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Shelley and Orphic Song:
Language in the Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley

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I

This essay examines P.B. Shelley's philosophy of language and its manifestation in his poetry. I have chosen as the object of my interpretation his lyrics which have rarely been discussed before such as "The Aziola" and "To Constantia, singing". This is because I intend to analyse that these minor poems express his idea of language as his poetic style.

II

Reading Shelley's poetry attracts our attention to his use of imagery. He avails prolific metaphors in order to reach the object of his poetic ideal. It is well known that Shelley's style of language was renounced by F.R. Leavis as 'elusive imagery', but nowadays nobody seems to believe in this. Strongly concerned with the problem of language, Post-modern critics are getting more positive about Shelley's unique use of words: his imagery is not his default, but the intended representation of his philosophy of language. This is why this essay analyses his lyrics with a view to recognizing his idea of language.

One of the reasons why I focused on Shelley's linguistic aspect is that it is during the latter half of the eighteenth century that discussions of language in general developed in England. Since Shelley's idea of language is the product of his time, it is worth while examining this period firstly.

One of the most interesting subjects which evolved during this period is the distinction of words and ideas. The linguistic model of John Locke dominated the philosophy of language throughout the eighteenth century. To him, a thing is classed as an idea.[1] That is, the object of the mind is ideas. To use words which signify no particular idea is considered to talk

nonsense, so that to discuss words rather than the ideas they signify is to be absurd.   Ideas are more important than their mere manifestation, words.   Consequently discussing language for language's sake is considered to be ridiculous.

Alexander Pope assents to this idea, for he also gave priority to thought rather than to language:

> *True Wit is Nature* to Advantage dest,
> What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest.*[2]

To him, language is representation just dressed up to manifest thought. Pope's words inform us that there is an idea at the beginning and that language is needed to express it well.   It follows that poetry to Pope is only to represent thoughts which are already established.

However, another trend of linguistic discussion appeared at the end of the eighteenth century.   In september 1800 Coleridge recommended Godwin to write a book on language.   In the letter he suggested that Godwin should 'destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things: elevating as it were Words into Things and living Things too'.[3]

People thus began to challenge the already established notion of words and things.   Jeremy Bentham as well argued that the progress of thought might be considered as a progress of language.[4]   While there was an accepted common sense that thought was prior to expression, at the end of eighteenth century the distinction between words and things was rather unstable.

Shelley's linguistic idea would belong to the latter group, for he suggests autonomy of language:

> He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
> Which is the measure of the Universe.
>
> *(Prometheus Unbound*, II. iv, 72-73)

Prometheus gave human beings speech, and it created thought.   Language generating thought is utterly different from the classical commonplace of Locke and Pope.   Language which has autonomy is distinct from Locke's and Pope's language which is merely the expression of established thought. Shelley suggests in *Prometheus Unbound* that words created concepts, not

that concepts produced words.

As Prometheus brought fire for men, he gave them speech. Fire became destroying and purifying fire and the symbol of revolution. Language as well is to be a present to propagate among human kind the idea of liberty from oppression, which had never been considered before. It is necessary for Shelley that language comes first, because if language is only the manifestation of an established idea, there is no revolutionary way to generate a new concept. We need new language to create new ideas, and that is the role of poets as "unacknowledged legislators."[5]

Shelley must have understood this role of poetry and language, for he praised language as a "perpetual Orphic song."[6] Being Orphic song, language, for Shelley, is a mythical bard's work that controls thought. Moreover, Shelley alludes the regenerative and creative aspects of language using the word "perpetual."

His idea of language was so revolutionary that it is worth while discussing his poetry in connection with his linguistic philosophy. I believe it will clarify the nature of Shelley's poetic universe.

III

The poem "The Aziola" appears to describe an amusing misunderstanding between the poet and his wife Mary. Although it is a personal style of lyric, his philosophy of language is discernible in the context. It is worth while considering how Shelley's use of language is revolutionary and, I would say, corresponds to modern linguistics.

The plot of the poem is quite simple. Mary said she could hear the Aziola crying, while the poet, not knowing what it was, thought Aziola was "some tedious woman." She explained laughing that the Aziola was not human but a "little downy owl." The relieved poet then hailed the sad cry of the owl, and its sad song attracted him more than ever.

