PATRICK SWINDEN

Shelley: 'Ode to the West Wind'

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay, and
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh, hear!

IV

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! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wandering over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts 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! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

NOTHING is more typical of the romantic consciousness than the movement of wind. For Swift, at the opening of the eighteenth century, wind was an image or irresponsible inspiration. When a man took upon himself the power of the wind, he belched.

Inspired speech was therefore a sort of belching. Inspired makers of speeches were windbags. It took a massive shift in the way people looked at the world for Shelley to be able to address the West Wind as 'The trumpet of a prophecy'. In doing so, however, he shows no sign of the vagueness, the lack of sense, that Swift suggests automatically accompanies inspiration. Shelley doesn't merely pick on the West Wind as a stock symbol of inspiration lying ready to hand. He looks at it more closely and more carefully than any poet had done before. His 'picture' of the West Wind is more accurately painted than it had been in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when, as Zephyrus or Favonius, it had blown, usually gently, through the nooks and crannies of several admirable poems. Milton in *Comus* has 'West-Winds, with musky wing, / About the cedar'n alleys fling / Nard and cassia's balmy smells'. The same 'Western Winds' blew on the 'breathing Roses' of Pope's 'Spring' pastoral. And again, 'Cool Zephyrs thro' the clear blue sky / Their gather'd fragrance fling' in Gray's 'Ode on the Spring'. Each poet is happy to forgo the difficult problem of describing the wind, which cannot be seen, in favour of the easier one of describing the scents of the herbs and flowers it communicates to the senses. But to what senses does the wind address itself? No-one before Shelley had thought to ask.

Shelley was being original in addressing his 'Ode to the West Wind' in Autumn. In a note he writes that 'This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once wild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine region.' Shelley had been living in Italy since the beginning of 1818. Towards the end of 1819 he moved with his family to Pisa, near Florence, and wrote the poem shortly afterwards. It is the fruit, therefore, of much observation of the weather and scenery of the Italian littoral. Especially of the weather. Shelley is one of the very few English poets who were interested in and competent at science. He was fascinated by the movement of clouds, their formation and dissolution in rain. Descriptions of weather conditions abound in his poems. Sometimes they are painstakingly scientific—too much so for many of his modern readers, who often fail to make allowances for the progress of meteorological science over the past a hundred and fifty years. The most celebrated instance of this is his description of 'The Cloud' (a poem included, with 'Ode to the West Wind', in the *Prometheus Unbound* volume of 1820) as a natural phenomenon directed by electric charges ('Sublime of the towers of my skiey bowers, / Lightning my pilot sits;' etc.). There was very respectable scientific support for this view in 1819 (Shelley's science teacher, Dr. Adam Walker, advanced it in his *Analysis of a Course of Lectures on Experimental Philosophy:* see John Holloway in booklist) and Shelley is being intellectually alert and 'contemporary' in incorporating the theory in a poem. He may not have been very tactful in the way he did it, but that is another matter.

Elsewhere Shelley is content to look carefully at the weather he is describing. The poems to Jane Williams are full of such accurate descriptions ('. . . the pools of winter rains / Image all their roof of leaves' or 'How calm it is!—the silence there / By such a chain was bound / That even the busy woodpecker / Made stiller by her sound / The inviolable quietness'). *Prometheus Unbound* is as good as the ode 'To a Skylark' on the movements of heavenly bodies, particularly on the way stars impress themselves on the senses. *Prometheus* has this, for example, as a description of a star reflected in still water, at a distance, as parts of several cloud formations drift across it:

> The point of one white star is quivering still
> Deep in the orange light of widening morn
> Beyond the purple mountains: through a chasm
> Of wind-divided mist the darker lake
> Reflects it: now is wains: it gleams again
> As the waves fade, and as the burning threads
> Of woven cloud unravel in pale air.

