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# A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO SHELLEY'S POETRY

—An Introduction to

*Shelley and Synesthesia*—

Suzuna Jimbo

( *Shelley and Synesthesia*, by Glenn O'Malley, Northwestern )  
University Press, 1964. 204pp.

Recently there is a tendency to make researches in literature through scientific analysis. For instance Freud's psycho-analysis is often referred to in relation to literary works. O'Malley's *Shelley and Synesthesia* is a remarkable attempt to appreciate Shelley's poetry through analysis of synesthesia.

The basic material of this study is Shelley's striking use of synesthetic imagery, which is defined as language that 'describes one sense experience in terms that "belong" to one or more of the other senses.' (p.3) The author earnestly shows, closely analysing Shelley's use of synesthetic imagery chiefly in his ideal poems, how it is interchanged among senses, how various synesthetic expressions in a passage or a poem are combined into a multiple unity, what significance synesthetic schemes have in relation to the subjects or themes and how Shelley's use of synesthesia develops and matures in his later attempts. Shelley got scientific hints of such conception chiefly from Newton and Erasmus and Robert Darwin. We can find in Newton's *Opticks* (1704) 'that measurements of spaces occupied by the seven spectral colors yielded proportions like those which obtain among the octave intervals.' (p.18)

This kind of influence is already noticed in Shelley's juvenilia such as *Queen Mab* and *The Retrospect*. The author, however, wisely begins with *Alastor* in analysing Shelley's synesthetic schemes, because it is Shelley's first successful attempt 'to develop an elaborate synesthetic pattern as essential element of that narrative.' (p.56)

There are two sets of images and symbols throughout the poem (*Alastor*). One consists of 'references to rainbows and prisms, the other to Aeolian or "natural" music and to Aeolian instruments.' (p.35) 'Air-prism' is the name given by the author to 'the result of the synesthetic fusion of these two image-symbol sets or motifs,' which 'are repeatedly juxtaposed not only in *Alastor*, but in poems written at every stage of Shelley's career.' (pp.35—36)

Before Shelley, William Jones, an eighteenth-century divine, had already indicated both sounds and colours come from one and the same source because the former are nature's voice heard through the harp and the latter are nature's light seen through the prism. Regarding this as a real fact rather than a metaphorical fancy, we may easily give a firm theoretical endorsement to the seemingly paradoxical legend of Memnon's harp; we can approve that the wonderful harp might have been a sort of prism refracting light as music and therefore that this music could have been an equivalent to prismatic colouring. Hence 'it is by this kind of Memnonian interchange *and its converse* that Shelley transmutes the harp-prism analogy into the synesthetic air-prism scheme of *Alastor*.' (p.46) The most conspicuous passage in the poem, from this point of view, is lines 151—157. The veiled maid is an Aeolian figure and her speech a natural music, hearing a "strange harp." This Aeolian music is 'compared to a natural harmony' and 'weaves for his visionary hearing a "web / Of many-coloured wool and shift-

ing hues," which is supposed to be 'rainbowlike.' (p.51) This inversion of the music into colours can naturally be attributed to the above-mentioned Memnonian principle, by which the hero can hear colours in his inmost soul.

'This combination of the motifs' is repeated through the poem, and sometimes further applied to descriptive projections of scenery. Accordingly the author stresses the significance of *Alastor*, asserting that images and symbols of light and harmony dominate Shelley's vision motifs in *Alastor* as well as in his later ideal poems, and that the air-prism device uses intersense harmony to illustrate profound reaches of insight into a theme of a single, all-pervasive harmony, which is one of Shelley's main subjects in his later poems too. (p.57)

After *Alastor* there appears a new element in Shelley's poetry, which the author calls 'Venus complex,' which I understand may be briefly expounded as equivalent of Venus's light and music. Shelley seems to have adopted Ptolemaic conception about the universe and the spheres and to have believed Venus to be in the third sphere, with a Pythagorean harmony. 'He makes Venus's light synesthetically audible. And then, . . . , he establishes the converse of this by making ethereal harmony perceptibly radiant.' (pp.59-60)

The Venus complex in *The Revolt of Islam* is grasped and introduced most plainly and convincingly. The most interesting point is 'doubling of Venus symbolism.' Here the Woman is likened to Vesper, and the Serpent to Lucifer; 'the Lucifer-Vesper, male-female relationship emphasizes that the essential force in Shelley's revolutionary philosophy is love, not hate' (p.64), which principle is suggested repeatedly, for example, by absorption of the Woman and the Serpent into a single being (which is to be taken Venus), fusion of two meteoric lights into "One clear and mighty planet" (I, lvi, 7), and the

nuptials of Laon and Cythna in Canto VI. In addition to this we find leaves and flowers making Aeolian music in the delin-eation of the hall (VI, xxvii-xxviii), as in *Alastor*. These Aeolian-rainbow motifs are developed into 'ideal harmony and supernal light' of Cythna and Laon's love.

