

LITERATURE

SOME NOTES ON THE STRUCTURE AND IMAGERY OF SHELLEY'S 'ODE TO THE WEST WIND'

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It seems natural for poets and especially for Romantic poets to roam among the stars. It may also be natural for them to yearn for far distances and to wander in their imagination where average human beings are not able to wander. But I have always felt that there is a special quality in Shelley's nature imagery and in his significant wanderings in space, outer space included. This individual trait of Shelley's imagination, unusual in its freedom and daring even when compared with the imagination of other European romantic poets, has been in the last fifty years a subject of quite a lot of adverse criticism aiming at a depreciation and 'revaluation' of Shelley's poetry¹. As this article is not in any strict sense a defence of Shelley it is not necessary to present the prolonged history of that criticism. Anyway, in that criticism, with so much concentrating on prescription and so little on description², the right of a poet to create his own world of images, a part of which is the product of the age in which he lived, has been questioned.

Neville Rogers says about Shelley:

"To follow him across the universal spaces in which he so often seems to have ranged too far and got lost is a hazardous journey whereon many perish: his symbols, however, are the paths and fortunately they are not undiscoverable though they are often remote and liable, as Mary says, 'to elude the ordinary reader'."³

¹ F. A. Pottle is right when he says that "the central modern critical document on Shelley may be taken to be Leavis's essay in Revaluation". F. A. Pottle, *The case of Shelley*. In *English Romantic Poets*, Edited by M. H. Abrams. New York, 1960, p. 294.

² Cf.: *Op. cit.*, p. 300.

³ Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work. A Critical Inquiry*. Oxford 1956, p. 16.

This statement can be used not only to sum up some of the traits of Shelley's individual talent, but may also serve as a warning to some of Shelley's critics, a warning which can be used with some effect only if we may be sure that they are candid in their approach to Shelley⁴.

Because of the bulk of unfinished work that Shelley so unfortunately left to his wife to publish and to posterity to ponder over one must admit that some complaints against the untidiness of Shelley's poetic workmanship are justified⁵. This, however, should be applied only to his lack of care or to his inability to finish so many of his poems, and not to the basic substance of his imagery and style.

None of these just complaints against Shelley's carelessness as an artist should apply to his *Ode to the West Wind*, a poem which has always struck me as representative both of what is best in Shelley's workmanship and style and also of some of his recurring ideas and images.

Among the other qualities of his exuberant poetic imagination that of his ability to hover far above this dull earth in the clouds and among the stars has always been puzzling to me as an expression of Shelley's "reaching for the stars" with a difference. These objects of cosmic and terrestrial nature are in Shelley's poetry something more than mere poetic ornamentations, so common for most poets either as the stage setting for their personal drama or, among some bards of old, so peculiar in astrological application. These qualities represent the fusion of the two most individual features of Shelley's mind: his revolutionary ideology and his adolescent, but at the same time serious, and daring enthusiasm for science. His pranks with chemical experiments and with electricity are too well known to dwell much upon them here. But Shelley's poetic mind could hardly make use of this rather erratic

⁴ F. A. Pottle presents convincing arguments for his statement that, "...it must be clear to any fair-minded observer that modern criticism of Shelley is not completely candid. The critics are still making a case. They are suppressing much that could be said for his poetry on their own grounds. They are practicing, and encouraging others to practice, a kind of reading of him which they would brand as superficial if applied to Donne or Yeats." *Op. cit.*, p. 300. A German scholar, Manfred Wojcik pointed out that the continuous adverse criticism of Shelley has been based on ideological prejudice. Cf. Manfred Wojcik, *In Defence of Shelley*. Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, XI, pp. 143—188.

⁵ This is an example of balanced and candid opinion: "Owing to his early death, the anxiety of his widow to preserve every fragment of his poetry, and his carelessness as an artist, his Collected Works are like a garden in which the weeds choke a good many of his flowers. His faults militate against his virtues, and his life work is a muddied stream." Stephen Spender, *Shelley*. London 1952, p. 6.