Reading carefully, we find the word "Aziola" has layers of meaning. When Mary said Aziola crying, the poet had no idea what it was, and he imagined that some tedious women was crying, taking the "Aziola" as a proper noun. It is true that the unknown sound afforded the imagi-

nation, but what is happening is the word "Aziola" is creating a different concept from Mary's intention. To her it is a little owl but to him it is a woman.

Of course, we could admit this is a misunderstanding as the word "Aziola" cannot possibly have two meanings because the 'correct' meaning of Aziola is "a little owl." However, the point of this poem is not to resolve the enigma, but to show that Aziola may evoke different ideas. What is amusing in this poem is that Mary's sentence may signify something completely different and induce utterly different feelings. If the "Aziola" was in fact some tedious woman and that Mary said, "Do you not hear the Aziola cry? Methinks she must be nigh" in dusk when there were no stars, the atmosphere is almost Gothic. It is no wonder the poet may "fear or hate".

On the contrary, if he knew that the Aziola was a little downy owl and heard Mary saying the same thing, he must have felt very differently. The second part of the poem describes his feeling roused by this second meaning of Mary's sentence. He was so relieved to know the Aziola was an owlet that he was moved by the sad voice.

In this case, still, we find the Aziola is nothing like an owlet: the Aziola's cry for the poet is, as he says, unlike a voice, unlike a lute, unlike the wind and even unlike a bird. The Aziola does not actually denote a creature itself. Besides, the poem does not mention the poet ever seeing it as a creature. In fact, he describes that Aziola as something stirring his soul, something "sweeter than them all", and something he loves.

Thus, there are layers of meanings in the word "Aziola." Aziola is an owlet for Mary, a woman for the poet when unknown, and something stirring his soul after he identified it.

In this sense Mary's words are a *signifiant*, or a signifier. The signifier originates from the study of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who considered it to be a sound-image or black marks on paper, which was very independent from the meaning and had the possibility to produce different concepts. In this respect, "The Aziola" is in particular explicable in the modern linguistic theory.

It is well known that he regarded a word as a couple of signifier and signified.[7] His premise is that the bond of a word and its meaning is arbitrary; there is no necessary connection between a word and its meaning. A word or *signe* for Saussure, is a unit which consists of signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*). Signifier is a sound image and signified is a concept. For example, we have a general kind of plant with a trunk and foliage, for which we use an English word "tree." However, it is not necessarily called the sound of [tri:]; they call the same object "arbre" in French, "baum" in German and "ki" in Japanese. That is, the sound image and its concept have no necessary connection at all. Spelling is also arbitrary, for it is no more than a black mark on paper. To Saussure *langage* is system made up of the units in a certain society, and the command of these units. Concequently, we may call the same object in various spellings and in the various sound of [tri:] or [arbr] or [ki], among different tongues.

Since a sound image is independent of a concept, the contrary is also true. A signifier can have various concepts. For example, "George" is a name in English but the same sound signifies "love affair" in Japanese; or the sound, for example, "snowy" may signify nothing in Japanese. The fact that "George" signifies a particular person is a social contract, which Saussure called *langage*.

The poet's work is a way of putting the established social contract of language into focus. They create new ideas with imaginative language. Shelly mentions this role of language:

> Language is a perpetual Orphic song,
> Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng
> Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.
>
> (*Prometheus Unbound* IV 415-417)

In the redeemed world of the act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, language is the mythical bard's song, which has a harmony of an Athenian artist. In Shelley's ideal world, language recovers the creative power of Genesis, in which God created the light, sky, and ocean from Chaos, and Adam named all the living things. That language rules the throng of thought, means that language shapes Chaos into word. Since *Prometheus Unbound*

deals with the problems of the human being, power, language and poetry, it represents Shelley's thought of origins:

> He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
> Which is the measure of the universe.   (II, iv, 72-73)

Here is his linguistic manifestation that a concept or an object doesn't exist until we name it. Prometheus' gift to humans was language. That language created thought, which Prometheus hoped, might propagate the notion of freedom from tyranny.

Proceeding with the analogy of Shelley an modern linguistics, we can analyse his lyric "The Aziola" further by pointing out another aspect of *signe*.

