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Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Permanent amidst the Mutable

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ABSTRACT

Shelley's lyrics of 1819-1820 have a common feature despite the diversity of the natural phenomena they touch upon. Shelley is seeking in the natural changes of the world analogies by which to reassure his most advocated faith that regeneration follows destruction. In this article I shall attempt to give substance to my claim that in these lyrics there is a pattern of scientific and ontological enquiry into Nature's apparently chaotic changes, through which Shelley is trying to come to real understanding of the Permanent, amongst the Transitory. I will sometimes invoke the help of other poems such as Mont Blanc or Adonais.

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Introduction

Looking carefully at the poems of 1819-1820, and most notably, perhaps, at *The Sensitive Plant*, and *The Cloud*, we find Shelley trying to affirm that change does not mean extinction and that death is itself but another step towards something permanent. Shelley invokes these natural analogies once again in *Adonais* and *Mont Blanc*, where the underlying contrast is always between the *Transitory* and the *Permanent*.

*The awful shadow of some unseen power
Floats though unseen among us, -visiting
This various world...*

(Hymn to the Intellectual Beauty, 1-3)

Does Shelley arrive at the Permanent in these poems? And if so, where does the continuous flux of experience as received by the senses lead him? In other words, what is the lesson of change that Shelley endeavours to register in these lyrics?

Elusive Intuition

Let us assume that Shelley was faced with a moral as well as epistemological problem; and we must recall that just as his earlier materialism did not give him full satisfaction as regards ultimate truths, so was his later Platonism insufficient by itself to give the solution. If we impinge ourselves a little on Shelley, we can define the particular problem Shelley had to face: he had an intuitive awareness of something permanent, something more than the flux of the chaotic sense-experience, which we all can see in the changing fortunes of *The Cloud*, in the seeds carried and planted by *The West Wind*, and in the untimely death of that lady tending the "perfect" garden in *The Sensitive Plant*. This kind of intuitive awareness is difficult to refine. Intuition, though it may carry a strong

conviction, is an elusive thing. In his indefatigable quest for the Single behind the Many, Shelley had, in the lyrics of 1820, to go on with nothing but elusive intuition on the one hand and the fleeting multifarious sense-experience on the other.

At one level of interpretation *The Sensitive Plant* is simply the story of a beautiful garden and the lady who tends it. It is told in a child-like manner that gives it naivety and unusual directness. The lady tends the garden from early spring until late summer, when suddenly she dies and a subsequent destruction prevails everywhere in the garden. The garden reaches a state of complete deterioration by winter; the sensitive plant and the other lovely flowers die but weeds and other poisonous plants live. When spring returns only the harmful plants survive:

*When winter had gone and spring came back
The sensitive plant was a leafless wreck;
But mandrakes and toadstools and docks and darnels
Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.*

(*The Sensitive Plant*, III, 114-117)

The whole poem seems to be elegiac, with the 'Conclusion' as a clue to make the meaning comfortably clear: material death is no more than the eventual failure of Man's perceptual faculties. The ideal, 'love and beauty and delight', which are the essence of the benignant lady of the garden, are permanent and eternal. With this in mind, one can dismiss the rest of the poem as an elaborate embroidered nature fable.

It is difficult to be satisfied, at this level of understanding, with the message of the poem thus put forward. For some details are still disquieting even to a modern reader as they used to for a contemporary one; and perhaps in some of Shelley's contemporaries' complaint we find reason for

further inspection: *'If Mr Shelley would write a poem in which he would introduce more tenderness and less gloom; never permit his subtlety of thought to run to obscurity; and above all, totally omit all allusion to his philosophical opinions, we are very sure that it would become universally and deservedly popular'* (Barcus, 329). Before this, that anonymous writer had agreed that The Sensitive Plant "is as beautiful as a specimen of...melancholy fancy as we remember to have seen." Yet despite the obscurity and the absence of "all allusions to his philosophical opinions"², the poem has really become "universally and deservedly popular", though popularity was the last thing Shelly was to care about. Now, and after Wasserman has unfolded the subtler language of the poem, it will seem too naïve for a modern reader to be comfortably happy with its directness.

