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Different Opinions on the meaning of Poetry between Percy Bysshe Shelley and Plato

أراء مختلفة حول معنى الشعر بين بيرسى بايسشى شيللى و افلاطون

Asst. Lect. Huda H. Jassim
م.م. هدى هادى جاسم
Islamic University- Najaf
الجامعة الاسلامية –النجف الاشرف

ABSTRACT
This study directs the attention towards the disagreements between the romantic poet P. B. Shelley (1792-1822) and Plato the widely known Greek philosopher (428/427 BCE- 348/347) concerning the meaning and importance on poetry for each one of them. The study, as well, aims to make a brief analysis for Shelley's essay A Defense of Poetry that is regarded one of Shelley's best evaluations on the meaning of poetry. Then, the study will approach Plato's objection on poetry from the educational, ethical and philosophical view-points. The paper ends with a conclusion which summarizes the main points.
Key words: Shelley's A defense of Poetry, Plato, Poetry.

الخلاصة
يثير هذ البحث الانتباه الى الخلافات حول معنى الشعر لدى الشاعر الرومانسى الانكليزى بيرسى بايسشى شيللى _١٧٩٢-١٨٢٢) والفيلسوف الاغريقى المعروف افلاطون (٣٤٨\٣٤٧-٤٢٨\٤٢٧ ق.م) كذلك يهدف البحث الى تحليل موجز لمقالة " الدفاع عن الشعر " ل شيلى والتى تعتبراحدى اهم تقييماته الشعرية. ايضا يتطرق البحث الى فهم اعتراض افلاطون على معنى الشعر من نواحى تعليمية و اخلاقية وفلسفية. ينتهى البحث الى خلاصة تلخص اهم النقاط.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الدفاع عن الشعر ل شيلى، افلاطون، الشعر

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1. Percy Bysshe Shelley's A Defense of Poetry (1821) :A short (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 40)

introduction

In 1821, the romantic revolutionary poet P. B. Shelley (Percy Bysshe Shelley 1792-1822), produced his A Defense of Poetry. This essay which represents a clear identification for the way Shelley proved himself a poet who had an independent view point on poetry especially on the importance of poetry in life.

Shelley found it necessary to write his essay in a time in which certain writers and thinkers started to relay on science as best solution for all questions and doubts of changing life. Shelley's essay comes as a reply to an essay written by his colleague, Thomas Love Peacock. In The Four Ages of Poetry (1820), Peacock mentioned how poetry turned into a dysfunctional kind of writing that has nothing to add to the new stage of modern scientific life and poetry was more prominent in ancient times. (https://interestingliterature.com.2021/10/Shelley defense of poetry).

A Defense to Poetry (1821) was Shelley's very crucial essay which was published eighteen years after his death, when his widow Mary Shelley published it in the Literary Miscellany that published Peacock's essay. However, Shelley included in his essay all what retained the value and significance of poetry. He showed that poetry originated from the traditional classical ages and it was related to civilization since it witnessed the needs of humans from the past to the present. Moreover, Shelley re-emphasized the idea that poetry production was eventually a process of perception in that it used certain faculty like imagination and it was, of course, a matter of organizing a different look towards things in the external world. Because Shelley belonged to the romantics, it was clear that these concepts like imagination and the source of inspiration occupied a major position in the literary evaluation of the romantic poetry. (Ibid)

Furthermore, Shelley's A Defense of Poetry illustrated that as humanity needs reason for interpreting universal problems logically; it is also in need for the power of imagination to receive signals from the external world and re-produce them spiritually. In this meaning, poets have a vital role cause the adopt this complex process. Poets to Shelley are not lovers in the sentimental side of meaning, but they represent part of religious propaganda in their establishment of laws, virtues and noble qualities. They are the tutors of the attractive and the pure and the founders of perfection. (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 43)

As a matter of fact, Shelley discussed different topics concerning the role of poets and poetry in his essay (Ibid). For example, he attempted to give poets important value since they, as he considered, take the roles of prophets and artists in that most of them are artists or adopt the direction of guiding people just like the poets in classical ages.