chemistry and physics. We may say, however, that whatever part astronomy played in his scientific interests, he made a full use of it in his poetry. The world was a stage for Shakespeare, the cosmos was the master image and the realm in which to roam for Shelley, and surely Shelley knew a lot more about the working of the universe in the scientific sense than Shakespeare did about the geographical whereabouts of the world. It may best be shown by pointing out that in some of Shelley's notes to his *Queen Mab*⁶ and in such poems as *The Cloud* nature, more or less strictly scientifically understood, was to Shelley not only an armoury for his imagery or a subject for idealistic pantheism, but also one of genuine, if somewhat bizarre, interest in its entity and functions. Some of the Romantics were not so alien to and remote from scientific enthusiasm as it is sometimes believed. To point to another instance, Adam Mickiewicz, who had to study science as a freshman as a result of the curriculum, showed at least in one of his poems a mildly jocular enthusiasm for science⁷. Shelley, as we know, studied science in spite of the curriculum and in defiance of regulations. However, among the romantic poets Shelley was unique in his persistence as far as science is concerned and in his serious and direct application of scientific thinking to poetry. Thus, *The Cloud* is not only a feat of the poet's ability to project himself into an inanimate object of nature, in itself a striking poetic achievement, but can also be read as a poetic treatise on the formation of clouds and on water economy in nature which is scientifically sound without at the same time being didactic. This shows a unique fusion of scientific truth and poetic imagination which is perhaps unparalleled by any poet writing in English.

Of course, in this space age it would be tempting to ponder more on, for example, how space is presented in some of the more 'starry' poems of Shelley, perhaps with a scientist at one's elbow, but for the purposes of this article it is not necessary, as we confine ourselves, as the poet did in the *Ode to the West Wind*, to the earth and its atmosphere.

As a revolutionary poet Shelley was very much concerned with the propagation of ideas

"From spirit to spirit, from nation to nation"⁸

and this was the master abstract idea to which he gave a local habita-

⁶ Cf.: notes to ll.1.242,243; 1.252,253 in which Shelley vents his knowledge of astronomy and physics.

⁷ The poem I have in mind here is Mickiewicz's *Toasty* (The Drinking Toasts).

⁸ All quotations of Shelley's poetry are from *The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by Thomas Hutchinson. London, Oxford University Press 1956. This one is from *Liberty*, *op. cit.*, p. 622.

tion and a name by using imagery that was taken directly from his scientific world picture and presented pictures or mere suggestions of the objects and phenomena of nature. The idea of the propagation of ideas is in his poetry concomitant with movement and with overcoming great distances. It is in the constant movement up and down, in radiation in all possible directions, in the recurring analogies and parallels of objects big and small as related to abstract ideas, in the change of moods and metrical movement and rhythm, in the tangled, but at the same time coherent, combination of all those, in the breath-taking pictures of the fury of elements like that of *A Vision of the Sea*, that Shelley excels and differs from other poets, showing at the same time, in spite of some carping modern criticism, one of the most convincing examples of the unity of form and content in English poetry.

We may even say that this spatial imagery plays an important and basically structural part in Shelley's poetics.

Among the images of Shelley we are confronted not only with such cataclysms as an earthquake, but also with the storm and the wind — old favourites with all Romantics.

Shelley's spatial imagery may be either suggestive of a horizontal or of a vertical movement⁹. In such poems as *Liberty* ("The fiery mountains answer each other") concentrating on the spread of ideas, it is the complex combination of both that makes a complete picture of the imagery of his particular poems.

The very subject of the *Ode to the West Wind* suggests movement and hence spatial imagery of a horizontal kind. Such is in normal human experience the very essence of the wind: it blows horizontally from one direction to another. The symbolic significance of the theme of the west wind includes such divergent subjects as the dissemination of ideas of freedom and Mary Shelley's expectation of a baby¹⁰. In spite of this we can hardly discover the latter subject when reading Shelley's poem. This shows, as many things do, Shelley's ardent commitment to revolutionary ideas which overwhelmed at least in most of his poems, any private concerns. The 'thawing' i.e. libertarian connotations of the west wind are not Shelley's exclusive traits. Although it would be too much to say that the west wind as the symbol of 'new birth', i.e. of

⁹ This distinction was made already by Karl Heinz Göller in his article entitled: *Shelleys Bilderwelt*, Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift, XLIV (1963), pp. 380—397. Cf. particularly p. 382. I should hesitate, however, to accept some of the generalizations of that article consisting in attributing to one poem only one kind of movement, i.e. either horizontal or vertical.

¹⁰ "The revival of his spirits came towards the end of that October when he was expecting another child." Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work*, p. 26.

change in the social structure of nations was a cliché of romantic imagery, it is necessary to point out to another independent parallel in the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, a parallel of its use in the same sense¹¹.

The otherwise invisible movement of the wind, the symbolism of which was so aptly presented by Neville Rogers¹², is presented in Shelley's poem by means of some particular and visible if not always tangible objects of nature which can be shown in movement and which create a certain perspective of depth and height (both literal and symbolic) which in their mutual relations are organized in some specific parallelisms, the latter being usually arranged, so to say, in layers, i.e. mostly in a vertical fashion.