The take-off point from which the poem originated might have been the garden of Lady Mount Cashel (Mrs. Mason), who was a friend of Shelley at Pisa. Or Shelley might have remembered the garden he once saw with Hogg at Oxford. In this case the garden has its real counterpart on earth and not in Heaven, and the lady might well be someone like Jane Williams, though, of course, Shelley was to meet this ideal of a woman a year later. On June 19th, 1822, Shelley described Jane Williams to Leigh Hunt as "a most beautiful person whom we all agree is this exact antitype of the lady I described in The Sensitive Plant -though this must have been a *pure anticipated cognition* as it was written a year before I knew her" (*Letters II*, 438).

Profusion of Flowers

At this level of looking at the poem come the real scientific details that there are in it. Such details are in fact the answer to those who are anxious to label Shelley always as a man with "*flights of fancy*" and that he has little of the world around him; *what he writes, they say, is only intellectual and does not have a serious affinity with reality*. It should be remembered, however, that Shelley was born a country man and according to Mary he "knew every plant by its name and was familiar with the history and habits of every production of the earth" (*Memoir of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, P. XI).

The flowers and the plants of The Sensitive Plant have freshness and brightness that comes from loving observation of nature. His letters to Hogg from Italy about the plants in the Pisan countryside reveal a deep knowledge of botany and a strong interest in it. At one occasion he thanked Hogg for his sending a milkwort which now "reposes between the leaves of a folio Plato (*Letters II*).

In return Shelley sent Hog a mountain flower, and he wrote: "I shall herborize (sic) myself and will send you as I found them what plants are (sic) rarest or popular to this country. I saw a great number of the Cryptogamia genus the other day which I have never remarked in England –fern especially. There are also curious fleshy flowers, & one that has blood and that peasants say it has a life" (*Letters II*). In Switzerland he had bought a collection of seeds of rare Alpine plants with the intention of sowing them in his garden when he is in England again. Botany for Shelley remains "more profitable and innocent occupation...than that absurd and unphilosophical diversion of killing birds" (*Letters II*). This profusion of flowers and trees gave a fresh dimension to poems like The Sensitive Plant.

In addition to the sensitive plant, Shelley lists the other flowers in the garden, counting as many as sixteen plants by name in the first sixty lines. From the botanical point of view,

the sensitive plant is different from the other plants in that it is flowerless, having no seeds to reproduce, whereas all the rest are flower plants. Shelley must have been well aware of this fact. He also must have been familiar with the fact that the sensitive plant, *mimosa pudica*, is an annual; it requires an equatorial climate and therefore it needs a lot of attention to survive in other climates, and in Britain it may even need a glasshouse care. Its life is comparable to that of Man in many ways. It is *mimosa*, i.e. basically mimetic of the human life; and its bi-pinnate leaves fold together upon touching. Whereas the sensitive plant is annual, all the other plants are perennials (Wasserman, *Shelley*, 157).

From the beginning of the poem Shelley tries to build a world which is in many ways a miniature of the real world. Thus the flowers are endowed with human feelings, and simple story is backed up by mixing sense-image to imply that flowers have as many senses as man:

*For each was interpenetrated
With the light and odour its neighbour shed
Like young lovers, whom youth and love make dear,
Wrapt and filled by their mutual atmosphere.*
(The Sensitive Plant, I, 66-9)

Whatever the poet meant the sensitive plant to stand for, it is obvious that this plant has a special place among the other flowers and to its sudden death is attached a significance more than that we usually give to a sensitive plant in a fancy garden. All its qualities lead to the supposition that it is an ideal picture, not of Shelley himself or any other particular person, but either of mankind amid natural creation at large, or else the type of the poet with creative sensibility amid general mankind.

