PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S NATURE POEMS – APORETIC QUESTS OF THE SELF

Aloisia ŞOROP [G]

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to highlight and analyze the manner in which Shelley defined the poetic self by means of an aesthetic identification with several natural phenomena, small wild creatures and plants. The paper will focus on his nature poems, some of them published posthumously. In turns, Shelley used such metaphors as a fabled animal, the faded violet, Mimosa pudica to describe a generic poet, or even himself.*

Key words: *nature, self, sensibility.*

Nature has been a seminal and versatile source of inspiration for both modern and ancient authors. The Romantics could by no means escape its enduring spell, all the more so as they considered it a reservoir of energy and purity in an ever more corrupt world and believed they could commune and communicate with it freely and in a highly creative manner.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a rebellious and radical thinker in such domains as social justice and individual freedom, approached nature from a Platonic perspective. Not only was he indebted to Timaeus' plea that there exists a world-soul and, *par conséquent*, all natural objects possess a soul and a life similar to man's, but he did not hesitate to use in his poems and poetic dramas embodiments of the natural forces in whose mouths he put words and in whose hearts, emotions (Bowra, 1973:111). Platonic and animistic at the same time, Shelley's interest in nature was described most eloquently by his wife in the *Preface to the Volume of Posthumous Poems Published in 1824*:

> His life was spent in the contemplation of nature, [...] he knew every plant by its name, and was familiar with the history and habits of every production of the earth; he could interpret without a fault each appearance in the sky; and the varied phenomena of heaven and earth filled him with deep emotion. He made his study and reading-room of the shadowed copse, the stream, the lake, and the waterfall.[1]

In 1816, while on a tour of Switzerland with his wife, Mary Shelley, and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, Shelley penned his name in Greek in different inns' registers as "PB Shelley: Democrat, Philanthropist and Atheist" (Cian, 2005:90). The fact proves that, though very young, the poet had already outlined his own profile, combining his radical political, social and religious principles with his solid background. Paradoxically, none of the three positions he envisaged himself in makes any reference to his artistic endeavours, they simply reveal his aspirations and the directions of his availability in his designs to change British society.

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[*] UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA, e-mail: asorop@yahoo.com

[1] All P.B. Shelley's poems and essays, Mary Shelley's Preface and notes to the *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* cited in this paper are quoted from The Project Gutenberg Etext of *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4800

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What he did not mention in his self-defining note was that he implicitly used his other faculties and skills, namely his imagination and poetic diction, to accomplish his three ideal missions. He could be a democrat, a philanthropist and an atheist only by being a poet. He will later enlarge upon it in his now much celebrated *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) in which he praised poets and their vocation:

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

In this essay and especially in its concluding sentence (see above) Shelley acknowledged that poetry can be a powerful instrument at the hands of poets. By bringing into discussion the poets' social mission and their visionary nature, Shelley referred in a veiled manner to himself. He could not divorce his individual/social/political self from his poetic/artistic one. The Poet (like himself) both enthralls (by imagery) and awakens conscience (by revolutionary message).

Shelley's outlook of himself as a militant poet is rounded by his wife's further characterization of him. Two years after his tragic death, Mary Shelley published several posthumous poems in the collection mentioned before, which she annotated with brief pieces of information about the place, time and the poet's mood when a particular poem (some left unfinished) or fragment was composed. In her "Note on Poems of 1818" she added:

> He was clear, logical, and earnest, in supporting his own views; attentive, patient, and impartial, while listening to those on the adverse side.[...] For who, [...], can imagine his unwearied benevolence, his generosity, his systematic forbearance? And still less is his vast superiority in intellectual attainments sufficiently understood—his sagacity, his clear understanding, his learning, his prodigious memory.

But Shelley came to be best characterized by his own poetic works which reflect the eternal and the ephemeral of his artistic self. And since he was so fond of nature and found that it responded all his needs, he used it again and again in his poems to reveal his poetic identity.

Like all Romantic poets, Shelley tried to externalize impressions and emotions by conveying them through imagery inspired by nature, be it under the form of landscapes or distinct natural elements. "In their search to find ways of expressing their internal feelings, the Romantic poets look outwards to nature to find emblems of the mind." (J.R. Watson, 1992:59)

The Romantics did not step on bare ground when finding nature inspirational; they simply extended the array of correspondences found by their predecessors. Not only were they keen on experiencing the natural environment *per se*, taking long walks and falling for the magic of colours, lights, smells and sounds in the woods, plains and hills, but they associated nature with everything that is physically and spiritually healthy and pure. Nature provided them with a rich inventory of imagery, too, and they claimed they found in nature appropriate comparisons, metaphors and allegories which could artistically express their mind and their philosophical musings.

