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## The Characters of Panthea and Ione in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*

Ralitza KONSTANTINOVA

In the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*,<sup>1)</sup> Shelley says that his imagery is "drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed." This important statement means that the synthetically conceived idea has a linear, therefore analytical, verbal expression. A total pursuit of the idea on the plane of verbal expression leads necessarily to fragmentation of the idea. The effect on the intelligibility of the text is thus often adverse: each image created to explicate one facet of the whole reflects the interpretative light in its own right.<sup>2)</sup> A *total* pursuit, however, is pluralistic in nature, and Shelley never seems to restrain further readings of his imagery. He himself admires the Greek tragedians for employing "a certain arbitrary discretion" in their interpretation of tradition, a "licence" which he correlates to imagination. (Elsewhere, he defines his 'fit audience' by the ability to escape the narrow boundaries of conventional one-truth interpretations.<sup>3)</sup>) Last, but not least, a *pursuit* of an idea is a process in which one has to capture as much as one can of something faster than flash. As a process, it is naturally fluid and incomplete, and it is a matter of mentality whether one should choose to "follow, follow" it, or describe one of its stages as *the* whole.

Seen in such a context, the text of *Prometheus Unbound* is only a frame for an idea which can be summed up in an equally beautiful algebraic frame where each of the components originates an equation or system of equations on its own. This paper will

examine two of the characters-components in *Prometheus Unbound*, Panthea and Ione, in order to include them in possible equations expressive of their symbolism, interdependence, development, and relationship to other characters in the play. The paper will argue that both Panthea and Ione can be assumed to represent the senses and the speech (or any other means of articulation) in their awakening from lethargy, unfoldment, and potential for refinement. Although there is no clear difference between them, Ione is the one who usually perceives the oncoming signals, while Panthea rationalizes the perceived by verbal articulation. Of course, Ione talks, too, not only in her informative function as a *dramatis persona*, but also in instances where she is explicitly referred to as a poet. Panthea and Ione are supplementary and vital to Asia as Asia is supplementary and vital to Prometheus, and in this sense it is natural that Prometheus speaks of himself as "eyeless in hate" (I, 9). The other major characters seem to 'ignore' Panthea and Ione dramatically: there is only one instance of *direct* encounter between Asia and Panthea in II, i, if we do not count Prometheus' response to an insensitive inquiry of Panthea in I, 646-647, and the address-errand in III, iii, 64-68. Elsewhere, their dramatic function is to perceive and report on the action in the play. As senses and reporters, Panthea and Ione triumph in Act IV, where, themselves regenerated in their best potential, they describe a regenerated world. Shelley's imagery, habitually exalting in sounds and colors, is exuberant there, and one cannot help speculating about the nature of the regenerated organ of articulation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ione and Panthea 'awake' first after Prometheus has summoned the Phantasm of Jupiter in line 221 of Act I. Ione (222-230) reports on the act of 'awakening' as of gradual unfolding of wings which heretofore have been covering her eyes and

ears. In the last two lines of her statement, however, she informs us that they with Panthea "watch and wake" near Prometheus for their "sweet sister's sake"; in the second act Panthea will tell Asia a dream she has supposedly seen while with Prometheus, who, in turn, has been through "three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours / And moments" (I, 12-13). These are significant contradictions, which outline clearly the separation of the three sisters from one another, as well as Asia's from Prometheus, as leading to organic insufficiency, with Panthea and Ione unaware of their potential of hearing and seeing, Asia unable to remember her dream-hope, and Prometheus unable to dream at all. One could ask why Ione and Panthea are not physically separated, too, and such a question would be an example showing the effect of an explanatory image which itself has become an idea. Of course, they are with Prometheus-Nous, because senses and organs of speech conventionally belong with the rational. However, the idea of physical inadequacy as resulting from the separation of the rational from the emotional suggests that such separation is unnatural. Thus, the dramatic action is triggered from a point where the restitution of the original integrity seems possible and wanted.