The sensitive plant, the sensitive poet, is living amongst those who feel less, love less, yet live longer than it does, i.e. as long as our senses are concerned, for the life circle of each plant in this garden is measured by illusory senses. After introducing the sensitive plant, Shelley starts parading the other members of the garden, before introducing that angel-guardian, the Lady, who looks after the garden. This Lady, possessed of every virtue and "power", lives luxuriously alone. She bestows happiness on the flowers, who rejoice at her coming to them. She has power to prop them when they are in low spirits and she waters them when they are thirsty. She also has the ability to heal the sick plants and kill the enemies of the flowers:

*And all killing insects and gnawing worms,
And things of obscene and unlovely forms,
She bore, in a basket of Indian woof,
Into the rough woods far aloof,--*
(The Sensitive Plant, II, 41-3)

Behind The Sensitive Plant, as the opening of the poem intimates, hides the myth of Venus or Adonis; and Shelley, it seems, shows confidence that the world is cyclically eternal and that winter is nothing but a temporal season that would be followed by spring:

*And the Spring arose on the garden fair,
Like the Spirit of Love felt everywhere;
And each flower and herb on Earth's dark breast
Rose from the dreams of its wintry rest.*
(The Sensitive Plant, I, 5-3)

In fact Shelley spends the first and the second parts of the poem building an ideal picture of each of the three main elements that constitute it, i.e. the Garden, the Lady and the sensitive plant itself. The garden is fair, "undefiled paradise"

(58); the Lady is a "Power in this sweet place, /An eve in the garden; a ruling grace...(115-16) The Mimosa is endowed with every perfect virtue that can be ascribed to its species; and though it is unable to provide any bright flowers or seeds,

*Radiance and odour are not its dower;
It loves, even like Love- its deep heart is full,
It desires what it has not, the Beautiful!*
(The Sensitive Plant, I, 75-7)

Shelley creates his Eden in the first two parts, and in the prime of everything, the perfection is suddenly turned into destruction:

*This fairest creature from earliest Spring
Thus moved through the garden ministering
All the sweet season of Summer tide,
And ere the first leaf looked brown-she died!*
(The Sensitive Plant, II, 41-3)

Grasping the Existence

Considering the poem proper as separated from the "Conclusion", one can detect the logical fallacy which involved Shelley in trying to develop the fable in terms of natural phenomena. The poem seems to be an elegy of the lovely plants which one by one are changed from lovely blooms into crude and indefatigable mandrakes, toadstools, dock and charnels. The once lovey forms of beautiful creatures are now "massed into common clay"; and the sensitive plant which was once endowed with every noble passion, has become a "leafless wreck". The fable begins with the myth of nature's ever-renewing cycle and ends with complete death.

The death of everything in the Eden leaves the reader with a feeling of emptiness and nothingness that he did not feel when he started the poem. Everything is driven to perfectibility, and then suddenly to complete annihilation. But Shelley hates nothing more than the vacuum or discontinuities. Hence his assertion that what the reader has seen is only temporary and illusory. He is trying, "in the face of the indisputable experience of transience, to grasp Existence as eternal and 'true' while rejecting the discontinuities and voids as only false appearances, errors of incomplete vision" (Wasserman). The poem at the end turns to be an elegy celebrating the untimely death of the lovely Lady and the destruction of the whole garden.

It is this verging on the void, the touching upon the hiatuses in the continuity in nature cycles which "implies an absurd world and renders life...meaningless" (Wasserman, 222) which makes Shelley hasten to supply the conclusion and make the lesson clear. Before the "Conclusion" the poem seems to be expiation on a text from Hamlet. For it develops a melancholic picture of the world as "an 'unweeded garden' gone quite to seed and dominated by 'things rank and gross in nature.'" (Hamlet, 1.2.139-141) With Hamlet Shelley cries "Fie on it!" With hamlet he could wish that "the sullied flesh would melt" (Baker, 201).

Because Shelley might have felt that his natural analogy and its elegiac change would inevitably bring much melancholic thought, he asserted his vision openly in the moralistic epilogue, which serves as a Conclusion. Beyond what is seen, Shelley tells us, there lies a divine order and harmony which knows neither cessation nor decay. When Shelley's natural analogy is contradictory to his vision, it's the vision that matters, "for he is occasionally false to nature" (Baker, 199); and he never hesitates to make his vision clear and his transcendental meaning stated.