Nature was perceived as totally harmonious with man, even created to resemble him, therefore it easily allowed itself to be known (by poets, in particular) by means of art and the imagination. Moreover, they borrowed terms from the natural

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sciences to define poetry: they considered it to be "organic", a living organism that develops like any living creature. Being prone to meditation, poets often lingered fantasizing on natural elements, projecting their own identity onto objects and phenomena in a process of poetic identification with them.

Being an avowed atheist, Shelley did not seek some deity in nature. On the contrary, in his opinion nature is a companion worth studying and following in its intricate workings because it can teach humans the natural laws of the universe. The epiphany of *the sublime* was the newly defined experience both Shelley and other Romantic poets had when confronted with majestic scenery evocative of the untameable power of nature.

On the other hand, Shelley was very keen on developing interpersonal relationships, because, as he presented it in *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*, isolated contemplation and interaction with superior powers "will lead only to a discovery of personal spiritual vacancy".(Day, 1996:162) In other words man needs men to understand nature.

Shelley believed that nature is the perfect medium for his quest of the self. Whether lavishly described in dozens of lines, or used only to encapsulate a pensive moment or a short reflection, nature is present everywhere in his poetry. Apart from the passages that are descriptive of natural spots in his longer poems or poetic dramas, there is a group of *nature poems* in which Shelley gives full play to his imagination in poeticizing grandiose landscape, such as *Mont Blanc*, tiny birds, such as *To a Skylark* and *The Woodman and the Nightingale*, plants, such as *On a Faded Violet* and *The Sensitive Plant*, or natural phenomena such as *The Cloud* or *Ode to the West Wind*. One can add to these examples a small number of posthumously published poems which can be interpreted as metaphors for a generic poet or Shelley himself, such as *The Lake's Margin, An Exhortation, The Questiona* a.o.

A fragment of the "haiku" type (without observing the strict metric rules of haiku-s, of course), entitled *The Lake's Margin*, records a recurring event of great consequence:

> The fierce beasts of the woods and wildernesses/ Track not the steps of him who drinks of it;/ For the light breezes, which for ever fleet/Around its margin, heap the sand thereon.// [Published by W.M. Rossetti, 1870.]

The hospitality of the lake's margin is immense, it offers not only access to a source of water to thirsty creatures, but also safety from predators due to the gentle breezes that rapidly cover their footsteps in sand and thus prevent "the fierce beasts" from sniffing them.

The real issue of the poem is who "him who drinks of it" is. "Him" who gets life from his mouthfuls of water is a creature that visits the sacred space of the lake, a source of life, a realm of inspiration, under the equally intangible protection of "the light breezes". The mention of the "breezes" can be an implicit reference to poetry. This time the Aeolian powers do not touch a harp strings to produce sweet music, but build sandals of sand for the unaccounted for visitor: a "him", possibly a poet, who is beyond the range of perception of ordinary people, "the fierce beasts of the woods and wildernesses" that will never guess the intruder. The highly private encounter with inspiration, the moment of artistic germination is so distinctively natural here that the poem becomes almost emblematic for Shelley's "*ars poetica*". The Poet, perhaps

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Shelley himself, is presented here as *un animal fabuleux*, impossible to perceive or understand by its like, though he is among them.

Turning to the small world, Shelley wrote *On a Faded Violet*, a three-stanza poem dedicated to the beautiful wild flower that fades ever so rapidly when plucked.

> The odour from the flower is gone/ Which like thy kisses breathed on me;/ The colour from the flower is flown/ Which glowed of thee and only thee!// A shrivelled, lifeless, vacant form, / It lies on my abandoned breast,/ And mocks the heart which yet is warm,/ With cold and silent rest.// I weep,—my tears revive it not!/ I sigh,—it breathes no more on me; / Its mute and uncomplaining lot/ Is such as mine should be.// [Published by Hunt, "Literary Pocket-Book", 1821]

The poem is an elegy on the flower whose withered fragile beauty is a perfect substitute for some faded love the poet mourns. It is praised for its wild perfume and vivid colour when unplucked, reminding the poet of his lover's beauty and kisses, but once picked up, the violet turns into "a shrivelled, lifeless, vacant form", painfully contrasting with the poet's warm heart and enduring love.