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Poets, according to Shelley, take into their side a universal aim of the importance of inspiration as a major source that transforms the impression to the receiver. One can hardly feel the outer world without a sensuous message from the poet. More obviously, they are the legal inheritors of wisdom and creativity (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 67)

In addition, Shelley referred to the distinction between poetry and prose showing that poetry is of higher degree since it is based on the use of musical effects and certain restrictions of rhyme and meter and, thus, it is more used in communications. (Pancoast, 2022: 3). More specifically, Shelley commented on the difference between poetry and history in a way that lets poetry to be more brilliant and less obstacle. He illuminated the idea that as history tells only truth even when they are hardly to be heard; poetry could be more enthusiastic in that it makes reality be less desperate and more glorious and aesthetic.

Poetry keeps the essence of the contemplation of the world. The reflection of poets' experiences in the external world. It has a wider role of reproducing all the impressions to the readers. It makes the experience a kind of real attachment to one's individualistic inner conscience. In this, poetry turns the hidden senses overt and more readable. (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 47-48)

This research offers an example from Shelley's poetry which depicts the way he considers the power of poetry in presenting some pictures of nature. In his Ode to the West Wind (1820), P. B. Shelley presented capital letters to make his stressed meaning on part of nature which is the wind. Shelley is definitely a poet of changing or unstable mentality which in one place tried to take readers to the world of the unlimited space by passing with the wind to everywhere inside the poet's mind. (Pancoast, 2022). This research does not go to examine Shelley's possibilities of poetry production since this thing is never to be suspected; but it aims to figure out the strength of poetry to provide enthusiasm and energetic spirit for fellow generations to write and read poetry:

"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing…Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear!..." (Ode to the West Wind. The World Poetry Archive, 307)

Whether in the opening lines of the poem or in the middle, the idea of Shelley's emphasis on the power of poetry is recognized thoroughly. Shelley intended from the beginning of the poem to use images from the external world to enlarge the capacity of imagination that poetry offers. It is only through a faculty like imagination that the Autumn's leaves seem to have this image mentioned in the poem. It is this supreme power of poetry that could make the west wind un seen like ghosts and pass very quietly. It might be a greater power of perception that took into consideration a process of

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presenting the wind both a destroying power and a power of new rebirth. Surely this way of approaching these two contrasting images of a part of nature does not result from misunderstanding of life; rather its roots come from a perfect perception of the cyclical movement of life and death.

"…If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear; If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee; A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share….The impulse of thy strength, only less free Than thou, O Uncontrollable! …." (308)

Here is also another references to images from the natural world outside and the influence that such images has on the poet. The lines above make it clear that poetry is not an illusion but a process of deep analysis of a unique appreciation from the part of a poet who feels what other feels and find it difficult to reveal. The poet's various wishes to have multiple faces or beings come from a sensitive search for spiritual fulfillment which poets usually look forward to see. To be a leaf, a cloud or even a wave means there is a wider aim behind which is obviously get liberty and be out of control.

" …heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud." (309)

Not only freedom, but the poet asked for getting more spiritual or individualistic features that poetry could widely provide like pride and unrestricted or opened spirit. Other references to strength and un-limitedness are scattered here and there in the poem with meanings of the power of poetry and the revolutionary sense of romantic aspect like "dirge" a description for the musical pattern of death. Pancoast (2022) makes the idea more obvious.

So this may crystalize Shelley's skillful manner of poetry production through which the west wind could be presented as "a character" having the features of the new strong spirit that is out of control and is part of the process of life and death. Again it is the power of poetry which enables Shelley to create a forceful image of the un tamed nature which is the west wind itself. (Pancoast,2022: 5)

At the end of the poem, the last two lines contain an unrequited question that might lead readers and critics to multiple interpretations and readings:

"…The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (307)

That connection between "prophecy" and the wind from one part and between poetry from the other part carries the meaning of mysticism that the romantics especially Shelley looked for. (Respatio, 2019: 31). The meaning of prophecy refers to the Biblical concept of the messengers and their return to life or it may stand for his own personal rebirth because he made a prediction for his death. Then the last question or line creates the Shelley's hope in the afterlife and the continuous process of life and death.