The message then is that our senses are the last thing to trust, for they are false. Beauty, truth and sweet shapes never pass away. The "Conclusion", a kind of a metaphysical addendum, affirms:

*It is a modest creed, and yet
Pleasant if one considers it,
To own that death itself must be,
Like all the rest, a mockery.*

*That garden sweet, that lady fair,
And all sweet shapes and odours there,
In truth have never passed away:
'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they.*

*For love, and beauty, and delight,
There is no death nor change: their might
Exceeds our organs, which endure
No light, being themselves obscure.*
(The Sensitive Plant, III, 127-37)

As Wasserman has pointed out in his enviable essay on The Sensitive Plant, there are two distinct ways of acquiring knowledge in this poem: "the evidences of the senses and the speculations of the imaginations. The first gives us the so called objective, the second a strictly poetic conception of reality" (Wasserman, *The Subtler Language*, 272). The world around us as perceived by our senses, i.e. objectively, is the great illusion; the reality that is arrived at through the imaginative power of a poet, or a mystic, is the basis for faith. Shelley's main difficulty in arriving at the Absolute Truth was that a man can not abandon his senses and trust the intuition only. Man is imprisoned within the limited scope provided by senses. He can contemplate only those sensations which he calls external world – "we can think of nothing which we have not perceived", this was almost a motto with Shelley. "Senses are the only inlet to knowledge, and there is an inward sense that persuaded me to this" (*Letters I*, 150). For him, there was no feasible repudiation of the show of senses, or sensory illusion, for a direct and certain contact with the Infinite or the Permanent. But to "locate the worth of life, and perhaps the evidence of immortality" we need those "extraordinary moments of total illumination" (Wasserman, *Shelley*, 221-2). The pole which attracts Shelley in a poem like The Sensitive Plant is ontological, or perhaps epistemological. It is the pole which contains the beacon, "the fire towards which we all thirst."

The Tonality of the Particular

Both Shelley and Wordsworth are obsessed by their deep devotion to nature: Shelley with seasonal changes, with the Adonic revival and vegetation growth; Wordsworth with nature in all its static charm. In this appreciation of nature the two Romantic poets differ. Wordsworth's fascination with nature lies in those moments when he is suddenly wakened by a view, a photographic shot, by the "ten thousand...at a glance". The permanency in Wordsworth's nature is embodied by the haunting presences of hills and valleys. He places his emphasis on the stability of nature's presences everywhere around him. The Permanent for him is to exist in the present sublimity of nature's features.

Shelley, on the other hand, tries to see the permanent beyond the changes. As Whitehead could perceptively put it: "Shelley brings vividly before us the elusiveness of the eternal objects of sense as they haunt the changes which infects underlying organisms. Wordsworth is the poet of nature as

being the field of enduring permanences carrying within themselves a message of tremendous significance" (Whitehead, 108). An example of Wordsworth's search for the permanent is perhaps the first book of his *The Prelude*. The brooding presence of hills, the earth, and the sky all haunt him. His theme is nature in *solido*, i.e. he dwells on the mysterious presence of surrounding things, which imposes itself on any separate element that we set up as an individual for its own sake. He always grasps the whole of nature as involved in the tonality of the particular instance" (Whitehead, 103). He perceived of the Permanent in each instance:

*Ye Presences of Nature in the sky
And on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills!
And Souls of lonely places! can I think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry, when ye, through many a year
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
Impressed, upon all forms, the characters
Of danger or desire; and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth,
With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
Work like a sea?*

(*The Prelude*, I, 464-75)

Shelley's emphasis is, however, on the changes of that which can not die. It is true that he, like Wordsworth, could see in nature everlasting presences, but again that is what lies beyond the changes and not elicited from nature in *solido*:

*The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters—with a sound but half its own ...*
(*Mont Blanc*, 1-6)

Of course this basic difference between Wordsworth and Shelley in their outlook to nature is particularly important: Wordsworth's nature is pictured and worshipped without taking into consideration the space-time relation and their mutual interaction or the unilateral action of either on any haunting presences of nature. The hills Wordsworth describes, the daffodils he sings for have ceased long ago to be as beautiful or haunting as they used to when he first saw them. The hills may still be existing, but certainly they are not the same as when he first trod them. The daffodils of course died and new others have risen in their place, but the inspiring sight will never be repeated again. His poems describe such phenomena as they existed at a particular time.