But the violet may also stand for the poetic self. The last two lines shift emphasis from the image of lost love to that of the poet, and the limp, scentless and crinkled violet is assimilated to him. He may be a poor discarded lover but he may be "mute and uncomplaining" as a poet and creator, too. Viewed from this perspective, the faded violet symbolizes the failed poet, an artistic *alter ego* whose freshness and colour have gone withered and cold, though he still nourishes passion and talent and ideas to write on. The faded violet can be interpreted as weary, passive, *blasé* Shelley, who makes (in his peculiar way) a Shakespearean wish: "Tired with all these for restful death I cry".(Sonnet 66)

Based on the same comparison between nature and himself, *Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples* [Published by Mrs. Shelley, "Posthumous Poems", 1824, where it is dated 'December, 1818.'] follows in the same self depreciative vein. Lying on one of Naples beaches, surrounded by the beauty and serenity of nature, a clear sky, "snowy mountains" in the distance, " Like many a voice of one delight,/The winds, the birds, the ocean floods,/The City's voice itself, is soft like Solitude's./", the poet is aware that he is living a moment of blissful harmony with nature.

> The lightning of the noontide ocean/ Is flashing round me, and a tone/ Arises from its measured motion,/How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion//

Nevertheless, he cannot rejoice at the purity and beautiful display of nature's divine congruity because he feels he has been doomed to failure, unhappiness and ill-health.

> Alas! I have nor hope nor health,/ Nor peace within nor calm around,/ Nor that content surpassing wealth/ The sage in meditation found,/ And walked with inward glory crowned—/ Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure./ Others I see whom these surround—/ Smiling they live, and call life pleasure;—/ To me that cup has been dealt in another measure./

Yet, somehow, he seems to come to terms with the life of misery that the future has in store for him and only wishes he could, like a child,

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> [...] weep away the life of care/ [...] Till death like sleep might steal on me,/ [...] and hear the sea/ Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.//

Finding the sea soothing and as restful as a sepulchre, the poet dreams of finding the calm he is deprived of in this world under the blanket of the waves. By a twist of fate, his last wish transcended poetical realm and came true only four years later. Shelley drowned in the Gulf of Spezia in 1822.

In the last stanza of the poem the poet explains the cause of his estrangement from people and from all the pleasures that this perfect day on the beach could procure. A misfit among people, "for I am one/Whom men love not", an individual considered cold and inaccessible, Shelley melancholically muses that even this wonderful day in the bay of Naples, which he ruins by his mood, will remain a simple memory, a joy of the past.

> Some might lament that I were cold,/ As I, when this sweet day is gone,/ Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,/ Insults with this untimely moan;/ They might lament—for I am one/ Whom men love not,—and yet regret,/Unlike this day, which, when the sun// Shall on its stainless glory set,/Will linger, though enjoyed, like joy in memory yet.

When Shelley wrote this poem he was genuinely suffering after the loss of his infant daughter two months before, while his first wife (Harriet Westbrook) and his sister-in-law (Fanny Imlay) had committed suicide two years earlier. He was also ailing for some unaccounted for medical reasons (his wife's notes). He could not be more destitute of joys and his grief could not be more eloquent. Highly personal in content, the poem reveals both poet and the individual. The fact that he found it appropriate to express his sense of utter helplessness and sorrow by comparing his lot to a marvellous day on the beach at Naples proves how much he regrets his inability to identify with nature, live its splendour and be part of its glory.

One of Shelley's most beautiful poems, *The Sensitive Plant* [Composed at Pisa, early in 1820 (dated 'March, 1820,' in Harvard manuscript), and published, with "Prometheus Unbound", the same year] owes a lot to Charles Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1789) that Shelley claimed to have read. Moreover, the poem was composed at a time when Shelley's contemporaries showed great interest in sensibility both in humans and in plants.

