christian mysticism, but to what effect?" Richard Cronin asks; "Shelley becomes the hierophant of Intellectual Beauty in opposition to the prophets of the Christian God, but it is far from clear how seriously his prophetic role is to be taken?" (cited in Callaghan, 2017, p. 90). McNiece tries to provide an answer by reading the poem as an instance of Shelley's practice of the "Romantic irony," a poem which would "express his yearning for the infinite and the absolute and record his somewhat disillusioning realization that the yearning must forever remain yearning" (1975, p. 311). "Shelley", McNiece argues, "comes to realize that the finite can never grasp the infinite and may conclude despairingly by acknowledging the inadequacy of language and consciousness" (1975, p. 312). From this perspective, it becomes obvious that Shelley, contrary to Cronin's suggestion, did mean his work to be taken seriously, since it presents his innermost conviction regarding the ontological presentiment of the human condition. Shelley qua the ironist "creates something like a transcendental illusion and at the same time reveals himself as the creator or manipulator," in order to signify the nullity of the attempt to "rediscover value and meaning in a world drained by doubt" (McNiece, 1975, p. 312). That is to say, the Romantic ironist is torn between the need for a transcendental signified which would bestow meaning on human existence and the tragic realization that no such ultimate guarantee can ever exist, that the lack in the Other is ontological and, as such, can never be compensated for.

A careful study of Shelley's oeuvre, however, reveals the insufficiency of McNiece's reading of "Hymn". In "Essay On Christianity," Shelley, having repudiated the established conception of God in Christian theology as "the idle dreams of the visionary, or the pernicious representations of impostors, who have fabricated from the very materials of wisdom a cloak for their own dwarfish or imbecile conceptions," (1859, p. 258) puts forth his own view on the existence of the transcendental Power who presides over the universe:

We live and move and think; but we are not the creators of our own origin and existence. We are not the arbiters of every motion of our own complicated nature; we are not the masters of our own imaginations and moods of mental being. There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords at will.

Our most imperial and stupendous qualities – those on which the majesty and the power of humanity is erected – are, relatively to the inferior portion of its mechanism, active and imperial; but they are the passive slaves of some higher and more omnipotent Power. This Power is God. (1859, p. 278)

Literature Review

There is a gap in the existing research on Shelley's 84-line ode "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Most of the critical pieces written on this particular poem by Percy Shelley revolve either around its platonic features (Notopoulos, 1943) or around its treatment of religion and religious mythmaking (Hall, 1983). A reading which examines the relation of beauty to sociological and psychoanalytical notion of desire lacks in all these critical studies and analyses. Bridging this gap defines the purpose of the present study.

Method

It should be expressed that the present study is a library research and, therefore, uses various sources accessible in physical and virtual libraries, including: books in different mediums (e.g. print, pdf, epub, etc.), articles from printed and online journals, websites, and general encyclopedias. The present study uses the method of description and analysis. For this purpose, the present study employs Slavoj Žižek's theories.

The proper question, which should be raised, concerns the nature of beauty. What exactly is beauty? Žižek's argument directly relates the notion of beauty to the Lacanian concept of the Thing. That is to say, an ordinary object turns into an attractive object of desire once it is sublimated to the status of *das Ding*, once it is invested with libidinal cathexis due to occupying the place of the ontological lack. Of course, this empty place is opened due to the primordial prohibition characteristic of the oedipal stage, whereby the incestuous desire of the child for the mother is prohibited by the intrusion of the Name-of-the-Father, and the mother turns into the impossible / prohibited lost object of desire. The only possible way to maintain interest in an object and consider it a perfect match for the empty place of the Thing is to avoid a direct encounter with it by all possible means. In other words, the object manages to keep its spell on the subject as long as it remains un-possessed, as long as the subject remains at a distant from it. The moment the subject gets too close to the object, the moment the line of proximity between the two is violated; that moment the object reveals its "true" face and falls, as a result, from its exulted place down into the abyss (Žižek, 1989, pp. 30-40).