This aspect of Shelley's poetry has been well explained by Patricia Hodgart also in her *A Preface to Shelley*. The comparison with Wordsworth has been well drawn that a long citation may be justified.

One outstanding characteristic of a Shelleyan landscape is its fluidity and movement. The Spirit of nature, or the animating principle which moves and changes all things, is for him a turbulent one; not only everything is in a state of flux – the seasons change, the flower dies, the cloud dissolves and is recreated- but the features of the landscape are often turmoil. Compared with the majestic stillness typical of Wordsworth's natural scenery, Shelley's world is in a ceaseless motion:

*Worlds on worlds are rolling ever
From creation to decay,
Like the bubbles on a river*

Sparkling, bursting, borne away.

His inspiration comes not from the frozen moments of Wordsworth's spots of time but more often from storm and wind. The boat in Alastor is swept by a whirlwind through "a chafed sea", the waters rush "in dark tumult thundering", the river twists and winds and eddies with confusing purpose; and the scenery in The Revolt of Islam changes with the speed of a nightmare...(Hodgart, 125).

But how far Shelley is affirmative in his last pronouncement on the Permanent is not easy to establish; nor is it made clearly known as to how he could reach the final judgement. That he tries to avoid the gravity of conviction is clear from these lines:

*Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that
Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat,
Ere its outward form had known decay,
Now felt this change, I cannot say.
Whether that Lady's gentle mind,
No longer with the form combined
Which scattered love, as stars do light,
Found sadness, where it left delight,
I dare not say...*

(*The Sensitive Plant*, III, 114-23)

Shelley finds that his epistemological perceptions are to be limited to this world, the world of senses, the world

*Of error, ignorance, and strife,
Where nothing is, but all things seem,
And we shadows of the dream.*

(*The Sensitive Plant*, III, 301-3)

Shelley seems to verge on the absolute faith when he affirms unequivocally that the beautiful can never fade into nothingness; "For love ad Beauty and Delight, /There is no death or change...(312-13). Yet the conclusion itself carries the seeds of uncertainty. He does not ask us to believe, only he recommends; and his recommendation is to the effect that his reader own that death itself must be, like the rest of all cessations, a mockery, a false vacuum in the cycles. It is a "modest creed" and pleasant to consider this faith. Even now, by the end of the poem, the ground for certitude is not safe; he tells us that this spirit animates all nature, yet he is not confident whether the animating spirit of the sensitive plant and the Lady's "gentle mind" were destroyed along with their outward forms or not; and thus he is drawing the boundary lines between soul and body even in the realms of plants. A flower, he says, "hath a soul" (*Letters*, I, 192).

Where does the "Conclusion" leave Shelley? What land has he sailed to and what victory has he achieved? Like Mont Blanc, *The Sensitive Plant* is not intended to solve Shelley's epistemological problems; it rather shows him grappling with them and, as we shall see in *Mont Blanc*, any attempt to solve these problems is necessarily a struggle. Shelley has said a great deal: to arrive at the Permanent we should use our imaging faculty and our senses.

Fallible Senses

The poem has taught us two ways of "knowing"; the first through senses and the second through imagination. The poem itself has become an independent cosmos, creating an independent reality. To understand such reality we must apply our imagination rather than our senses:

If we read the poem with our fallible senses, we "perceive" only the superficial fable telling of nature's life and death; if we read it with the imagination, we experience

its non-literal revelations that exceed the limits of sensory experience, and those intimate the eternity of forms of reality (Wasserman, Shelley 171).