Saussure points out that the mind can create as many associative series as there are diverse relations.[8]   For example, in *enseignement* 'teaching', *enseigner* 'teach', *enseignons* '(we) teach' etc., there is the common radical; or the association may occur from the common suffix like *enseignement, armement, changement* etc.; or it may spring from the analogy of a concept signified such as *enseignement, instruction, apprentissage, éducation,* etc.; or simply from the similar sound images as *enseignement, justement, clément*, etc.   Thus, we can roughly divide association into two levels; one is signifier(sound-image) level and the other is the signified (concept) level.

In Shelley's poem, "owl" (line 12) associates on the signifier level with "soul" because both have [ul].   What made the poet imagine the Aziola as "tedious woman" is the similarity of the sound and spelling of Az<u>io</u>la[io] and ted<u>iou</u>s[iə].   Furthermore, "all" (1.19) has no rhyme to couple with, except "soul" and "owl" in the first part of the poem. These three words associate on the signifier level and, at the same time, on the signified level.   That is, the "owl" is not only an owl but it is actually the "soul" for the poet, and "all" he loves.

Thus, "Aziola" is a very important signifier in the poem.   The unfamiliar sound of "Aziola" helps in stimulating the imagination and inducing association.   The signifier "Aziola" can designate a little owl and some tedious woman, however, it is, for the poet, something stirring

his soul, and it is:

Unlike and far sweeter than them all. (19)

and something finally he loves. These images evoke further what Shelly always desired in his poetry. That is, the "Aziola" could be the Skylark or even Intellectual Beauty, for both are what he wanted to grasp regardless of their imagelessness. These signifiers are chained in Shelley's desire, and he is the poet who is continuously looking for an ideal in the ocean of signifiers.

IV

This section examines one of the Shelleyan women in his love poems.

In the poem "To Constantia, Singing" Shelley appears to adore the woman Constantia, counting out her attributes. However, this poem actually expresses a temporality of experience of power. What's happening in the poem is that the poet is chasing the power which lodges on the surface of her body only for a moment, for the objects of his admiration are shifting incessantly. In this situation, Constantia, or the woman herself, is a signifier, which has no stable concept but can induce other different signifiers like a series of chains.

The object of the poet's desire seems to be Constantia, but he just tries to grasp a power behind her.

...... Constantia, turn!
In thy dark eyes a power like light doth lie,
("To Constantia, Singing," 2-3)

One moment previously it was "the sounds" which had attracted him, but they "are laid asleep now." Then, he praises, even anatomizing her into "thy dark eyes," "thy lips," "thy breath," "thy hair" and "thy touch". Behind these seemingly fetishistic objects, he knows power dwells only temporally. He cannot hold in his hand the objects of his desire, because the seductress is not the person herself, but the power behind it.

He is eloquent, trying to interpret it:

A breathless awe, like the swift change
Unseen, but felt in youthful slumbers,
Wild, sweet, but uncommunicably strange,
Thou breathest now in fast ascending numbers.

("To Constantia, Singing," 10-13)

Regardless of his effort, the impossibility of articulation exists. That is expressed by "swift change," "Unseen," "uncommunicably strange", which only disclose an evasive nature. Why? The answer is in the last line of the second part.

The enthusiastic poet's aim is just to follow the sublime career of her enchanting voice,

Till the world's shadowy walls are past and disappear.

("To Constantia, Singing," 20)

The line explicates both why it is impossible to articulate and what makes him pursue. The answer for the latter is that he recognizes as a poet's fatalistic career to pursue reality. And the reason for the former contains a Platonic connotation.

Every object in this world is in Platonic sense only a shadow beyond which ideal exists. For instance, there is a table, but it is only a shadow of a table, and a real or ideal table is somewhere beyond that shadow. After all, everything in the material world is nothing other than the "painted veil."

The poet knows all this, but he cannot help chasing these shadows, for he is a poet, the pursuer of truth. Besides, the optimistic poet believes he can find something if he wishes, because visionary power offers "wings" to soar to surpass the limit. In this conviction the chase continues in the fourth stanza, and the word "now," regularly appearing especially in the last stanza, suggests that the poet tries to grasp the shadow of the desired object in every evanescent moment.

The last object of his desire reveals the nature of his pursuit. It has nothing to do with the woman. It is the "breath of summer night" that suspends his soul in its voluptuous flight, so that he seems almost to forget about the existence of the woman.

