

## Supervisor's Report

### Tomáš Balvín: "Shelley's Negotiation of Metaphysics"

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This is a thoroughly researched thesis focusing on philosophical sources of Shelley's poetry and thought. The author has decided to discuss a complex issue of Shelley's "metaphysical" thought, which he defines in the thesis epigraph (using a phrase from Mary Shelley's text based on a manuscript of Shelley's essay "Speculations on Metaphysics") as "an inquiry concerning those things belonging to, or connected with, the eternal nature of man." The problem of this definition is that it is not related to any philosophical concept of metaphysics, starting with Aristotle and continuing with Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lévinas and Derrida. The author's own understanding of Shelley's metaphysics, stressing "the social goal" of "his philosophizing," namely his criticism of "organized religion" (8), makes him avoid a systematic confrontation of Shelley's views of metaphysics with those expressed by major philosophers discussing or critiquing metaphysics. One can only regret that the author resigns on a detailed analysis of Shelley's "Speculations on Metaphysics" (there are three mentions of this essay in the thesis) and develops a number of rather heterogeneous associations this concept had in Shelley's thought, other philosophical doctrines and critical literature on Shelley.

Although the author declares in the Introduction that "the thesis shows a more interconnected picture of Shelley's philosophy and poetry" and "is concerned with the effects that poetry should have on society for which a clear vision of a functional metaphysical world was sought to be discovered" (9), Shelley is presented rather as a thinker than as a poet. Aesthetic aspects of Shelley's poetry are seldom noticed, despite the fact that today's relevance of Shelley's work is predominantly aesthetic and its philosophical aspects are always grounded in Shelley's poetic art (as evident, for instance, from Paul de Man's reading of "The Triumph of Life"). Contrary to this, the author imagines Shelley as an artist aspiring to the role of a social philosopher and trying to "wrestle philosophical ideas and societal visions into his art" (7). Another problem is that this rather disputable point of departure has not impelled the author to formulate a clear research question.

Instead of a research question, the thesis postulates a rather schematic division of "ideologies or metaphysical schools" (7; this phrase is a proof of the author's confused understanding of metaphysics): "materialism, Godwinian perfectionism and idealism" (7). In the process of supervision I repeatedly emphasized that the categories of materialism and idealism are not suitable for the interpretation of Shelley's poetry, because their opposition points back to the schematic antagonisms of Marxist ideology. In a seminar attended by the author, I have illustrated that in many Shelley's works from *Queen Mab* to *Prometheus Unbound* "materialism" and "idealism" interpenetrate to such an extent that they cannot be discussed in isolation. In my opinion, the importance of Godwin's thought (especially his perfectionism) for Shelley's poetry has been overrated and the thesis (which often substitutes author's own argument by strings of quotations from critical literature) does not demonstrate the relevance of Godwin's philosophy, rather Shelley's departure from Godwin's perfectionism. Another mistake is to explain this departure by the influence of Platonic concept of Love which the author attempts in the third chapter.

Schematic understanding of Shelley's philosophy in the thesis precludes any interpretation of the historical development of Shelley's poetry. Why does the author deal with "The Cloud" in the first chapter and discuss "To a Skylark" as late as chapter four, if both poems appeared in the same volume published in 1820? Although "The Cloud" is based on a "materialist" idea of the circulation of water in nature, it ridicules the Newtonian concept of the universe and individual physical processes in it. It would be better to interpret both poems in view of Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, but this part of Shelley's poetic drama is

only cursorily mentioned in the thesis. It is evident that the schematic point of departure declared in the Introduction does not work. It does not contribute to understanding the development of Shelley's poetry.

Another problematic aspect of the thesis is the discussion of inspiration. Although it has an important role in Plato's philosophy, Shelley's thought of inspiration (chiefly in *A Defence of Poetry*) can hardly be explained by his affinity with Plato's philosophy. Rather, Shelley's understanding of inspiration anticipates Derrida's notion of "trace". Moreover, the theme of inspiration (principal in chapter 4) is at odds with the original scheme announced in the Introduction. Although it is possible to read this chapter as an attempt at a rectification of the originally chosen approach, it does not succeed in this task, because it returns to the poems of 1815-16 (*Alastor*, "Mont Blanc," "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty") whose reading can hardly help to interpret *A Defence*.

All these shortcomings make the thesis rather fragmented. In combination with the vaguely formulated research question, the fragmentation makes the conclusions of the thesis fairly confusing. Of course, it is true that Shelley is not "a linear-developing thinker" (111). However, the thesis fails to outline a clear development of Shelley's thought and poetry, precisely because they are closely intertwined and difficult to pin down by means of schematic notions.

A good feature of the author's work is his final attempt to reflect on the structure and methodology of the thesis and rethink its conclusions. In view of this, as well as of the demanding nature and considerable breadth and thoroughness of the research of critical literature, I **recommend the thesis for defence and propose the grades "very good" or "good," depending on the performance of the candidate during the defence.**

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