A poem like *The Sensitive Plant* requires an effort on the part of the reader more than the mere use of senses to move into its cosmos and get at the eternal reality. It requires him to play the role of the creator, the poet, and to use the data presented to him imaginatively:

The apparent and exposed subject of The Sensitive Plant, despite its title, is the life and death of the world-garden. But in every act whereby the senses report these data, the poet's imagination operates on them through similes and metaphors, dreams, and yearnings, to gain intimations of the eternal reality (Wasserman, 171).

Shelley then is not too emphatic and his final remark about love, beauty and delight having no death is not an argument as much as it is a tone, or a faith at which he arrives in those great moments of exceptional vision. The might of love, and beauty and delight

*Exceeds our organs –which endure
No light –but being themselves obscure.*
(*The Sensitive Plant*, IV, 23-4)

These two lines come at the end of the poem; and they stand as a concluding condemnation of the senses as fallible organs, unfit to establish reality or acquire knowledge. The organs of sensation and reasoning are obscure, dim and dark. In referring to man's organs as obscure Shelley is perhaps applying the conception of the human mind as "a camera obscura" (Wasserman, *The Subtler Language*, 264), a dark chamber which receives images only by excluding all but small opening of the light. Receiving images as Shelley believes requires three elements: the object to be received, which is here Love and Beauty; the eye of the receiver, which is similar to the opening of the camera; and the light without which no images can be received. But when the flood of light is too bright, the camera will be unable to receive correct pictures. Our organs are unable to receive Love which is equal to light, because it is blindingly brilliant.

Unity in Diversity

Writing to Peacock from Bagni di Lucca on 25th July, 1818, Shelley gives a minute account of the clouds and weather particular to that region. His description reveals a great interest in sky phenomena:

The atmosphere here, unlike that of the rest of Italy, is diversified with clouds, which grow in the middle of the day, and sometimes bring thunder and lightning, and hail about the size of a pigeon's egg, and decrease towards the evening, leaving only these finely woven webs of vapour which we see in English skies, and flocks of fleecy and slowly moving clouds, which all vanish before sunset...I take great delight in watching the changes of the atmosphere (*Letters*, II, 25).

Shelley's interest in weather watching was part of his age's interest in it, and in his life-time he witnessed this practice change into science. The Mediterranean was constantly in his mind when he wrote his main weather analysing short poems, i.e. *The Cloud* and *Ode to the West Wind*. These poems are outstanding illustrations of Shelley's abilities to observe, understand what he is seeing and to transform it, in these poems, into a symbolic expression of his divine and prophetic function as a poet. Again he is carrying on his struggle to transcend the mutability of seasons and reach at the Permanent. He is trying to learn the lesson of *Mutability*.

The Cloud in particular has been described as a meteorological *tour-de-force*, a series of rapid cloud-scapes and impressions of day and light skies with remarkable accuracy. For though it is a fanciful and beautiful piece of sky poetry, it remains exact, at least by the ideas of Shelley's days. But what is deeper than this is perhaps the fact that the cloud fascinated Shelley not because of its beauty, but also because it is, like *The West Wind*, *Mont Blanc* and *To a Skylark*, an example of Permanence in change and unity in diversity.

The exactness of *The Cloud* unfolds itself gradually as Shelley follows the fortunes and changes of this phenomenon, and the result is a monograph in which science has been adroitly fused with fantasy and myth. Through this laugh-tale of this cloud's adventures, Shelley has created a memorable picture of water circulation. In this poem the realm of mutability is shown in all its multiform effects: shade, shower, dew, hail and snow. *The Cloud* and *The West Wind* are further variations on the theme of mutability. They are a new assertion that the

"everlasting repetition of the fixed cycle of mutability persuaded Shelley that behind the cycle there is an immutable power, and that the apparent death in nature is not extinction but the necessary condition for rebirth. Nothing in nature dies or is absent. It only changes" (Wasserman, Shelley, 241-2).