In these respects, Constantia is not essential to the power, she was just a passage of the power, as the summer night is now arousing his interest and admiration instead. Constantia is only a signifier, which is independent of the significance that the poet attributed to the woman in the previous moment. Every signifier, which once had a power, is ceaselessly attracting the poet. So the ending suggests the possibility of further pursuit.

F.R. Leavis criticized Shelley's metaphors for being only ornamental and signifying nothing.[9] However, it is not the poet's fault. This is caused by Shelley's linguistic philosophy that language produces meanings. It is possible to consider that he developed the idea of language as Orphic song from this notion. The prolific use of metaphoric language in Shelley is the attempt to find the power behind objects. However, the problem is the absence of final signified. What he sought in nature is not the exact object but perpetually something beyond it. Once an object loses its power, it is forgotten, and the next one starts to attract him, so that he moves from signifier to signifier seeking after the power.

The same thing applies to political power in the poem "Ozymandias." There are three discourses in the poem; the beginning one is the poet's and the longest is the traveller's and Ozymandias' in the middle of the poem. The most significant is Ozymandias' words:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

("Ozymandias," 10-11)

When he ruled the country, these words were sure to terrify his subjects. Now that the statue of the king lies in the sand as stone legs and visage without trunk, the inscribed lines on the pedestal have already lost their political power for the seer. The carving of those letters signify different things: his words are ironical, and express the vanity of power, the passing of time, mortality and so on. Then, where is the power now? The traveller from an antique land appears to have a power, for he dominates the discourse of the poem. However, the traveller's figure also implies things that come and go. There is no final signifier which holds the power.

We can also read the poem "To Constantia, Singing" as an allusion

to a flow of melody. The singer moves swiftly from note to note, then the past notes are forgotten one by one. What has power is the exact note that she is singing at that moment. In this sense, musical notes are only black marks on white paper. They have no significance until the singer puts them into melody. Shelley is a poet of first-this-and-then-that, for he knew that a sign is just a sign, and a shadow is a shadow.

Most female figures, in fact, have a role similar to Constantia. As it has been quite often pointed out, Shelleyan women are behind the veil that hides his ideal. *Epipsychidion* is a poem about a pursuit of the veiled divinity. *Alastor* is most significant, since the sad poet dies in the middle of his quest for the image of beauty seen in the veiled maid. I said it is significant because it reveals the other aspect of Shelleyan pursuit. Although he sought after a Platonic transcendental world, he frequently describes his failure. In fact, much of his self-pity in his poetry reflects the difficulty of his quest. Modern readers know there is no transcendental signified in poststructuralist terms. Besides, readers won't expect the end of his journey, for they enjoy the journey itself.

Thus, whatever he describes in his poetry, there is always something beyond the desired objects. They are nothing other than the "painted veil." Shelley is enthusiastic to analyse the shadows to reach the reality, as the psychoanalyst interprets his/her patient's dreams to discover his/her existential problem. The difference between the psychoanalyst and Shelley is, however, that the former reaches the truth behind seemingly incommunicable signifiers in dreams, while the latter is always on the way to the truth. If the psychoanalyst's work is to attain the patient's truth, what is the poet's aim?

The next section considers this, moving chronologically backwards into Shelley's earlier lyrics in order to investigate the motive of his quest.

V

I presume the major philosophical lyrics will offer some idea of the nature of Shelley's pursuit.

"Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" communicates to his readers the difficulty of naming the power which attracts the poet. The repeated use of simile informs us of Shelley's attempt to define and to redefine the divine nature of a perception of a presence in nature. Through the repetition, however, it only reveals its evasive nature:

> The awful shadow of some unseen Power
>> Floats though unseen amongst us, . . . visiting
>> This various world with as inconstant wing
> As summer winds that creep from flower to flower, . . .
> Like moon beams that behind some piny mountain shower,
>> It visits with inconstant glance
>> Each human heart and countenance;
> Like hues and harmonies of evening, . . .
>> Like clouds in starlight widely spread, . . .
>> Like memory of music fled, . . .
>> Like aught that for its grace may be
> Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.
>
> ("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," 1-12)

The poet is here eager to grasp the "awful shadow of some unseen Power" by using "as" and "like" repeatedly. But however hard he tries, the words barely touch the similarities just as insects flitting above the surface of the water, and never reach the final signified. When the poem comes to bring out similarities, it reveals an clusive nature; "unseen Power" is floating "unseen"; it is "Like moon beams" "behind" mountain shower; it is "Like memory of music fled"; and it is "mystery" after all.