Next the author sees Venus complex involved in the song of *To a Skylark*, concentrating his attention on two stanzas, the fourth and the fifth. Most Shelley scholars read the "silver sphere" in the fifth as Venus. The author wants to give additional evidence for this reading. Regarding the lark's song synesthetically similar to Venus's light, the author thinks 'the sustained influence of the star-lark, its song, equals the con-tinued influence or presence of the morning star.' So far does this elucidation seem to be reasonable. But when I examine the author's way of attributing "a star" and the "silver sphere" to Vesper, something doubtful must be noticed. Even if we admit similarity between the lark's song and Venus (here as Lucifer), it would be difficult to construe the star as Vesper.

By the way, as the background of this lark-Venus identifica-tion the author wants to show connection between nightingales' singing and spherical music, and further, between their song and the melody of Venus's light.

In *The Triumph of Life* Venus's movement is treated as the same as the sun's. The ideal Shape fading in the coming light, and the new Vision crossing the forest (of course in both, music and colours are fused), in Rousseau passage of the poem, are respectively compared to Lucifer waning in the sunlight and Vesper restored in the twilight. Connecting this with Shelley's vision theme, we may recognize implication of changes in spiritual life from 'a youthful visionary perception of an ideal,' to 'loss of the vision,' to 'feeling that the vision, though lost, still exerts some influence' and to 'hope that the vision

will return in full glory, when common daylight has faded.' (p. 84) This stylization is already applied in the fourth and the fifth stanzas of *Skylark* and 'in *Adonais*, where Keats as Lucifer passes through temporary eclipse to emerge as immortal Vesper.' In the last part of exposition of *The Triumph* the author ascribes to growth of Shelley's poetic skill and, confidence, two common features of *The Triumph* and *Adonais*, increasing subtlety of individual synesthetic images and plainness of his synesthetic schemes especially in their relationship to Venus symbolism.

According to the author, in "the embodied rays" of *Epipsychidion* Shelley tries to create 'a source, or what one may imagine to be a source, of several sensory emanations (sound, light, odor, and so on), all of which may have synesthetic effects or somehow relate to one another synesthetically,' and not a source which 'sends out a single sensory emanation . . . , which synesthetically affects several senses.' (p. 90) This design seems to give Emily the glory (with its light and warmth), the spherical music and the odour, and also makes it possible on the island that "every motion, odour, beam, and tone, / With that deep music is in unison: " (ll. 453-454). Both Emily and the island are incarnations of Venus and at the same time embodied rays when we think effluent, multiple synesthetic music issues from them. Shelley also 'becomes a meteor, twin to a meteoric Emily (l. 576),' (p. 108) and they 'will become the "living soul" of the island Venus (l. 539).' (p. 109) Considering thus, the author believes 'their one silent melody of thought (cf. 560-564) must incontrovertibly range with music of the third sphere . . . . 'And therefore 'Shelley, too, is to be an embodied ray.' (p. 109) Venus symbolism and synesthesia in *Epipsychidion* show that all rays 'refracted in every sort of human, natural, and celestial prism, converge in one unbroken light.' (p. 111)

As to *Adonais*, the author originally emphasizes, first of all, Adonais's references both to the star symbolism and to the mythical narrative. On one hand, Adonais is Venus-Urania and is revealed 'to be "the Divine Love, the Platonic One," and reunites immortally with her "unchanging essence." ' 'On the other hand,' the author expounds, 'Adonais also is an "Aster," and like Plato's Aster, a Venus—morning star or Lucifer in life, in death evening star or Vesper,' (p.115) These implied meanings reveal us Shelley's intention to multiply Venus references, all the more because the theme of this poem is that all are ultimately one in Venusian unity. To express this theme three motifs, which the author calls stellar, musical, and floral, dominate the whole poem. These motifs are clearly interwoven in stanzas 2, 12, and 20. For example in stanza 2 Echo causes the fusion. It is wisely noted that both human breathing and plant oxidation are forms of burning. Then if the melodies are felt to be flowers, flowers should be stars on earth, that is asters, because of their burning light. 'The intricate, highly compressed metaphor of "Rekindled all the fading melodies" (II, 7) fuses, therefore, the stellar, floral, and musical motifs presented separately in the first stanza.' (p.124) This synesthetic equivalence of three motifs again suggests that they participate in an ultimate unity, unity in multiplicity.