This is also presented in most of Shelley's poems. He adopted the mystic intense observation for the natural world. He used his powerful imagination

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to transfer reality to a kind of poetry that could be welcomed by the public and understood by common people. In this case poetry becomes a vehicle for changing the social and political conditions of people's life. (Respatio, 29). Thus poetry just like other genres of literature has a noble purpose which is the voice of change that common people always need to have. Despite the fact that the majority of romantic poets dealt with the deep level of imagination and travelled away from reality by their sense and spirituality, yet nature was their major source of inspiration that gives them power and satisfaction.

Shelley's Ozymandias (1817) as well as comes to have a look on the poet's ability to weave the historical facts with strong imaginative mind to give a moral lesson to humanity. The life and death of a great king of the ancient Egyptian culture seemed to be clarified and told in a peculiar manner which reflects the poet's extreme ability of imagination. The story is about Ramesses II who was one of the great and powerful rulers who ruled Egypt for more the sixty-six years and achieved various victories with many contributions to society. But after his death what remained was only a half-buried statue in the wide desert:

"…My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."
(Ozymandias. The world poetry Archive. 330)

As the poem mentions a glorification of a king who once was an extremely powerful, yet it ironizes the way the statue appeared to the reader in present life. The poem, after all, sends a moral lesson about the fact that time is changing as it is passing quickly and nothing remains forever. So Shelley has a complete aim of defending poetry since it also makes a moral goal of teaching the virtuous and the aesthetic. Then, it is not poetry which should be banished but the subjects offered by poetry and the manner that may lack the noble purpose of enlightenment. (Sarikas, 2019. https://blog.prepscholar.com/ozymandias).

Indeed, Shelley's A Defense of Poetry gained wide attention from critics and writers who found it really reflects the essence of the age. Since he was a Romantic poet, according to the romantic movement. He mentioned how poets had the spiritual and visionary look towards the universe and how the individual was the center of the universe. He never narrated historical events or instructions to present poets on how to write poetry. Instead, he just like other romantic considered that imagination could possibly be the major supreme faculty that gives opened sphere to poets to understand their world. Shelley, moreover, attempted to send a universal message to all fellow generation that poetry is fine expression and it has a unified purpose that really needs to be appreciated. His ideas on poetry were fully crystalized in

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his essay when he compared it to "Aeolian lyre" which could be moved and controlled under the influence of the player and the air. So it is the job of humans to determine the tone of poetry depending on the impressionistic influence of his soul. (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 40)
But when comes to Reason, Shelley commented that it is the process of "enumeration" which leads to the numerical or empirical system; whereas imagination is how one perceives and interprets the signals by a process of impressionistic evaluation. (P. B. Shelley. A Defense of Poetry. part I. 41)

2. Plato's Objection to poetry

Plato was a great philosopher and mathematician from Greece. He lived from 428/427 to 348/347 BCE. He was student of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), teacher of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and establisher of the Academy, very famous as the writer of philosophical publications of peculiar impact. He was mainly a critic but his objections to poetry and poets are very prominent in the literary history of the various studies concerned the meaning and value of poetry. Plato's The Ion, the Symposium & the Republic and the Laws are among the works which contain different opinions on poetry. (Barad, 2010. https://groups.google.com/g/eng_dept_bu/c/Ss44ldf_XrY)

However, this research does not intend to shed light on all Plato's philosophical opinions on poetic writing; but here some important points which summarize what crucially seems to be a matter of difference:

A. Plato's Educational disagreement on poetry

In The Republic Plato sees that poetry or art in general like a sort of imprisonment and a kind of illogical emotions for young generations. This is, of course, because it distracts humans from reality. Nevertheless, Plato's educational objection does not seem to be completely accepted by all critics. Plato's views cancelled the many advantages of poetic writing and the wonderful influence of poetry. Morals, intellect and religious teachings are scattered in most of classical poetry texts like the hymns and Christian cannon. Students in school may need to study poetry for gaining spiritual and magical flourishment for their minds which Plato might consider ridiculous. The educational side of study does not only relative to logical assumptions but it also demands a kind of sentimental attachment to result a fulfilled manifestation of a subject. (Myungjoon, 2010: 1)
The point of difference comes from Plato's remote view on poetry. He regarded that education is how individuals contribute to achieve justice and social perfection. Since most the Greek philosophers like Plato and Socrates believed that justice is the only way to get knowledge. When humans get knowledge, then society reaches excellency and virtue. Plato also focused on the three branches of knowledge which are; knowledge of the Virtue, knowledge of the job and self-knowledge. Nevertheless, one can easily