It is this insight which Žižek hints at in the above-mentioned argument regarding the role of the beloved in courtly love. The lover remains under the beloved's influence and keeps on idealizing her as long as he is kept at distance, as long as he is not allowed to get too close to the beloved. However, when he finally is given permission to pass the line as a reward for his long-lasting sufferings and unconditional servitude to his lady's "whims," she "turns her other, reverse side towards him" so that he can see the real of his desire. The ugly, terrifying face of the beloved is, in fact, an embodiment of the primordial void, a bodily manifestation of

the pit of “disgusting substance of life,” that is, the pit of *jouissance*. In his encounter with the Thing, therefore, the lover perceives the futility of his quest and the nullity of his dreams. As a result, as the tradition of courtly love often ended in under the influence of Medieval Christianity, he finds the only way to escape the deadlock of desire in renouncing the earthly love and directing instead all his attention towards a heavenly beloved, in “*desublimating*” the “figure of *die Frau-Welt* (the woman who stands for the world, terrestrial life) and choosing a spiritual sublime object of desire (Žižek, 2013, p. 101).

From a Lacanian perspective, the Thing belongs to the realm of the Real, since it introduces an incision into the seam of the symbolic order. Of course, one of Lacan’s final definitions of the Real is the element which has extimacy, that which ex-sists. (Fink, 2017). Actually, Žižek explains Lacan’s notion of ex-sistence in its relation with the Real, as “the impossible-real kernel resisting symbolization.” “It is, of course, this ex-sistence of the Real, of the Thing embodying impossible enjoyment,” Žižek claims,

that is excluded by the very advent of the symbolic order. We could say that we are always caught in a certain *vel* (or in Lacanian terminology, a false and forced choice), that we are always forced to choose between meaning and ex-sistence: the price we have to pay for access to meaning is the exclusion of ex-sistence. (Žižek, 1998, pp. 136-7)

In other words, the moment we enter the symbolic order, the moment we acquiesce to castration and accept the confiscation of our *jouissance* (a temporary moment of transgressive pleasure) by the Other, we unconsciously choose existence over ex-sistence, that is, we exclude forever the possibility of attaining the ultimate object of desire and a full enjoyment of the Thing.

The same process, in fact, is applicable to ideology as well. Ideology provides its subjects with peaceful life in a social space, in an organic community where everyone finds himself at home and enjoys his life under the protective shield of a transcendental signified. That is to say, as socio-ideological subjects, we are presented with an appealing picture of our condition, with the sweet dream of the possibility of attaining the object of desire and filling our lack. This happens, we are told, once we follow the path shown to us by ideology, once we trust in the promise that one day our ideological prophecies are realized. But, the moment we start to doubt the Cause, the moment we lose our faith in the truth of the ideological narrative and begin to question the possibility of attaining unity and completion, the social paradise will turn into an abyssal hell, where instead of peace there is eternal and unending suffering and woe. In order to preserve our socio-ideological “sanity,” in other words, we have to embrace what Žižek calls “ideological anamorphosis,” to learn to look through ideological glasses and avoid tearing down the veil of fantasy (Žižek, 1989, p. 110). Of course, the element which keeps the integrity of an ideology intact and gives meaning to the ideological field as a whole is the sublime object, or (in Lacanian terms) the master-signifier, the element which, despite its seemingly semantic saturation, is nothing but a senseless, non-signifying object, similar to the skull at the bottom of Holbein’s Ambassadors so often referred to by

Lacan, as a perfect example of how the gaze qua the real cuts into the texture of the symbolic order, disturbing the subject's sense of control over the overall picture:

If we look at what appears from the frontal view as an extended, "erected" meaningless spot, from the right perspective we notice the contours of a skull. The criticism of ideology must perform a somewhat homological operation: if we look at the element which holds together the ideological edifice, at this "phallic", erected Guarantee of Meaning, from the right (or, more precisely – politically speaking – left) perspective, we are able to recognize in it the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning. (Žižek, 1989, p. 110)

