

THE ROLE OF THE POET IN SHELLEY'S "ODE TO THE WEST WIND"

Ana Lúcia Almeida Gazolla - UFMG

The "Ode to the West Wind" is considered to be Shelley's supreme lyric and one of the most representative texts of the period.

The motif of the poet as the seer who announces a rebirth for mankind, a recurrent notion in Romanticism, is developed in the poem, conferring structural unity on its several parts. The related view of poetry as an instrument of the Principle that acts in the whole Universe is also presented in the "Ode," through symbolic and mythical associations which will be focused on this brief analysis.

The poem presents one of the main symbols used by Shelley: the West Wind. It is described in the first stanza as a "destroyer" and also a "preserver," a death-life force, which builds up a unifying pattern in the poem — the death-resurrection motif. The apparent paradox in the action of the wind is developed through various images: the wind is the unseen presence that drives the dead leaves, representing a force of destruction, but it simultaneously scatters the seeds, preparing the rebirth of Nature. The counterpart of the West Wind is its "azure sister of the Spring," who will awaken the "dreaming earth" and make its resurrection possible. Death and life, therefore, become cause and effect of each other, and the cycle of mutability finds expression in the seasonal metaphor which governs the poem. The Wind is the personification of the Power that lies behind this

cycle; it produces a constant flux of death and rebirth, following a law of causal necessity. Nature, however, is never really dead. It is only dreaming or sleeping, and the wind of Spring awakens it, as the West Wind awakens "from his summer dreams the blue Mediterranean..."

The symbol of the West Wind, associated with the motif of the seasonal cycle and the death-rebirth pattern, refers to the mythical substratum underlying the poem. Zephyrus, the West Wind, represented, according to Classical mythology, a force of destruction, both of Nature and of man's works. However, after falling in love with Chloris or Flora, the goddess of Spring, Zephyrus turns into a life force, helping his beloved in her creation. Further symbolic associations can be traced in the tradition. According to Jung, for example, in Arabia the word "ruh" signifies "breath" and "spirit," which is one illustration of the notion of the Wind as the primary element of Nature.¹ The same view is held in the alchemical tradition, in which the Wind, in the form of the hurricane, synthesizes the four elements which constitute material existence - earth, air, water, fire. The hurricane is thus seen as a force of fecundation and regeneration. In the same way, in the Hindu tradition, the Wind is equated with "the principle of life, language and heat (or fire)."²

The belief in the four elements which are the Cardinal Points of material life - and, by analogy, spiritual life - has been part of the Western tradition since pre-Socratic days. All of these associations are suggested in Shelley's text, especially that between the Wind as an agent of transformation and the fire of poetry, which will be identified the poet becoming the Instrument of the Universal Spirit which governs life.

The Wind thus symbolizes this force present in the Universe which acts everywhere. It stands for this Power "that ceaselessly imparts activity to the entire universe, physical and mental, ... the immediate cause in the realm of mutability."³ The winds, as the author expresses in the first stanza, "art moving everywhere": their action is felt on land, in the air, on the sea, characterizing their universality. As Wassermann points out, the recurrent imagery of leaves in the first three stanzas, allied to metaphors that tend to blend the three regions (associated with the elements earth, air, and water) diminishing the distinctions among them, reveals this universality and the synthetic character of the Wind. This is also emphasized by the fact that the wind "acts everywhere according to the same law, so that however its media differ, its effect remains constant:"⁴ In the first stanza, there is a reference to the dead leaves which reappear in the second stanza in a simile: "loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed." In the third stanza, the submarine vegetation repeats the process occurring on land: the "oozy woods" are despoiled of their "sapless foliage." The interchange of images in the three stanzas, as we have said, leads to a blending of the three areas or elements described: the buds are presented as "flocks to feed in the air"; the wind is characterized as a stream; the submarine landscape, with its "azure moss," "sweet flowers," "sea-blooms," "oozy woods," reproduces what is found on land. In the fourth stanza there is a recollection of all these images, but now referring to the poet, which indicates that a higher synthesis is aimed at:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;

*If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share*

*The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, o uncontrollable! ...*

The poet wants to share the Wind's strength, to become its instrument, to be carried away by its power as a leaf, a cloud or a wave. In a way he wishes to become almost a passive instrument of this power against which his will must stop fighting, so that, like a child, he can regain his identity with the Universe and be in harmony with the governing laws of Nature. As Wassermann points out,