In the last decades of the 17th century the studies of sensibility, both at the skin level (nerves were known now to cover the whole body) and at the emotional, psychological level were on the increase. It was an *age of sensibility*, after all, and John Locke's philosophy highlighted the role of the senses in man's acquisition of knowledge. But excesses of interpretation were not long in coming: the nervous structure of individuals was believed to depend very much on their education, intellect, gender (women were more exposed than men) and even social appurtenance. That is why people of higher spirituality or displaying more intense intellectual activities were considered prone to over-sensibility. Samuel Richardson's physician, Dr. George Cheyne, claimed that "Genii, Philosophers and Lawgivers" were the categories who enjoyed "more delicate and elastic Organs of Thinking and Sensibility." (Brewer, 2007:43)

In this context, analyzing why *Mimosa pudica*, a plant imported from South America, visibly reacts to external stimuli withdrawing its leaves and drooping, scientists drew the conclusion that plants can display sensitivity (or simply irritability)

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just like people. Writers became equally alert to the unusual features of the plant and understandably chose it to be "the literary icon of sensibility".(Kitani, 2009:37) Because the plant's name translates as " the shy mimosa", the plant was regularly personified as a lady and symbolized "sensibility and moral purity". (*ibidem* 38)

But Shelley's *Sensitive Plant* may originate from an altogether different source. In a letter dated 11 December 1821 that he wrote to his sister-in-law, Claire Clairmont, he put down the following sentences about himself:

> The Exotic, as you please to call me, droops in this frost, a frost both moral and physical, a solitude of the heart [...].The Exotic, unfortunately belonging to the order of mimosa, thrives ill in so large a society.(Gosse: 12)

Regarded from this perspective, the poem seems to be a celebration of Shelley himself, a most sensitive being, who is irreversibly harmed by frost/unfriendly circumstances both physically and symbolically.

The three parts of the poem describe a most wondrous garden tended by a magic lady over the four seasons. Shelley stated that he found inspiration for his poetic garden in the one that Margaret King, Lady Mount Cashell tended at her home in Pisa where he and his wife had met her. Not only the garden was inspirational to Shelley but the lady herself was transposed into the wonderful mistress of the garden in the poem, whose tragic death causes the garden's fall into ruin.

The poem starts like a tale, identifying the Sensitive Plant as a peculiar one among the numerous plants that enjoy spring revival.

> A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew,/And the young winds fed it with silver dew,/ And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light./ And closed them beneath the kisses of Night.// 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.// But none ever trembled and panted with bliss/ In the garden, the field, or the wilderness,/ Like a doe in the noontide with love's sweet want,/ As the companionless Sensitive Plant.//

From the very beginning the Sensitive Plant is perceived as entirely distinct from the other plants and, like all beings "different", it is doomed to solitude. While the Edenic garden unfolds its splendour in daytime, and the snowdrops, violets, tulips, daffodils, lilies-of-the-valley, hyacinths, water lilies, jasmines, roses, daisies, tuberoses and numerous buds display their colours and mingle their perfumes in a frenzy of synesthetic impressions, the Sensitive Plant feels out of place. It has nothing to boast of but its great Love that crosses it from "leaf to the root" for want of radiant petals or sweet perfumes. Nevertheless, this frail and apparently insignificant plant cherishes high aspirations: it longs for the Beautiful.

> But the Sensitive Plant which could give small fruit/ Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root,/ Received more than all, it loved more than ever,/ Where none wanted but it, could belong to the giver,// For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower;/ 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!//

And the poem continues with a list of the Sensitive Plant's wishes, which are no ordinary things but highly poetic and truly marvellous natural phenomena or

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creatures: the winds that cause the woods to murmur, the beams of the flowers' beauty, the "plumed insects" resembling "golden boats on a sunny sea", the "unseen clouds of the dew" that burn the flowers before the sun absorbs them into perfumed wandering clouds, the vapours of midday that wrap the earth like a quivering mist. They were not only expressions of universal Beauty displayed on earth but also "ministering angels" to the Sensitive Plant.

The second part of the poem describes the versatile, almost preternatural mistress of the garden, "She had no companion of mortal race", who, like "an Eve in this Eden: a ruling Grace" was tending the garden like God its "starry scheme".

In the third part, the whole garden joins the mourners " And the silent motions of passing death" on the day of its mistress' funeral. Before long the garden "became cold and foul/Like the corpse of her who had been its soul". Not only was there no one to take care of it, but autumn and winter soon settled over it and the plants gave in one after the other. Instead, ugly and parasitic plants sprang from the soil infesting the garden:

> And plants, at whose names the verse feels loath,/ Filled the place with a monstrous undergrowth,/ Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue,/ Livid, and starred with a lurid dew.//

The air grew heavy with emanations and pestilence:

> "The vapours arose which have strength to kill/At morn they were seen, at noon they were felt,/ At night they were darkness no star could melt.//.