In the middle of a description like this, 'purple mountains' cease to be an embarrassment. So does the whole progress of the imagery of the following stanza from the ode 'To a Skylark' once we have understood, as Donald Davie (see booklist) has pointed out, that the silver sphere is not the moon but Venus, the evening star:

> Keen as are the arrows
> Of that silver sphere,
> Whose intense lamp narrows
> In the white dawn clear
> Until we hardly see—we feel that it is there.

The dwindling points of the star contract to a pinpoint and draw into the star, as it were, the silvery-white atmosphere of dawn. Silver star and white space almost fuse. The lamp is intense and we are intent on apprehending it as a discrete object—but by this time apprehension is hardly a matter for the senses, we hardly *see*, we *feel* that it is there. More common, but no less difficult to render, are the uncertain movements of a summer evening breeze, the kind of thing Shelley manages with such clarity and poise in the unfinished (not quite finished) 'Evening: Ponte Al Mare, Pisa':

> There is no dew on the dry grass to-night,
> Nor damp within the shadow of the trees;
> The wind is intermitting, dry and light;
> And in the inconstant motion of the
> breeze
> The dust and straws are driven up and
> down,
> And whirled about the pavement of the
> town.

Three examples, then, out of many, of Shelley's sensitivity to the appearance of atmospheric conditions—wind, starlight, the movement of clouds, the look of dawn in a cloudless sky. They had to be given to disabuse those who have read some of the attacks on Shelley in the present century of the notions that Shelley was, in Dr. Leavis's words, 'peculiarly weak in his hold of objects—peculiarly unable to realize them as existing in their own natures and their own right'. For myself I do not know how you get hold of an object like the fading of the evening star at dawn, or the motion of wind through dry grass, but in so far as it is possible I should say that Shelley has done it better than any other English poet I have read. Nor do I know what the discreteness of an object in its own nature and its own right really amounts to. The condition it suggests to me is of such a metaphysical peculiarity that my mind finds it impossible to entertain the notion. If, however, objects exist in a shifting context of other objects, conditions of light and shadow, personal interest on the part of the individual who senses them and thinks about them, then I think Shelley reproduces very aptly the ways those objects, in those conditions, 'strike the sense'. I think he does so in the 'Ode to the West Wind'. But in the Ode there is much more than the accurate transcription of sense impressions. Shelley has impregnated his subject with philosophical speculations which are interesting and of great importance to himself. The skill with which he has fused the visible subject with the invisible thought, so that it can scarcely be said that the one is simply an image or metaphor of the other, accounts for much of the beauty and the complexity of the poem.

In spite of its rapid movement, the impression it gives of inspired improvisation, the Ode is constructed with the utmost rigour. Each of its five parts is shaped rather like a sonnet, fourteen decasyllabic lines ending with a couplet (in the Shakespearean manner). Unlike the sonnet, though, there is no division into octave and sestet. The momentum of the stanza (as I shall call each of the five parts) continues unchecked to the opening of the couplet or even beyond this to the last line. This means that the first line gives a powerful thrust to the stanza, shifting the rhythms that follow with a remarkable energy. Sometimes more than one heave is required, and the heavily stressed opening of the first line is augmented with something of the same sort in the second:

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of
> Autumn's being

Four stressed syllables are followed by a pause at the comma, Then perhaps 'thou' takes a half stress, followed by the stress on 'breath'—after which there is a release of momentum along with the stresses on the first syllable of

'Autumn' and 'being'. But to make sure sufficient energy is conserved to carry the rest of the stanza, 'Thou', at the opening of the second line, receives another heavy stress, and a pause after. Then it is allowed to take off, with that halting and careering movement that is so hard to define, so easy to hear. It is typically Shelleyan, and we shall have to return to it at a later stage. The other stanzas vary in the amount of 'thrust' they need from the start to carry them through the twelve or thirteen lines before the invocation. The fifth is most like the first, in the rhythmical terms I have been describing.