After stanza 38 Adonais is the star of Venus, and Urania 'as an anthropomorphic muse or goddess' disappears and becomes instead the "One" of "the white radiance of Eternity." Shelley's synesthetic practice hereafter also changes in some extent, pursuing 'supernal unity and permanence at the expense of earthly variety and change.' (p.133) For now he seldom applies that fusion of motifs to the "one Spirit."

The synesthetic scheme in *Prometheus Unbound* is the stream-of-sound (radiating light), which in *Orpheus* potentially brings

'the world, as well as the "herbless plain," to fertility, radiance, and harmony,' and in *Prometheus* grows more complex one to play actually an important role. *Prometheus's* theme is world harmony composed of the earth's atmosphere and love, that is, a manifold unity.

Act I presents only preparation for synesthesia, combining things physical and moral. The whole of Act II Venus symbolism runs through. It is worth noticing that (as the author believes) Shelley wants us to take Asia doubly Venusian. She is originally "Child of Ocean," later becomes "Child of Light" at her rebirth. To borrow the author's words, 'as Love in the form of Asia, . . . , is Child both of Ocean and of Light, I think we have in her both Venus Anadyomene and Venus-Lucifer, reborn in both aspects from the stream-of-sound.' (p. 158) The motifs of the stream-of-sound scheme are skillfully interwoven in Asia's long lyric "My soul is an enchanted boat."

(II, v, 72-110) This stream-of-sound, which sprang from clouds and fountain vapours in Act I, becomes 'a new kind of all-embracing Oceanus' and is unified into a more complete pattern.

One explanation will be worth introducing, among those which the author gives about the second part of Act IV (ll. 194-502), where intersense analogies abound from beginning to end. The arrangement of colours except white in the second last line of these:

A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,  
 Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass  
 Flow as though empty space, music and light;  
 Ten thousand orbs involving and involved,  
 Purple and azure, white, and green, and golden,  
 Sphere within sphere. . . . (ll. 238-243)

is, as the author points out, 'in inverse order to the spectral



red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.' And if we think the central white to be the source or focus of pure light, from which spectral colours come out, Shelley is showing here prismatic phenomena, and this seems to be 'a peculiar apt way to recall Newton's analogy between the spectrum bands and the octave intervals.' (p.171) Thus elucidating the line, the author asserts that both "music and light" have come from the same source and must participate in unity in multiplicity.

In concluding his study, the author insists that Shelley's synesthesia subserves the primary designs of his ideal verse. What is most valuable in Shelley's synesthesia is, 'his equation of sensory perception with moral discernment,' and so synesthetic harmony of senses is necessarily accompanied with that of uplifted morality. (A brief example is "The sphere whose light is melody to lovers.")

What impressed me most deeply in this book is the author's consistency in perceiving Shelley's synesthesia, always connecting it with themes of his poems. Interesting interpretation of a few passages of Shelley's work should be attributed to such attitude of the author's investigation (e.g. the explanation of those three lines in *Prometheus* which are notorious for discussions of Shelley's intersense analogies (II, i, 25-27) (p.159). The author may also be said to have achieved a fair measure of success in displaying Shelley's use of synesthesia in the stream of its development.

On the other hand it will not be denied that this book contains a few ambiguous passages. (e.g. expositions of the stream-of-sound (pp.153-154) and about the relationship between a lark and Venus (p.72)). Lastly, I should like to say, we truly hope such important but rare study will be developed enough to be free from above-mentioned obscurity, but we must keep it in mind that such analytical study as this is only a

step to a better and more proper appreciation of poems, that when we actually read poems such analysis is made only unconsciously and instantaneously because poems should be perceived not by theory or philosophy but by intuition, and that therefore there must be a limit to such analysis.

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