Ione perceives the Phantasm of Jupiter (I, 222-230) in three modes: as "a throng of sounds", as a Shape, and as a Danger. The quality of her perception is poor; she neither hears, nor sees clearly. One almost hears her coarse voice muttering the intuitive warning to Prometheus, whom she does not even know how to address (I, 227-228).<sup>4</sup> Panthea sounds more analytic: she gives the natural cause of the sound (231-232), compares the awfulness of both Shape and sound (233), sketches the Shape's appearance (234-236), lightly hints at its mortality ("his veined hand" in 237), and makes an ambiguous statement about the Shape's morality (238-239) which makes you question Prometheus' morality. About twenty lines later, in 256-257, the sisters are

heard again: Panthea observes the visual changes in both nature and the Phantasm at the time when he is about to commence his repetition of Prometheus' curse, while Ione reacts with instinctive fear at the very beginning of his speech, fear which, we know, is unjustified, since the Phantasm is not real. In line 315 Ione has already overcome at least part of her instinctive confusion. There she cheers up Earth who in her turn has interpreted Prometheus' words in 303-305 as 'ante-mortem' confession, while "'tis but some passing spasm" of gnawing conscience. Ione goes on with more confident description of another Shape coming down (316-324), the best description produced by either of the sisters so far. It is neither chaotic nor sketchy, pretty detailed and consistent, linearly explicative of the picture: lines 316-317 dab the horizon and the scenery before it, 318 deals with a moving Something, the character of its movement ("trampling", suggestive of the character of the Something), and the effect on other supposedly moving things in the picture (the winds which, hacked and trampled by another current, become "slant"). 319 focuses on the feet of the Something or the Somebody, and on their attire, 320-321 give a simile for the brightness of the attire in which a couple of other recognitive details come to surface. Ione does not have a name for this Shape, but after she has followed its right hand "stretching on high.../ A serpent-cinctured wand" (323-324), Panthea erupts in recognition: "'Tis Jove's world-wandering Herald, Mercury" (325). A similar descriptive-recognitive-informative exchange follows between the sisters (326-337) concerning the Furies, indirectly Mercury, and more directly Jove. Clearly, the discourse becomes more sophisticated, the picture of the world recreated through the experiences of the Ione and Panthea focuses ever wider, with Ione venturing her first question-guess in lines 335-336, and Panthea daring for the first time a direct and morally constative look on Prometheus (337). A hundred lines further in the first act, however, after

two brilliant half-lines pronounced by Prometheus (431-432), they are back to their contemplative function and the fear, but this time more aware of ways of self-defense ("close thy plumes over thine eyes / Lest thou behold and die" [439-440]). The fear is again unwarranted, as we hear in lines 583-593, Panthea has "looked forth twice" and seen parts of the horror movie which the Furies inflict on Prometheus, but is still alive. Horror movies have their cathartic function; having fulfilled it, they disappear: Prometheus is supposedly nearer to his integrity<sup>5)</sup> after being tortured by the Furies-thoughts-prophecies-memories (depending on where one chooses to draw the temporal line, in- or outside the text). It is time, as Earth motherly reminds, for hopes, "subtle and fair spirits" who dwell in "the dim caves of human thought" (658-659), and who behold the future (661-663). Panthea readily reacts when the spirits appear (664-666); Ione takes up the visual description, follows it for a while, and then suddenly changes the descriptive mode into auditory. What she hears this time is not "a throng of sounds", but music (669-670), and in 756-757 she will repeat her sister's qualification of it (671) as 'sweet and sad'. 'Ione' is a name resembling the name of Plato's Ion, the poet-conductor of divine inspiration. It is highly probable that the choice of name for Ione was not accidental, although the idea does not seem consistently pursued. While Panthea loses her voice, Ione gains hers from the beauty of the hopeful thoughts, sad from the remembrance of past woes, but sweet from the awareness that the woes are over. The main woe in question is Prometheus' separation from Asia, the "golden chalice" for his 'overflowing being' (809-810), without whom he cannot sleep, dream, or hope. "Most vain all hope but love," he declares, and then Panthea, who loves both him and Asia, offers to help him find her. What will she be in the second act but Prometheus' and Asia's meeting eyes?

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The motive of the eyes keeps popping in Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*. Prometheus declares himself "eyeless in hate" in line 9; he remembers "drinking life" from Asia's "loved eyes" (123); Ione speaks of eyes in 222-230; the Second Fury intents on looking in Prometheus' eyes (338); Ione bewares of seeing the nightmares inflicted on Prometheus in 439-442, but Panthea dares look at them (583), etc. In Scene i of Act II eyes become the focus of dramatic action and the conduit for the reintegration of Asia and Panthea. Ione does not appear in Act II: Panthea bears here the functions both have exhibited in the first act.