The vigour and rapidity of movement throughout the poem have a great deal to do with Shelley's manipulation of the *terza rima* verse form. He uses this with an apparent ease that has been achieved by no other English poet. Shelley adapted it from his reading of Dante, and used it to fine effect also in his late unfinished poem, 'The Triumph of Life'. The difficulty of the form in English, with its paucity of rhyme words compared with the Italian, can be gauged by looking at two other poems. One of these, Dorothy Sayers' translation of *The Divine Comedy* into English *terza rima*, shows the intolerable strain imposed on an English translator of Dante, for this reason among others. The other, the 'fire watcher' section of T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding', shows how another fine English poet, and admirer of Dante, had recourse to a variation of blank verse to get at all close to the lucidity, plangency, force and ease of the Italian. No other poet in English has extracted such a variety of music out of *terza rima* as Shelley. Indeed no other poet in English has come near to him in this respect.

So, Shelley's use of *terza rima* accounts in large part for the fact that none of the five stanzas of the Ode reads like a sonnet. The division between the two parts of the sonnet is counter-acted by the impetus of the rhythms, driving the poem forward from the thrust of the opening lines, across the interlinking rhymes of the verse form, to the solemn halt at or within the couplet.

Nevertheless the poem as a whole does reveal the division into two slightly unequal parts that we associate with the sonnet. The first three stanzas are a single unit, each one of which employs the power of the wind over one of the elements—the earth, the sky, and the sea. The last two are also a unit, emphasizing the relation between the wind and the poet. The first three stanzas connect with one another at a number of sensitive points, making them a single source of power, not merely three separate descriptions of different 'landscapes' dominated by the tendentiously unifying force of the wind. And the last two overlap into a single statement or address to the wind through the invocation which is skilfully prepared in the first three sections of the fourth stanza, released at the fourth section (at 'Oh, lift me . . .'), and thrust over the couplet to fuse with the imperatives at the opening of the fifth stanza—'Make me thy lyre, . . .'. So what is lost in the single stanzas (with what gain in terms of energy, speed and rhythmic vitality!) is retrieved in the design of the poem as a whole. How secure is the over-all gain to poem will depend on Shelley's success in binding the constituents of the two parts together, and then again in fusing the two parts *after* they have made their proper separate impact.

The first two stanzas describe the West Wind primarily in its character as a destroyer rather than as a preserver. The wind cannot be seen. It must be felt by witnessing its effect on things which can be seen, and which are the objects or the agents of its power. In stanza one these are the leaves, like ghosts (they are thin and frail) fleeing from an enchanter; and the winged seeds blown to the ground and buried like corpses in a grave, but in fact resting in cradles to be re-born with the coming of Spring. The images in this stanza strike me as being incidentally felicitous (as in line 11, where I suggest we are looking at the flocks of sheep at a great distance, sprinkled about the hillside as they are driven upwards to mountain pastures—reinforcing the impression of a Spring landscape to which the unfolding buds also belong); but they do not combine to produce a powerfully integrated effect. The force of the stanza is created more through its rhythms than through its imagery. I think it is worth pointing out that at this stage the imagery is all of a piece in

one respect—it suggests throughout the presence of the earth and growing things. There is no hint of the presence of sky and sea that is the subject of the following stanzas. But whilst in this sense the stanza is discrete, in a retrospective sense it will be discovered to have been a preparation for what follows. That is to say, the stanza offers no positive links with what is to come (other than the presence of the West Wind itself). But what is to come, we shall find, provides many links with what it has come from. Words and groups of words that are to be used in the next two stanzas will suggest very strongly a link backwards to what appeared to be discrete and unconnected in the first stanza.