While coming to the different types of mutability in *The Cloud*, Shelley tries to be as accurate as possible, though one faulty piece of information that he inherited from his time, i.e. that the clouds are controlled by atmospheric electricity, has crept in. Adam Walker, who lectured both at Syon House Academy and Eton during Shelley's school days there, held that "water rises through the air, flying on the wings of electricity" (King-Hele, 244). In *The Cloud* Shelley seems to repeat the same conception:

*Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,
Lightning my pilot sits...
Over earth and ocean, with gentle motion,
This pilot is guiding me,
(The Cloud, 17-18, 21-2)*

As in *The Sensitive Plant*, the cloud's birth and rebirth or the seasonal regeneration are the subject:

*I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams...
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds ...
(The Cloud, 1-2, 5-6)*

The accuracy with which Shelley describes natural phenomena such as a cloud or a west wind is disheartening fact for those who are still playing on the chord of accusing Shelley with superficiality and chaos. Nothing can be as misleading as the hasty judgment that the world, say, of *The Sensitive Plant* or that of *The Cloud* is a restricted one, in which Shelley has limited himself to a narrow section of natural life; or that in analysing a cloud or describing a fancy garden with a handful of flowers he has eschewed real life's problems and occupied himself with narrow analytical details about the progression of nature's cycles.

The Cloud is a good example of how much scientific knowledge Shelley's poetry can suggest. The classification of the different types of clouds as referred to in *The Cloud* is a tangible proof of his wild interest and comprehensive outlook. *The West Wind* and *The Cloud* have been described as "unsurpassed, and almost unchallenged the supreme lyrics of

the sky".²³ It is not a mere chance that this judgment should come from a twentieth-century physicist. The Cloud is really variegated with a wide range of different types of cloud. The description in these lines –

*I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone
And the Moon's with a girdle of pearl-*
(The Cloud, 59-60)

can well be applied to Cirrostratus Nebulous clouds. This type of cloud is usually high and veil-like; it is a sheet of the haze, often giving rise to halos round the sun (burning zone) and the moon (girdle the pearl); sometimes it is very thin and only slightly whitens the blue of the sky.

The cloud described in the lines-
*When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
Are each paved with the moon and these.-*
(The Cloud, 55-60)

is probably the middle-altitude Altocumulus Radiatus, a sheet of cloud that seems to be torn in strips. In general this cloud consists of globular masses or patches; that is why it is a tent which is rent into bits.

And yet a third type of cloud is that which is sunbeam-proof and which hangs "like a roof". This is the low grey sheet of Stratocumulus Opacus; whereas the cloud which marches through the triumphal arch of the rainbow in the lines –

*With hurricane, fire, and snow,
When the Powers of the air are chained to my chair,
Is the million-coloured bow; -*
(The Cloud, 69-71)

is probably a Cumulonimbus Capillatus, a low rain-cloud, often featuring an anvil-shaped 'thunderhead'. This type is perhaps the same as that in the lines –

*Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,
Lightning my pilot sits;-*
(The Cloud, 17-18)

Of course Shelley did not know the technical terminology as we have come to know; for the terms applied to the different shapes of cloud came to life with the appearance of Luke Howard's "Essay on Clouds" in 1803. The study of clouds became popular only with Howard's book *The Climate of London* (1818-1820). There is no evidence, however, whether in Shelley's letters or in those of his circle, that he had ever had an access to Howard's works. But Shelley might have come across some of Turner's and Constable's paintings in England or elsewhere. Yet because "many of Constable's cloud studies belong to the years 1821-1822, and Turner's occupation with clouds and vapours began about the same time" (King-Hele, 219), it is very probable that Shelley did not see any paintings by either of the two artists at this particular time. Shelley, though he kept himself well-informed on literary matters, was hardly able to keep himself familiar with everything going on around him, for communications were not as quick as they are now and the parts of the world were still too far from each other. But it remains a probability that some of Constable's and Turner's pre-1822 paintings were known to Shelley, but not those of 1822 and after since the production of a year was difficult to circulate and to be made known to people in the very same year.