Discussion and Analysis

The assertoric nature of Shelley's argument proves that, for him, God is more than a transcendental "illusion." In fact, Shelley definitely believed in the existence of a supernatural power from which we inherit "our most imperial and stupendous qualities." As a result, reading "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" as an instance of the Romantic irony completely subverts Shelley's self-professed beliefs. Shelley's world is not a "world drained by doubts," neither is his mission to "rediscover meaning and value" therein (McNiece, 1975, p. 312). Rather, it is a place where each corner and nook radiates with divine presence, where every face, every thought, mirrors the majesty of the "Universal God." It only needs a change in perspective and attitude to become aware of this heavenly Being, that is to say, the subject who is

free from the contamination of luxury and license...whosoever is no deceiver or destroyer of his fellow-men – no liar, no murderer...whosoever has maintained with his own heart the strictest correspondence of confidence, who dares to examine and to estimate every imagination which suggests itself to his mind...has already seen God. (Shelley, 1859, p. 277)

Having thus corrected the misconception regarding the supposedly ironic nature of the poem, it is time to cast a new glance at Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," and to find a proper answer to the questions raised in and by the poem. It begins with the description of what Shelley calls "Intellectual Beauty," probably his term for the "Power" which presides over the universe. This Power moves "unseen" throughout the world, the effect of which is sometimes manifest and sometimes hidden from our intuition:

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen among us; visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower;
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening,
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,

Like memory of music fled,
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (*Poetical Works*, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", pp.1-12)

The images evoked by Shelley all pertain to evanescent and fleeting phenomena: none of the objects with which he compares the "unseen Power" have a determinate and concrete substance. This, as the poem argues, corresponds to the inconstancy of the Power itself. The mind cannot probe a way into the nature of this universal presence, since it is nothing but a shadow whose source remains unknown to the perceiver. It is only through its effect, through its "inconstant glance" onto "each human heart and countenance," which we become aware of its existence. However, in spite of its transience and mutability, the Power is dear to the poet not only because of its "grace," but also due to its "mysterious" nature, because it escapes a rigid and definite knowledge. Put differently, the universal Power becomes for the poet the ultimate object of desire, an entity which gives meaning and significance to his life as such. The ever-elusive nature of the Power is also reminiscent of the evanescence of *das Ding*, which we know exists only through its effects on our psychological life, only through experiencing its power of attraction whenever we come into its presence. Shelley believes that the Power is more revered, more "awed," because of its inconstancy, that is to say, he takes the Power's mutability a condition of its appeal and endearment. Yet, why should the absence of the Thing be so much libidinally invested? Is it not the case that our whole life is a pursuit for attaining this lost object? Do we not search for the sublime object behind every veil? Then why should its absence be more pleasing to us than our constant proximity and closeness to it?

This passage, McNiece points out,

underlies a central change of attitude occurring in Shelley's thought...If we lived unremittingly in the presence of beauty, the responsiveness to beauty might be blurred and lost...An argument borrowed from traditional theodicy is here converted to the purposes of a revolutionary and agnostic humanism. (1975, p. 329)

McNiece here draws on the traditional cliché that an object continues to exert its charm and appeal to our imagination as long as it maintains its distance from us, as long as it resists to submit to our understanding. As soon as the object of desire becomes available to us, as soon as we manage to hold it in our hands and experience a full enjoyment of it, it turns into a useless and ordinary thing like all other objects, an excremental object which has nothing more to captivate and enthrall our imagination. However, what is missing from McNiece's argument is the crucial fact that the object is, at the end of the day, nothing but a mirage, a mere appearance which points to nothing behind it. That is to say, it is impossible to live "unremittingly at the presence" of the Thing, since there is no object at whose presence we might dwell in the first place. The object of desire is a place-holder for an ontological lack, which means that primordially there is no lost object as such. This sense of loss is a mirage, a sham, to trick the subject into movement.