In the first irregular sonnet of the *Ode to the West Wind* (for reasons of convenience I am subsequently going to call these sonnets stanza I, II, III, IV and V respectively) we may observe the predominance of spatial imagery of movement in a horizontal fashion. Thus, e.g. a horizontal movement is presented in the image of the dead leaves, this kind of horizontal movement being repeated in the same stanza for three times:

... the leaves dead
Are, driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
.....
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The winged seeds, ..."
.....
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)"

This group of images suggesting a horizontal movement is capped by the finale:

"Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!"

This particular feature of Shelley's poetic imagination, an ability to

¹¹ In a part of his dramatic poem *Dziady* (The Forefathers) entitled *Na pomnik Piotra Wielkiego* (On the Monument of Peter the Great) Mickiewicz compares two monuments: that of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, expressing all the virtues of a good and benevolent ruler and that of Peter the Great which shows the tsar mounted on a steed in such a way as if he had trampled his subjects in the way. Then Mickiewicz goes on to compare the latter monument to a frozen cascade of tyranny. Then the poet asks: "When the west wind warms up these realms, what will happen to this cascade of tyranny?" thus formulating a prophecy of revolution.

¹² *Shelley at Work*, pp.: 211, 215, 272, 308.

observe 'movement everywhere', even where an observer with limited imagination would not recognize any movement whatsoever is very typically represented in the *Ode to the West Wind*¹³.

In stanza II Shelley seems to have transferred his spatial imagery of movement to a higher level of existence, both in the literal and in the imaginative sense, and consequently, too, achieved a sort of stepping up of poetic significance. He uses a simile:

"Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean".

The movement here is predominantly horizontal, but it also has some vertical connotations embedded in the word 'shook' and the change of level itself is emphasized by the image:

"... steep sky's commotion",

The line, or rather the image of 'tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean' has caused a lot of adverse modern criticism¹⁴. To dwell upon it here or to try to explain to the critics in this article how they should approach it is pointless, because it seems they did not want to take the trouble to stretch the powers of their imagination for reasons that are extraneous to cool, scholarly judgement. One should point out, however, that the combination of heaven and ocean in the image of 'tangled boughs' can be explained as a parallel image (if the clouds are like leaves, then there are imaginary boughs from which they depart) and in terms of water economy in nature, not unlike those of *The Cloud*:

"I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the sky;
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die".

Anyway, whoever has the elementary sensibility required from a critic of poetry and the necessary amount of good will can hardly be excused being unable to recall the image of low clouds running over a stormy sea as well rendered as by Shelley's daring line.

¹³ Cf. Karl Heinz Göller, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

¹⁴ The controversy concerning this problem is best presented by C. C. Clarke, *Shelley's 'Tangled Boughs'*, *The Durham University Journal*, Dec. 1961, Vol. LIV, No. 1, pp. 32-36. I find Mr Clarke's own opinions, as expressed at the end of his article, sound and unlike those of many other critics, adequate to the range of Shelley's poetic imagination.

If we want to be precise and I am afraid Shelley's poetry requires precision rather than vague and ironical innuendoes like those in Dr Leavis's essay, we may say that in stanza II Shelley stringently and consistently follows a kind of unity in his imagery, as all his images of movement and space are concerned with the level of the sky, or more strictly we may point out that nearly all the motifs he presents here refer to objects above the surface of the earth. Such significance can be ascribed to the following motifs: 'loose clouds', 'tangled boughs', 'bright hair of some fierce maenad', 'dim verge of the horizon', 'the zenith's height', 'the locks of the approaching storm' (here again easily recognizable as the cumulus clouds), 'dome of a vast sepulchre', 'congregated might of vapours', 'solid atmosphere'. All these motifs are more or less 'horizontal'.

The third stanza seems to be more complex. Obviously there Shelley probes depth, again both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense, in the latter sense suggestive of the depth of the penetration of thought, the thought that Shelley wishes at the end of the poem to 'spread over the universe'. Correspondingly, the above-the-earth surface level of the preceding stanza was metaphorically suggestive of the higher flights of thought.

It must be pointed out, however, that the first half of stanza IV is a remarkable departure from this general pattern of imagery.

The stanza can be almost exactly divided into two parts. In the first part from the beginning till 'the sense faints picturing them' we have instead of turbulence and 'commotion' a general atmosphere of calm which is suggested by words like: 'lulled', 'crystalline streams' and 'sleep'. We have also there the sense of decay, detectable in the lines:

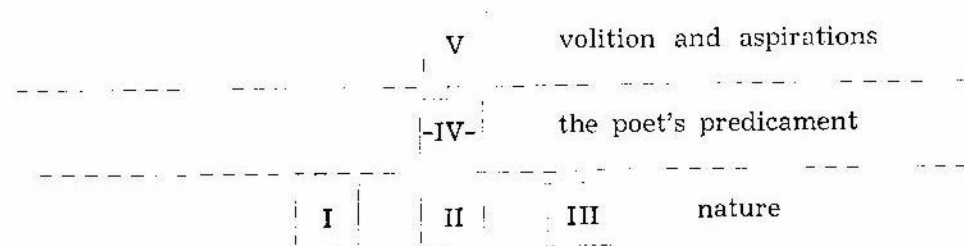
"And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers".

