

***Ode to the West Wind* as Prophetic Poem/A Poem Singing of Regeneration
Through Death/A Poem Mingling Personal Despondency and Prophetic
Passion**

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If Shelley fainted and fell like ‘a dead leave’ in *Indian Serenade*, and was a ‘frail form, a stranger among men’ in *Adonais*, it is in *Ode to the West Wind*, these faltering tones become trumpet-tones of prophecy. Shelley the revolutionary has always sought the insuperable and the wild in Nature, quite unlike a Wordsworth who sought the serene. The fierce autumn storm involving the West Wind brings for him the hope of regeneration from a dead earth and the deadening traditions. The approaching storm seems to him as the clarion cry of hope to win over his nagging despondency, his ‘thorns of life’. It is noteworthy that Byron, too, had longed to be ‘a portion of the storm’, but only in order to share its ‘fierce and far delight’. But Shelley calls upon it as the far-sweeping preserver of the seeds of the future, the herald of spring or regeneration.

The sweeping power of the West Wind is the refrain of the first three stanzas which describe its effect respectively on earth, sky and sea. Shelley first describes what is closest to

him. Then as if raising his eyes he describes the sky from the zenith to the horizon. Finally, he looks beyond this to what he cannot see the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The West Wind is invoked at the very beginning as 'wild'. Later it is described as 'tameless, and swift, and proud', qualities which are not seen as positive, since order demands obedience, control and tameness. The reason may be that Shelley is an atheist, and so his apostrophe differs from the more usual addresses to gods and spirits, and also that he wants the Wind as a force that can overturn the existing order and which does not think of submission. The Wind drives the 'pestilence-stricken multitudes' of the dead leaves and chariots the winged seed to their wintry bed where they would wait for their future resurrection during spring. The colours of the leaves, 'Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red' correspond to the four races of man: Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasian and American Indian. The idea of the Wind's being the 'Destroyer and Preserver' also reminds one of Lord Shiva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Preserver, known to Shelley from the translations of Sir William Jones and Edward Moore. However, the use of the word 'Destroyer' before 'Preserver' suggests the rebirth through death.

In the second stanza there is a comparison between the Wind's swift current and the stream of water. The Wind is hailed as the singer of the dirge of the dying year upon which the dense vapours of the dark autumnal clouds built a sepulchral vault. Winter rains are a prelude to the fertility that returns with spring. Again, the idea of the sepulchre is also associated with resurrection. When Mary Magdalene came to Christ's sepulchre on the third day after the crucifixion, the stone shutting the entrance to the sepulchre had been rolled aside and on it sat an angel who told her that Christ had risen from the dead. In the third stanza the description of the ocean and sea is linked with political ideology. The sleeping Mediterranean, when awakened by the approaching Wind, reflects 'old palaces and towers',

once tokens of tyranny which are mellowed down by time. But Shelley is less concerned with the towers and palaces: he concentrates on the life that has grown over the signs of a ruined empire, the 'moss and flowers', the signs of rebirth through destruction.

The poet pleads for a negation of his human status in the fourth stanza, which is a mingling of the first three stanzas; he wishes to be only an object for the wind, like leaf, cloud and wave. The concluding stanza is an impassioned plea that with the endless energy of the Wind the poet's prophecy of the reawakened earth and man's victory over evil be broadcast to the world. He now compares his own thought with the dead leaves which, by concealing and fertilising the seeds, help the efflorescence of a new life in spring. The impassioned cry of the concluding lines is prophetic of that unconquerable hope for humanity: 'O Wind,/ If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

Thus the poem advocates the advent of a new millennium: man is to be made perfect by the complete dissolution of all traditional ties by which the race is at present bound together. It conforms to the prophetic role of a poet that Shelley assigns in *A Defence of Poetry*: 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.