Something is not in its place, no doubt. The fact is, it has never been. In other words, this loss is ontological, which means it is not lost in the first place, based on the common understanding of the term, “to lose.” Loss presupposes existence, the way absence presupposes presence; it determines a quest for retrieval, for revocation. It is here that McNiece falls into the trap of associating Shelley’s “unseen Power” to a substantial object, to a real entity which exists behind the veil of phenomena, and relates the theme of mutability in Shelley’s thought to an actual absence from the presence of the object of desire.

The second stanza takes the first stanza’s argument further. The Power, which is identified here as the “Spirit of Beauty” (l.13), is the element which gives meaning to human life. However, this signifying element has left the poet’s world and turned it into a despondent and gloomy place. The question about the absence of the “Spirit of Beauty” acquires deep ideological overtones, as it is submerged under the general category of the human condition as such. That is to say, Shelley links the ephemerality of Beauty to the concept of universal mutability, which is at work in all the levels of the worldly existence. The Spirit fades because its noumenal existence surpasses our perception, because its phenomenality follows the universal design where everything which “once is shown” is doomed to “fail and fade” (l.20). Our life is a constant flux from one opposite pole to another, from fear to dream, from death to birth, from love and hope to hate and despondency. Therefore, it is the necessary “mutability” of worldly life, Shelley argues, that is responsible for our separation from the source of all grace and bliss, from the Power which is the transcendental guarantee of all we say and do. The questions raised by Shelley regarding the transience of natural phenomena, the mutability of human dreams and hopes, and the inability of man to separate love from hate and despondency from hope, are not raised the with an eye for a proper answer, since Shelley is already aware that human mind does not have the capacity to comprehend truth; rather, they are raised in order to reveal the limitations of philosophical thought and condemn to failure in advance all attempts to come up with the suitable answer.

Stanza III stages Shelley’s enduring aversion to theological doctrines and his criticism of the solutions offered by different ideologies throughout history to the problems raised in the previous stanza. Each ideology, Shelley seems to argue, has created a fantasy scenario in order to account for the apparent inconsistencies which constantly plague human life. However, apart from their imaginary and false premises, these ideologies cannot exert any positive effects on the amelioration of the dire circumstances since they neither present decent and proper answers nor are successful in bringing peace to our minds. Amid the turbulent and agitated sea of life, in the middle of “life’s unquiet dream” (l.36), it is only Beauty which can bestow “grace and truth” (l.36) to human existence. All we hear and see, Shelley laments, are merged with “doubt, chance and mutability” (l.31), making it impossible for us to find a permanent and stable foothold in life. Religion and philosophy have tried to bring back constancy to human life; however, they have failed since none of them have managed to find the proper object which would provide an anchor to human being’s wandering and unsettled soul. In other words, Shelley believes in the possibility of a bright future, of an end to the dark and

gloomy space of doubt and uncertainty pressing on us from all directions, only if we break the spell of all religious myths on our hearts and souls and fill them, instead, with the pure and illuminating light of the Intellectual Beauty, the sublime Thing which can alone fill the empty place of lack at the heart of our existence.

In the next stanza, Shelley provides the answer to the question which he raises earlier, that is, the question regarding the reason behind the perpetual absence-presence design which dominates human life in this world. The reason that "love, hope, and self-esteem" (l.37), which constitute the heart of Shelley's moral and ethical universe, are not attained perpetually is that they are emanations of the Intellectual Beauty, which itself has an unknown and inconstant condition. In fact, if we gained lasting access to this omnipotent Power, we would surpass the limits of humanity and turn into gods, no longer at the mercy of change and mutability: "Man were immortal and omnipotent / Did thou, unknown and awful as thou art / Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart" (ll.39-41). The only solution to the restlessness of the soul, the moment of man's apotheosis and immortality, is when Beauty dawns on our life and makes our hearts firm and stable. Beauty is the source of all inspirations, the fount and origin of all our ideas and opinions. Without it, thought would turn into a feeble flame, the dying light of a taper, which would not suffice to illumine our path towards humanity. As McNiece points out, the image of the dying light and a dark and sable background is "a brilliant success, summing up dramatically Shelley's central theodicy," since it asserts that, without the intervention of a divine Power, our endeavor to find the way out of life's labyrinth and negotiate our intellectual limits and deficiencies would end in failure (331). Therefore, the concluding lines of the stanza turn into a poetical equivalent of religious supplication, where Shelley raises his voice in prayer and implores the Spirit of Beauty to stay forever and no more depart, "lest the grave should be, / like life and fear, a dark reality" (ll.47-48).