The second stanza has provided the occasion for a good deal of adverse, because ill-informed criticism. There is no need to dwell on the aberrations of a critic (Dr. Leavis) who has had more than moderate success in some of his work but who has a poor ear for the movement of English verse and appears to be blind to many of the details of a world which does, after all, exist outside books. However, if he had raised his eyes from the text and looked at the sky, he might have seen clouds in what John Holloway describes, taking the phrase from H. Duncan Grant, *Cloud and Weather Atlas*, as anvil formations. I do not think Holloway's paraphrase of this stanza can be improved upon, and so I offer it verbatim from his note to lines 15–28:

> A large 'anvil' thunderstorm cloud is mounting in the western sky ('steep sky', 1. 15, rightly suggests that such a cloud seems to rise vertically). The wind is high, and the two arms of the anvil are fraying out forwards into long, fibrous cirrus clouds like the hair of a Maenad blown forward from her head by the wind (1. 21). The base of the anvil is dissolving in streams of small clouds ('found at the base, or even more often on the lower surface of anvil projections' Grant). Finally, the sun ('this closing night' 1. 24) is setting in the west, and the whole cloud is thus partly in deep shadow, partly a rich ruddy colour. Here, in fact, is the crucial point of the whole passage. Coloured in this way, the storm-cloud looks like a gigantic tree, with the loose, flying lower clouds streaming from it like autumn leaves (1. 16) and the upper, cirrus clouds looking like its branches.

So Shelley is using his eyes to register very precisely the appearance and movement of clouds in the formations Holloway describes. At the same time he brings forward the imagery of trees and leaves from the first stanza; and he projects forward into the next the imagery of stream and 'aery *surge*'. This suggests that the power of the wind operates in essentially the same way in the air as it does on land and sea. It is indifferent to the variety of the phenomena it works upon.

The third stanza reverts to the West Wind as a preserver, at any rate as a power that enlivens and invigorates rather than one that buries and entombs. There are two 'pictures': one of the Mediterranean, the other of the Atlantic. Shelley can usually be counted on to reproduce accurately the effect of light on water, or indeed on light striking objects reflected in water and then thrown back from the surface of the water (I am thinking of 'The Question' in which water lilies, floating near the edge of a river, 'lit the oak that overhung the hedge / With moonlight beams of their own watery light'). In the part of the Ode we are looking at, the Mediterranean is lulled to sleep by the sound of streams flowing into it. These produce the effect of currents observed on the surface as coils, gently binding as well as lulling the recumbent inland sea. As the sunlight beats on the surface (the proximity of 'wave' and 'day', along with the emphasis on blueness, intensity, and quivering, releases the hidden word 'ray' as a ray of light creating that quivering effect on the water) the submerged palaces and towers at Baiae seen to float and move under the wave. Presumably the moss and sea flowers do quiver as the light strikes down to them and the motions of the water rock them. The impressions of clear light, in both air and sea, is intense—not merely blue, but azure and crystal producing this effect of calm brilliance.

With the appearance of the Atlantic the passive acceptance of light and of the coils of those streams, which the West Wind disturbed

when it awakened the Mediterranean, gives way to an energetic activity. The Atlantic has powers of its own. Responding to the wind, not merely being acted upon by it, the outer sea cleaves itself into chasms. The woods and foliage at the bottom of the ocean 'despoil themselves'. The initiative has passed from the wind to the objects in nature that respond to it. They have, as it were, anticipated the will of the wind and made themselves the vehicles of its power. In doing so they antitipate the demands of the poet in the last two stanzas, in which he too strives towards the condition he has described in the forms of leaf, cloud and wave in the earlier stanzas. But as well as anticipating the demands of the poet, the images in stanza three also cast back reflections on stanzas one and two, much as stanza two 'read back' its leaves and boughs to stanza one. Here the Mediterranean half hides the earth of palaces and towers sunk beneath it; its moss and flowers, together with the 'sea blooms' and 'oozy woods' of the Atlantic, carry back to the leaves and seeds and buds of stanza one. I have already commented on the projection of the stream and the 'Blue surface of thine aery surge' across stanza two to merge with the water imagery of this third stanza.