Shelley's standing assumptions are that the one Power is the moving spirit of all the 'energy and wisdom' within existence and governs both human thought and all the operations of nature by a uniform, impartial law of sequences; and that the human requisite for receiving that Power is a state of passivity. Since the energy flowing from the one Power acts identically in nature and mind and follows the same law of 'causal' necessity, the West Wind has an ontological kinship, and not merely a metaphoric or analogical one, with the Spirit invoked to act upon the poet's thoughts. Only the medium of the dynamic Spirit is different, and to address the spirit of Autumn's being is also to address the spirit that governs thought.⁵

The belief in this Oneness of Power leads Shelley to establish an analogy between the seasons and man's moral cycle. There is no death in Nature: the dreaming stage, the death-like appearance of the Earth during the Winter is only transitory and Spring corresponds to an awakening, a revival of what is apparently dead. Transferring this metaphor to mankind, the author optimistically implies the succession of cycles of moral decay followed necessarily by a moral rebirth, a moral revival. The poet will be, in his reconciliation with the Power, the agent of the moral awakening of mankind. He will be the lyre of the Wind, and the idea of its force penetrating him also implies a further development of the same metaphor: his poetic energy will be regained, his poetic power will be revived. In the second verse of the fifth stanza, Shelley expresses the fear that his poetic power would be waning: "What if my leaves are falling like its own!" He draws an analogy between his career as a poet, the seasonal pattern, and the death-rebirth motif, tying all this together in the last stanza. The sense of despair present in some of the lines ("I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!") is replaced by his belief in the power of poetry in producing intellectual growth. He becomes confident in his capacity of influencing the world, being a depository of the strength of the Wind, becoming its lyre. As the Wind scatters the seeds that will grow when Spring comes, so the poet's verses will contribute or even cause the awakening of mankind. He becomes the prophet that announces the change, and his thoughts "like withered leaves" will "quicken a new birth!"

Shelley identifies his poetry and the dualistic character of the action of the Wind: it is at the same time death and life,

"ashes and sparks," because it brings upon the end of the state of stagnation since it causes the beginning of a new cycle. Poetry, therefore, engenders a new birth, and the lips of the poet echo the voice of the Wind, becoming the "trumpet of a prophecy!" The poet will be the agent of change, and his words are the sparks of spiritual life that drive the "unawakened earth" (as symbol of man's mind or self) from Winter to Spring. Poetry here is associated with Fire, the element of the fourpart distribution which was missing in the text. The first three correspond to the states of matter, but fire is the agent that brings about the transformation of matter.

The symbolic association of fire to creativity is also implied: the oppositions of fire and air, the two masculine (and creative) elements, to earth and water, the feminine and receptive pair, justifies the development of a link between poetry and the West Wind.

The poet-prophet is, then, the inspired instrument that transmits the voice of the Wind to mankind. He foresees the future because he becomes identical with the Power, but this happens only if he accepts becoming its instrument.

Shelley's belief in the power of Poetry is summarized in these two tercets:

*Drive my dead thoughts⁶ over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,*

*Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth,
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth*

The trumpet of a prophecy!

The note of despair, the fear that he could be less effective as a poet than he wished to be and, as Bloom and Trilling express it, "the sense of having failed one's own creative powers,"⁷ is changed into hope for social and moral reforms, and a great confidence in the poet's role. The word of the poet becomes a messenger of the Spirit, after his soul has been renewed by its power.

The Ode, however, after the last positive statements quoted above, ends in a question:

..... o Wind,
If Winter comes can Spring be far behind?

The poet sums up the whole meaning of the poem. He reaffirms the idea of the cycle and the death-resurrection motif through the opposition Winter/Spring; he stresses his hope for a change and, moreover, he addresses his question to the Wind showing that it represents a superior Power to the poet who, by himself, is unable to give answers to his own questions.

NOTES

- ¹ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 373.
- ² Cirlot, p. 95.
- ³ Earl R. Wassermann, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 239.
- ⁴ Wassermann, p. 240.
- ⁵ Wassermann, pp. 239-40.
- ⁶ Wassermann explains that Shelley uses the adjective "dead" referring to his thoughts because, once expressed in poetry, they are no longer in the living mind.
- ⁷ Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 447.