This departure has a special function in the structure of the poem which will be discussed at the end of this article. What must be pointed out here is the remarkable contrast which it creates within the stanza itself. The contrast of the calm and decay suggested by the first half of the stanza and the return to movement, turbulency and 'commotion' in the second half is one of the most striking elements of the *Ode to the West Wind* and has a highly symbolical significance.

The three respective levels of the first three stanzas of the *Ode* represent a remarkable symmetry which was observed by Donald

H. Reiman in *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*¹⁵ and which seems to be more characteristic of Shelley's poetics than one might expect from a Romantic. In the first three stanzas the earth surface level is duly the starting point and the other two levels, the sky and the above-the-earth level on the one hand and the bottom of the ocean level on the other hand form a kind of parallelism that is one of the most important structural elements of the discussed poem. These three levels symbolize the highest reaches of human experience and of the poet's thought within global limits. This gives a sort of unity to the first three stanzas and, on the other hand, tends to give to those stanzas, thus forming a group in themselves, a sense of contrast with stanzas IV and V. They are a sort of pictorial preparation for the more abstract connotations of the latter, more personal and philosophical stanzas.

Stanza IV is clearly a sort of translation of the nature images of the first group of stanzas into terms of the human and social predicament and experience of the poet himself. Both stanza IV and V deal with the poet's human problems and with his feelings, but again there is a striking difference between those two stanzas. Stanza IV in so many connections with the nature imagery of the first group presents in pessimistic terms the actual state of affairs i.e. the reality of the poet's predicament. Stanza V, on the other hand, presents the poet's aspirations, hopes and wishes and his arduous commitment. Thus we may say that stanza IV represents the level of existence and experience and stanza V by presenting the level of volition, commitment and 'prophecy' provides the crowning effect and the sense of the highest level of being for Shelley as a romantic poet. This general structural pattern of the *Ode* may be shown by means of the following diagram:



Such an interpretation will have a special significance if we interpret the poem in terms of the fortunate critical device of Stephen Spender's 'symphonic' character of the *Ode*. The function of the five stanzas, like that of the five movements of a symphony, will thus be seen in a new

¹⁵ D. H. Reiman, *Structure, Symbol and Theme in 'Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills'*. PMLA., Sept. LXXVII, pp. 404—413.

light, the most striking feature being the remarkable regularity, closeness and symmetry of the poem. If we go on interpreting the *Ode* in those symphonic terms we shall find that in it Shelley, again contrary to some adverse modern criticism, is in a perfect command of his fortissimos and pianissimos, which also play a significant structural and symbolic role. Here I mean the above discussed division of stanza IV which in the whole pattern is a repetition in diminution of the mutual relations of stanzas IV and V as discussed above, and as shown upon the diagram.

Thus, we have reasons to assume that the *Ode to the West Wind* is not only one of the most 'finished', but also one of the most finite poems by Shelley.

The impact of some great poems like the *Ode to the West Wind* is stronger than some "changes in the sensibility" of practitioners in literature, being an instance of a highly disciplined and closed structure and at the same time of free and daring imagery, which however is informed by a sort of nearly cosmic order, one of the mysterious, but inherent qualities of most great art. The *Ode*, like most of Shelley's great poetry, belongs to mankind and not only to one nation. Thus the poet's wishes are fulfilled. And this universal appeal of Shelley's poetry is his strength. It is its preserving factor which gives it a lasting value, almost impervious to the caprices of critics, who, after all have their own axe to grind when writing about Shelley. Foreigners are not bound by the critical feuds and fashions of his country.

One other question arises: can we suppose that the structure of the poem as it has been demonstrated above was a result of Shelley's deliberate effort or was it an unpremeditated effusion of those highlights of emotional tension which the Romantics called 'inspiration'? This is not a 'yes' and 'no' question, but it was Shelley who said that "The source of poetry is native and involuntary, but it requires severe labour in its development"¹⁶.

Just how much "severe labour" in the development of the *Ode* was involved may be seen in Rogers's discussion of the composition of the *Ode to the West Wind*¹⁷.

¹⁶ Quoted after Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work*, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 211—230.