Goethe, catching the spirit of the time, wrote an essay on "The Shape of Clouds According to Howard", ending it with

four poems called Stratus, Cumulus, Cirrus, and Nimbus. Shelley did read *Faust* and one or two other works by Goethe, but no mention is made by Shelley of Goethe's poems about the clouds. We are left with the supposition that what Shelley said about clouds is a merit to be attributed to him only. He lived in the spirit of his age, but he was advancing independently, sailing into new realms alone. The last few lines of the poem sum up the cloud's life cycle:

*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.
For after the rain when with never a stain
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams
Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again.-*
(The Cloud, 73-84)

That the cloud is rightly the daughter of earth and water is clear from the fact that the earth and water are necessary ingredients for every cloud-birth. Water usually evaporates either from land and therefore earth is one of the legitimate parents of a cloud droplet, or from seas and oceans where it really condenses on a salt particle, which is originally washed off land; so the expression cuts both ways correctly.

The "pores" through which the cloud passes are either the pores of plants through which rain droplets pass, or rivers and rivulets, which return the cloud's remains into the sea. If they are the pores of plant, then the cloud is playing a fertilizing role; for plants when receiving rain water become more productive than when they are irrigated by river water. This is at least what a common thought was in Shelley's days:

*The common saying of countrymen, that no kind of water
gives the country so smiling a look as rain, may be explained
on the same principle. The rainy clouds, by extending their
own electric atmosphere of plants, dispose the pores of the
later to receive greater facility, the liquid which is soon to
follow; and the succeeding drops penetrate into them the
better, as everyone carries along with it a portion of the
penetration dilating element* (Beccaria as quoted by Grabo, 120).

The other important image in the lines quoted last is "sunbeams with their convex gleam". As early as Queen Mab, Shelley was acquainted with the fact of light being refracted by atmosphere. To an observer on the earth, the beams thus refracted should seem like a curve concave downward. But the image is to be seen from above, by "an observer in a cloud looking down" (King-Hele, 225). Hence the refraction is convex.

The cloud's genealogy, being the daughter of Earth and Water, and the nursling of the sky, allows it to play the intermediary role between the Heaven and the Earth: in this poem Shelley "had presented," as Wasserman says, "the two unreconciled aspects of man, his heaven-oriented but lifeless mental ideals and his earth-oriented experiences of living that prove transitory and therefore false" (Wasserman, *Shelley*, 245^h). Yet through the intermediary role it is finally affirmed that the show of appearances is misleading and deceptive.

Conclusion

As the "Conclusion" in *The Sensitive Plant* carries the message of the plant poem, the last twelve lines in *The Cloud* contain also the crux of it: "I change, but I cannot die". The cloud is an ever-cycling regeneration; it only seems to vanish and we assume that it has been annihilated only to discover that it mocks its "cenotaph", which is no more than an "empty tomb", a memorial of that which is not buried there, an apparent sepulcher that the undying cloud mocks with laughter which is Shelley's frequent symbol of intense vitality" (Wasserman, *Shelley*, 242).

The lines show that Shelley thinks of "death" and "birth" as one same phenomenon. It is interesting to notice that death for Shelley is a "mockery", i.e. it is not the end, a cessation or a vacuum; it is rather another new start whereby a new cycle has begun. It is a change from one state into another- a step in the everlasting change. Shelley does not see in any change a state of discontinuity, for "there is a spirit within (man) at enmity with nothingness and dissolution. This is the character of all life and being. Each is at once the centre and circumference..." (*The Selected Poetry*, 458), the words "centre" and "circumference" are exchangeable in Shelley's thought, so are death and birth: thus the cloud, like a "child from the womb" (birth), or like "a ghost from the tomb" (death), arises and "unbuilds", (destroys) the cenotaph which was, only moments before, built (born) by the winds and the sunbeams. *The Cloud* is a poem in which Shelley creates a diversity of unending cycle of change; it has become a power which, like that in *The Sensitive Plant*, distributes life and death; it is one form of the Spirit of Nature, or the breath of that nature, fulfilling the will of the One.

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