Here, it turns into a matter of paramount importance to analyze the concept of Beauty in order to disclose the central illusion which dominates Shelley's thought. What exactly is beauty? When does an object seem beautiful to us? Is beauty an intrinsic feature of an object or is it the result of a certain optical illusion? Perhaps, the best way to approach the issue is to follow Žižek's interpretation of Lacan's analysis of courtly love. In the tradition of courtly love – a doctrine of love in which love between the sexes, with its erotic and physical aspects spiritualized, is regarded as the noblest passion this side of heaven – the lover idealizes and idolizes his beloved, and subjects himself to her every whim. Yet, what constitutes the basis of this idealization? What is the reason behind the sublimation of the Lady? According to Žižek, such an idealization does not have any relation whatsoever to the beloved's essential features. Rather, her beauty and ideal state is the result of the place she occupies in the overall structure. "The moment the poet or the knight serving her approaches her too closely," Žižek argues, "she turns her other, reverse side towards him, and what was previously the semblance of fascinating beauty is suddenly revealed as putrefied flesh, crawling with snakes and worms, the disgusting substance of life (1997, p. 83).

The charm of the sublime object is nothing but an illusion, the effect of the symbolic re-working on the terrifying void of the real. “The gap that separates beauty from ugliness,” according to Žižek, “is thus the very gap that separates reality from the Real: what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real” (1997, p. 83). That is to say, in order to lead a minimum of “normal” life in a social field, it is necessary to repeal a portion of *jouissance*, to keep the symbolic reality safe from the intrusion of the real.

This leads us to the illusion at the heart of Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”. Shelley’s Beauty is *das Ding* in disguise, the ex-sisting element which holds our existence together by procuring the minimum amount of *jouissance* necessary for the subjectivization of the foreign body of the Other. It is the sublime object (in its positive sense) which gives purpose to our otherwise dull and boring life, which secures in what we do and say a minimal enjoyment of our own, although we never gain a precise knowledge of its nature. That is to say, like all the other objects which are chosen to materialize the Thing, Beauty can have effect as long as it keeps its distance with us, insofar as, in Shelley’s words, it remains “unseen” and “inconstant.” Therefore, what Shelley asks for in his recourse to Beauty, that it no longer depart the scene of life and become accessible to him, equals a total collapse of the symbolic reality which, in turn, is the very medium for intellectual activity and thought. In a Kantian twist, what prevents a full access to the source of *jouissance*, to the source of intellectual nourishment, what constitutes the condition of impossibility of a perfect coincidence of the object and the Thing, turns into the “condition of possibility” of our reality as such. This is precisely what Lacan meant with his notion of the surplus enjoyment: the paradox of *jouissance* is that it can only be experienced as a surplus, since it comes into being as the direct result of prohibition. Prior to the Father’s “No!” there is no *jouissance*; it is only after the advent of Law that *jouissance* comes into existence. Or better say, *objet petit a* qua the embodiment of surplus enjoyment “exists only in its distorted state (visually, for example, only insofar as it is viewed from aside, anamorphotically extended or contracted) – if we view it ‘straight,’ ‘as it really is,’ there is nothing to see” (Žižek, 2013, p. 28).

Equally, Shelley’s Beauty exists as long as it is anamorphotically perceived, insofar as it remains an absent impossible Thing – if we look at it straight, if we get too close to it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an excremental object, like what Shelley believed to be the “vain endeavor” and “frail charm” of the previous ideologies. From a Žižekian point of view, what differentiates Shelley’s Beauty from “Demon, Ghost, and Heaven” of the poets and sages is only the name. In essence, they are all sublime objects meant to occupy the empty place of the Thing. What proves this argument, that Beauty is Shelley’s version of the sublime object of ideology, comes in stanza VI, where Shelley puts forth his ideological dreams and expectations which, he believes, can only be realized through a belief in transformative power of Beauty.