With the arrival of Panthea, Asia declares that she at last 'feels and sees' the eyes, "those eyes", which she describes as beautiful in their paradoxicality (28-29). Then, in 30-31, she specifies why "those eyes" are so important by giving the first direct statement in the play about Panthea's relatedness to Prometheus and herself ("who wearest / The shadow of that soul by which I live"). She gently admonishes her sister for being so late (32), and discloses how she has been feeling as a result of this delay ("my heart was sick with hope" [33]). Both excess and lack of hope are deficiencies, and we conceive that Panthea will be the pipe for achieving a balance between Asia and Prometheus. Excited, Panthea responds remembering sleeps and dreams "before the sacred Titan's fall" and Asia's ensuing "unhappy love", and after that. At the end of her speech, she relates to herself as being "the wind / Which fails beneath the music that I bear / Of thy most wordless converse" (50-52), which is a statement in need of explanation: Panthea may be speaking of herself as being the speech too conventional and flat to express the idea of love, or being the poet(ry) equally weak in expressing the inexpressible discourse of love.<sup>6)</sup> In any case, her dramatic and logical function is to reunite herself (and Ione)

with Asia, and to restore thus, as a representative of Prometheus, the bond between him and Asia. The idea which Shelley tries to promote by means of this rather complicated interrelationship is that neither the Rational nor Love could be the sole principle of existence, and that both the Rational and Love must be communicated and perceived in order to 'exist'.

A new bit of 'information' about Panthea and Ione is offered in 43-49, where they are associated with "old Ocean" and presented as sea nymphs. Later, Panthea speaks of "our sea-sister" referring to Ione (57), while in Act III, iii, 64-68, Prometheus will relate Ione and Asia with Proteus, another sea god, in connection with the "mystic shell", which Proteus has given Asia as "nuptial boon". The image created thus is singular in its entangled symbolic and needs linear explication. Proteus, as well as most sea deities in Greek mythology, foretells the future; hence, the sisters are in possession of a similar talent, and if intuition is in some sense prediction of future events, then Ione has exhibited this talent with her very first dramatic appearance. The "mystic shell" suggests interpretation closely related to the Ion-motive considered on page 5, with a more specific link between Ion and Ione (she is the guardian of the shell-conductor which produces sound-poetry when 'breathed within', or inspired). Heraldry supplies the image with further symbolic: there are three conch shells in Shelley's coat of arms, each of them with specific communicative function.<sup>7)</sup> In a sense, Shelley is the guardian of these shells, as Ione is the guardian of that "mystic shell". Ione becomes thus the focus of two beams associative of poetry (Ion and Shelley), plus an additional one suggestive of the same, inasmuch as Proteus is a foreteller, and most of the foretellers in Greek literature, being divinely inspired, speak in verse.

However, as already mentioned on page 5, the idea about Ione being (alone or with Panthea) a poet is not persistently



pursued. The discourse throughout the play is first of all Shelleyan, and one cannot draw a line between the characters by means of their language<sup>8)</sup> and the degree of their poetics. There is, undoubtedly, a progressive development in the way Ione and Panthea express themselves in Act I; and in Act II Panthea and Asia present brilliant pieces of poetry; but the focus is elsewhere. The scene with the First Dream revolves around, among other issues, the failure of the speaker to convey undistorted information. Panthea tells the Dream exclusively in terms of her own relationship with Prometheus and Ione (62-90 and 93-106), with a cursory reference to Asia in 89-91. There is no wonder that Asia reacts with dismay ("Thou speakest, but thy words / Are as the air. I feel them not" [108-109]), and insists on looking into Panthea's eyes in order to extract the information *she* is interested in; Panthea is right in saying that Asia is going to project her own self on that which is in her eyes (112-113). The conflict is temporary, but one is tempted to ignore the dangers of 'the biographical fallacy' and speculate about the relationships of all those women around Shelley, and about Shelley seeing himself as 'victimized' and informationally 'distorted' in their talks.

The rest of Act II is as harmonious as it should be. Panthea dutifully restores the bond between Asia and Prometheus, and from the way she performs it is clear that she has restored herself to Asia, too. Together, they remember the Second Dream which begins as a silent movie and is gradually transfused into song. The sisters 'link hands' (207) and 'follow' the melody-thought into the Cave of Demogorgon. From this point on, they act as one Self; yet, when an Other is addressed, the addressant is Asia, not Panthea.<sup>9)</sup>