The power shows its evasive nature further, from the second stanza onwards. The poet, who is now naming it as "Spirit of Beauty," wails its frail and fading figure addressing in the second person singular. This time again, he illustrates as many elusive images as possible: "the sunlight not forever/Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river"; "aught should fail and fade that once in shewn"; "fear and dream and death and birth" visit human life interchangeably; "love and hate, despondency and hope" comes repetitiously.

Furthermore, the poet knows that even "the names of God and ghosts and Heaven" are vain, for they are not able to give him the identity

of the Power. Thus the effort of identifying continues:

> Thy light alone . . . like mist o'er mountains driven,
>   Or music by the night-wind sent
>   Through strings of some still instrument,
>   Or moolight on a midnight stream,
> Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.   (32-36)

His quest for the truth, after all, is the linguistic strategies of repeating metaphor or simile in the attempt to reach the final signified. In identifying the Power, "mist," "music" and "moonlight," which all begin with the letter "m", might correspond with "mystery" in the first stanza. The final part of the poem gives a proof of the echo:

> thou . . . O awful LOVELINESS,
> Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.   (71-72)

Although he counted out as many similes or metaphors as possible, he returns to the beginning of the poem where he described the power as nameless. Shelley finally named the power "awful LOVELINESS", but the closure without disclosure confirms the limits.

Now it is not difficult to find Shelley's motive in the start of his poetic quest. The power he seeks is,

> Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

This caused him to seek his poetic career, and challenge the problematics of articulation. Many parts of his poetry are motivated by this sense of mystery. It is true that he expressed an anxiety and irritation about his quest. The madman's cry in *Julian and Maddalo* reflects them: "How vain Are words!" However, it doesn't check him, for his wish is to,

> by the incantation of this verse,
> Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> > *(Ode to the West Wind,* 65-67)

Shelley's prose "A Defence of Poetry" manifests clearly the relation of language and poet's career:

> Their [the poets'] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks
> the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their
> apprehension . . . .[10]

His poetics is based on the conviction; "Language is perpetual Orphic
song." However, his linguistic philosophy is the expression as well as
the anxiety that there is no final signified. That is why Shelley used as
much metaphor as possible to reach the final ideal. In the end he could
not reach it, but this is natural in the post-structural terms, as there is no
transcendental signified. In this respect Shelley's poetry should be re-
evaluated by modern readers and scholars.

NOTES

All quotations from Shelley's poetry refer to *Shelley: Poetical Works,* edited
by Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and their line
numbers are marked in the parenthesis in the text.

1) To Locke words "stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind" (p. 402).
   See especially his argument about language in Book III of *An Essay Concerning
   Human Understanding,* edited by Peter H. Nidditch (London: Oxford Uni-
   versity Press, 1975). The summary of the linguistic philosophy in Shelley's time
   mostly relies on Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: The
   Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981).
2) *An Essay on Criticism* 297-8 in *The Poems of Alexander Pope,* edited by E.
   Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1961), Vol I.
3) *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford:
   Clarendon Press, 1956-71), Vol. I, p. 626.
4) Bentham mentions that the correction, extension, and improvement of thought
   is to a prodigious degree a consequence of speech. See p. 188 of *The Works of
   Jeremy Bentham,* edited by John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1843),
   Vol 8.
5) "A Defence of Poetry" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* edited by Donald H.
   Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977),
   p. 508.
6) *Prometheus Unbound,* IV, 415-417.
7) Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* edited by Charles Bally
   and Albert Sechehaye (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1980). For the argument
   about signifier and signified, see especially Chapter I: "Nature of The Linguistic
   Sign" in the Part One: "General Principles" pp. 65-70. Regarding Shelley's
   poetry in post-structural terms, the interesting discussion is represented in G.

Kim Blank's "Introduction" to *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views,* edited by G. Kim Blank (London: The Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd, 1991).

8) For Saussure's idea of association, see *Ibid.* pp. 125-127.

9) F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), pp. 205-206.

10) "A Defence of Poetry" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 482.

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