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notice that Plato's contribution to education does not have any reference to poetry but it is really a subject of intellectual development that is far away from useless spiritual account of poetry. (Myungjoon, 1-2)

B. Plato's Philosophical disagreement on poetry

In his theory of the Mimesis, Plato declares that philosophy is higher than poetry since it deals with the idea and poetry is quietly away from the idea. (Lee, 1994). He even remarks that the poet looks like the imitator to truth and thus he is inferior and knows nothing but "appearance" (Ibid). Again Plato depends on intellect and logical result of thought to reach virtue which he considered supreme. He directed the attention towards the idea of imitation according to which poets (in specific) and artists (in general) are viewed as mere imitators and they have no knowledge about the whole the existence. The problem is that Plato concentrated on the concept of purposelessness that poetry has. Then he goes behind this to reconsider that all art is merely a matter of imitation without anything productive. Thus all genres of literature whether it is poetry or fiction or even drama they are all away from real life and they never add anything to human's mind or develop any intellectual skill. That is why he gave more attention and focus to philosophy and turned very away from poetry and art. On course, Plato's theory is not totally applied for one could not apparently deny the role of poetry and the vigorous sense and perception it creates in the psyche. (Barad, 2010. https://groups.google.com/g/eng_dept_bu/c/Ss44ldf_XrY)

C. Plato's Moral disagreement on poetry

Among all philosophers of the world, Plato is best known for his morals and ethics. He portrayed humans in a higher level of creation and put poetry to lower inferior level out of which evil instincts could be resulted. Poetry has imagination, thus Plato found that it brings mixed feelings of pleasure and despair. This view lacks a complete overview on the meaning of poetry because it neglects the many poetic texts or poems that include moral teachings. It disregards the universal aesthetic values about human existence and role of individuals in life. In addition, poetry itself even when containing references to emotions and sentiments; it could probably send moral lessons on how humans should be behaved in society and how they act to get virtue. (Buryeat, 2022)

Contrastingly, in his The Republic, Plato explained how poets should be exiled since they might be corrupt the minds of humans. He continued describing poets in making them in comparison to philosophers. In order to show it in more clear way, Plato mentioned an image of the cave and stated that both poets and philosophers come through it but only philosophers could easily get out from the cave with enlightened mentality and knowledge. Whereas poets mislead their way and end their path with illusion and lack of virtue. This is due to the fact, as Plato illustrated, that

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poets during their search for a meaning for something they go beyond the limits and get missed in the world of injustice. Plato never considered how poetry is included the deeds of great gods and goddess and their stories of ethics and moral guidance. That might be a reason why one of his big followers and students like Aristotle and other poets of ancient time were disagreed with him on this point. (Ozensoy, 2022. https://www.thecollector.com/plato-philosophy-republic-poetry/)

Conclusion

Shelley decided to write an essay that answers many questions about poetry and its role in humans' life. According to his view-point, poetry is the medium by which man's capacities are to be very opened or free and in the same time restricted to noble purposes. Poets, in more effective manner, appeared as the pioneers of delightful world and the founders of peace and sensuous creations. A Defense of Poetry, in other words, proved that Shelley does not disagree with Plato on matters of subjective conviction; rather it associates with a more universal attachment of humanistic requirements. Reason, Shelley considered represents the systematic role around which poetry is weaved which stands for creation and imagination. So, both are essential for more stable understanding of the world. Plato may not find these backgrounds for the meaning of poetry. He viewed poetry as the thing that distracts Man's mental powers and adds some lower values to the spirits of human existence. Intellectually, Plato concluded no importance for poetry and the poets are merely imitators with no fruitful profits to produce in life.

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