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In the fourth scene of Act II Asia, accompanied by Panthea,

meets Demogorgon. She asks serious questions and receives two important statements in response to one of them: that "the deep truth is imageless" and inexpressible in terms of the present reality, and that only "eternal Love" is not subject to that present reality (114-120). Interpreted, these statements point towards the necessity and possibility of transformation. The character and scale of this transformation, as described in the third and fourth acts, indicate a conviction that the Great Chain of Being is wrong not only in the way its links are joined, but in the choice of links, too. What happens by the end of the play is not a mere restoration of Prometheus' (and everybody else's) integrity; the 're-velopment' brings the elements back to their pre-temporal entropy whence a new Chain of Being, based on different principles, emerges.<sup>10</sup> After a hectic Act III, with all the major and minor characters proclaiming various kinds of transformation, there follows the serene fourth act, where the only participants are Panthea and Ione, Spirits, Hours, Moon, Earth, and Demogorgon who at the end comes to compartmentalize the fresh universe. Prometheus is not there; from the whole reintegrated complex, only Panthea and Ione are left to perceive and articulate unbiasedly Shelley's vision of the new world. Act IV is a contemplative reiteration of Act III; it could be seen also as the coda of the play. At the same time, it brings forth another message which at first seems radically irrelevant to the rest. The fourth act almost says: "Well, now that we are all happy and loving each other, leave me alone with my poetry, will you?"

Act IV begins with a series of songs. Like in the first act, Panthea and Ione wake up with the sound; however, here it is not a terrifying "throng of sounds", but music. It can be presumed also that this sleep has been more regenerating than that in Act I, perhaps similar in quality to their sleep "before the sacred Titan's fall" (II, i, 38-43). The sisters' immediate

response to the song of the Unseen Spirits is another song (30-39), which is the first and last instance when either of them speaks in rhythm other than iambic pentameter.<sup>11)</sup> One can only speculate whether this change of meter was Shelley's 'lapsus linguae'; even if it was not, the attention is drawn to the process through which poetry 'happens', and by implication, to the symbolic character of one or both of the sisters.<sup>12)</sup>

Their triumph, however, is the rendition of the "two visions of strange radiance" in lines 185-318. Ione hears an "awful sound", Panthea explains its origin, both depict it in a hearable way. Then, Panthea sees a scene imposing itself on the "Ocean-like enchantment of strong sound", the description of which she commences in the intertwining modes of music and picture. Ione takes up the vision of the "winged Infant" and renders it in a painting which ends in "sounds/Sweet as a singing rain of silver dew". When Panthea continues, her representation of the Earth's whirling Orb is like a race in which sound, movement, color, odor, and fancy run a dead heat. Nothing after that ecstatic flood of imagination surpasses it, neither the pastoral-like exchange between Earth and Moon, nor the majestic rise of Demogorgon at the final of the play.

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*Prometheus Unbound* hardly succumbs to consistent interpretation because of the character of its imagery. This paper focused on the symbolic importance of two of its characters, Panthea and Ione, in the light of their functional relationship with other figures. What emerged as a result of the textual analysis was their link to the senses which, awakened and refined, are capable of poetic perception of the world. Such an equation, however, is neither exhaustive of these characters' symbolic nor purposely sought. Sometimes, Panthea and Ione will be more specifically related to senses or poetry; elsewhere, they will simply report

on the dramatic action. In some sense, they are more voices than imagery, 'mystic shells' producing music dependent on how Shelley, or any critic of his play, 'inspires' them.

### Notes

- 1) All references and quotations are from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (A Norton Critical Edition) [SPP], ed. Reiman and Powers, 1977.
- 2) Whether there is an obstacle to intelligibility or not is a matter of discourse: as Shelley points out, Greek literature is "in habitual use of this power", that is, the audience was in habitual use of comprehending it.
- 3) In the Advertisement to *Epipsychidion*, Shelley expresses his fears that there will be "but few/who fitly shall conceive thy reasoning"; lines 169-173 of the same poem give a clear statement on how interpretation in general should not be done.
- 4) Although "one of many wounds" translates well into the Greek of Homer and Aeschylus, it is not probable that Shelley did not realize its potential in representing a primitive perception and articulation.
- 5) See T. Rajan. Reading Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in *Studies in Romanticism* 23 (Fall, 1984), pp. 317-338. On the uncertainty about Prometheus' "spiritual transformation", see p. 337.
- 6) See Rajan (note 5), where the dialogue between Asia and Panthea is seen in terms of, but not limited to, reading a text. The present paper is in some respects tangential to Rajan's, but its whole direction is different.
- 7) SPP, p. 186, footnote 4.
- 8) Although one could in some cases: gender and morality, for instance, are indicated.
- 9) Panthea does address the Spirit of the Hour (II, v, 1-14), to whom Ione, in III, iii, 69-73, gives the "mystic shell".
- 10) See D. J. Hughes. Potentiality in *Prometheus Unbound*, SPP, pp. 603-620.
- 11) Ione and Panthea do partially use the iambic tetrameter in I, 314-336.

12) See p. 7.

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