Conclusion

What the present study adds to the existing body of research on Shelley is this important fact that the key to the prison of bondage and “dark slavery” (l.70) in which human soul has been enchained throughout history is in the hands of Beauty. Shelley confesses that all his life, through his childhood and adolescence to his years of maturity, he has not passed a second without cherishing the hope that one day, the Spirit of Beauty, the Power who presides over the universe, will come and bring down to earth the throne of tyrants and the house of false priesthood: “I vowed that I would dedicate my powers / To thee and thine: have I not kept the vow?” (ll.61-62). The millennial prophecies of the Apocrypha, the prospect of the Second Coming of Christ, the emancipation of humanity from the bonds of oppression and the establishment of the Heavenly Paradise on Earth, all find reverberating resonance in Shelley’s dreams, albeit in atheistic and agnostic disguise. Shelley’s illusion, therefore, becomes twofold: besides his opinion that a full access to Beauty will eradicate uncertainty and inconstancy from the human life, he locates the roots of the present universal discontent and suffering in the absence of the Spirit, rather than seeking the causes of failure in the very essential defectiveness of the symbolic reality: “They know that never joy illumed my brow, / Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free / This world from its dark slavery” (ll.68-70).

Shelley concludes the poem by an invocation to the Intellectual Beauty to bestow its power upon him and supply him with peace and calmness, upon him “who worships thee / and every form containing thee” (ll.81-82), he “whom, Spirit fair, the spells did bind / to fear himself, and love all human kind” (ll.83-84). These concluding lines bring to mind Shelley’s early political poem, *Queen Mab*. In that poem, Shelley put forth his aversion to all religious and theological doctrines, while he supported revolutionary principles and ideals, drawing the picture of a bright future where, freed from the shackles of false ideologies, human beings would finally achieve the highest standards of morality and humane values. When the future comes, the bitter events of the past and the dire situation of the present will be seen as necessary phases without which our dreams of universal freedom and prosperity would have never been realized.

It is now that we could return to McNiece’s argument regarding the ironic nature of Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and change the center of its focus a little bit. Shelley’s own words about Beauty and his firm belief in its omnipotence, together with Mary Shelley’s mentioned description of her husband’s ideological leanings, would give us the right to claim with safety that Shelley’s was a case of irony. However, this irony differs totally from the one intended by McNiece, and by other de Manian critics. The irony of Shelley’s life is more a dramatic irony rather than a Romantic one, with the crucial difference that in this case, Shelley himself was the victim of his ignorance as to his ideological views rather than one of his characters. Shelley thought he had finally managed to escape the chains of ideology, to go beyond the limited view of religion and theological enslavement. Yet, what he, ironically, did not realize was that, unawares, deep in his unconscious, he was more Christian than the Pope himself. Shelley’s failure to recognize in the universal misery of mankind a sign of an ontological antagonism, essential to our life as

subjects of the symbolic reality, led him to a life-long struggle with those to whom, at the end of the day, he turned out to be more a peer than an enemy. Of course, the only possible way to free ourselves from the grips of ideology, as Žižek claims, is to acknowledge the constitutive lack which marks the core of reality as such, to acknowledge the futility of all the attempts to fill the empty place of the Thing with any positive objects. In a sense, the most important lesson to be drawn from psychoanalysis is that the only positive thing, the only possible substance, is the lack itself. It is only when we come to terms with this primordial lack, when we perceive in all ideological narratives the same quilting process under different and often opposing disguises, only then can we claim that we have achieved “true” freedom and liberty and have finally broken the spell of ideology. No need to emphasize further, Shelley never reached this realization. He was as ideologically oriented as mature Wordsworth and Coleridge, both of whom he deeply loathed for their “false” ideology.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their gratitude to *JALDA* editors and reviewers.

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