The Paradise of the garden in spring and summer turned into a Hell in autumn and winter. The poor Sensitive Plant wept tears that were transformed into a "blight of frozen glue", its stem got broken and its sap withdrew into its deeper roots, like thick blood into the heart of a dying creature. Then blizzards and ice rains created a havoc that spring could only partially mend and only for "evil" plants:

> When Winter had gone and Spring came back/The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck;/ But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels,/ Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.//

Surprisingly, the poem has a conclusion which brings the author-of-this-poem and its readers into the poem. The author expresses his doubt ("I cannot say") as to the Sensitive Plant's capacity to revive the next spring. He then joins the ranks of common people ("we the shadows of the dream") further enlarging on the Platonic view embraced by Shelley that our life is but a shadow of real life:

> [...]but in this life/ Of error, ignorance, and strife,/ Where nothing is, but all things seem,/And we the shadows of the dream//

and continuing with the logical conclusion that, if life is but an illusion, so must be death, a simple "mockery'. To follow this "simple creed", "yet pleasant", one may be tempted to consider that the content of the miraculous garden has never changed. We have. Because, Shelley claims, the triad of "love, beauty and delight" lends vitality to a garden or a work of art, even if they cannot be perceived by ordinary people, like all things imperishable.

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> For love, and beauty, and delight,/There is no death nor change: their might/Exceeds our organs, which endure/ No light, being themselves obscure.//

There could not have been a clearer statement that the Sensitive Plant stands for Shelley-the poet, a singular soul strangely frail and over-sensitive, a being composed of Love that he bestows on others with generosity and, more importantly, who is avid of Beauty. Even if such remarkable beings can ostensibly perish in unfavourable circumstances, whatever they have created under the auspices of "love, beauty and delight" will endure.

Ode to the West Wind comes as the crowning illustration of how closely Shelley identified himself with nature. Addressing the West Wind directly "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere", "O, uncontrollable!", "Spirit fierce", "impetuous one" Shelley makes the parallel of the wind to himself more conspicuous. These are the attributes he would want to possess. After describing the tumult the wind can produce both in the air and in the deep recesses of the Mediterranean, Shelley turns to poetry which he describes as inherently natural, viewing himself as the organ by means of which nature can write poetry: 'Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:". A few lines farther he cries for total identification, he wishes the West Wind would inform his self: 'Be, thou, Spirit fierce/ My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" His wish originates in his ardent desire that the ideas he preaches should be as all-pervasive as the wind.

If in the fourth stanza the poet appeals to the wind "to dissolve his substance" (Bloom, 1971:300) in the fifth he "stresses mutual need: if the prophet needs the divine, the divine as assuredly needs the prophet if the message is to be heard by men."(*ibidem* 302). The poem ends in an optimistic mood, as if the identification had worked and the seeds that the poet had sown were ready to germinate in a not so distant spring.

To conclude our essay we may say that Shelley repeatedly looked for ways of finding correspondences between the poet, more often than not himself, and nature. He, successively, identified the poet with powerful, fragile, evanescent natural elements or even fabled animals. He succeeded in disclosing contradictory facets of the (his) poetic self: optimism, melancholy, isolation, revolutionary fervour. He found nature both an ally and a trustworthy companion with whom, at times, he used to interchange identities, for he, too, was tumultuous as an ocean, ephemeral as a plucked violet, insignificant as the grains of sand on a glorious beach, mutable as a shy Mimosa or overpowering like the wind.

His poetic quests of the self never came to a definite conclusion. They did not even reach a conclusion and were, unfortunately, abruptly stopped by his untimely death. But they bore fruit in his wonderful poems and the last stanza of *The Question* echoes the same issue: did his quests of the self find an answer? For whom?

> Methought that of these visionary flowers/ I made a nosegay, bound in such a way/ That the same hues, which in their natural bowers/ Were mingled or opposed, the like array/ Kept these imprisoned children of the Hours/ Within my hand,—and then, elate and gay,/ I hastened to the spot whence I had come,/ That I might there present it!—Oh! to whom?// [Published by Leigh Hunt (with the signature Sigma) in "The Literary Pocket-Book", 1822]

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