By the end of stanza three the energy of the poem is unabated, but its direction has changed. What began as the onslaught of the wind upon passive will-less attributes of nature —dead leaves, seeds, clouds, a lulled Mediterranean—has been transformed into the active, if fearful, co-operation of the Atlantic with the terrifying power of the wind. When Shelley turns to himself, in these last stanzas, it is the example of the Atlantic that is at the forefront of his mind. First he turns back to the whole of the poem so far to gather together the dominant images—to be born on the back of the wind like a leaf; to fly with the wind as a cloud; and then, at the same time as panting beneath the power of the wind, to 'share / The impulse of thy strength.' The poet wants to subdue himself to the purposes of whatever power is represented by the wind; at the same time he sees himself as the wind's competitor, sharing its strength, striving with it in prayer. He is 'chained' and 'bowed' by precisely those attributes that belong to the wind—he is 'tameless', and 'swift', and 'proud'. But he needs to be tamed by the wind so that he is a fit instrument for it to blow through, so that he will fulfil his function in the world as the leaves and clouds and waves do—passively or co-operatively, and without pride. His invocation to the wind to make him its lyre recalls his comments in the *Essay on Christianity:* 'There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords, at will.' The will is that of the Power, not of the lyre of human consciousness upon which it breathes. To receive the power the poet must use his will to harmonize his own identity with what he calls an 'exquisite consentaneity of powers.' This is what Shelley is recommending to himself in the last stanza. But he recognizes that the recommendation is couched in what may be unfittingly imperative terms: 'Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!' I have to confess that the descent into an altogether unimperative self-pity at lines 53 and 58 seems to me a blotch on the poem. 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' is tonally quite out of key with the rest. It detracts from the powerful representation of a thwarted idealism, an idealism thwarted by its own strength and assertiveness, which is both the subject of the poem and the psychic dilemma out of which the poem is formed.

That strength is present in every part of the Ode: in its commanding structure, the binding force of its imagery, the precision of each separate image, and the driving energy and speed of the rhythms. Most of all it is in the rhythms. It is well known that the great Romantics of both the first and the second generation fell, in their different ways, under the influence of Milton; and that they adopted different strategies to cope with that influence —with greater or lesser success. Shelley's best poetry—and there is more of it than most people seem to think—is quite free of this influence. It is less well known (though Eliot seems to have covertly recognized it) that Shakespeare's influence has been even more widespread and sometimes more insidiously damaging—a source of weakness as well as

strength. Shelley's poetry seems to me to be as far as English poetry can get from Shakespeare's influence. His handling of imagery, his own variant of Romantic diction, above all the rapid, headlong movement of his rhythms, are at the furthest remove from Shakespeare's.

Perhaps, in so far as imagery is concerned, Dr. Davie comes nearest to the truth when he writes that the sensuousness of some of Shelley's poetry 'is of a peculiar sort which makes the familiar remote. (He takes a common object such as a rose or a boat, and the more he describes it, the less we remember what it is.)' This is quite different from saying, with Leavis, that Shelley was 'peculiarly weak in his hold on objects.' After all, in 'To a Skylark' Shelley describes the bird, and by implication the poet, as an '*unbodied* joy'. The poet is 'hidden / In the light of thought'. The more powerful the light, the more intense the feeling, the more likely it is that the solid object the poet contemplates loses its solidity and gives place to an almost abstract intensity of experience. This must be why in Shelley's world so much is shifting, why light fails to mould objects into solid, weighty things that can be turned around and touched like Keats's urn or Wordsworth's stones and pitchers. Instead light splits up, refracts, floats objects, catches them as they catch something of the intensity and abstraction of light. That is why, in spite of the uncanny vision of moving things Shelley produces in the Ode, the final impression we take away with us is of an intense transparency. The 'thought' of the poem is self-consciously stuck in a trap of its own devising. But that very self-consciousness, refracted through the imagery of leaves, clouds and waves bound together by the darting rhythms of the *terza rima*, is profoundly liberating. It is that liberty, the quality of that un-encumbered aspiration, that we go to Shelley for. In this poem, he does not disappoint.

Further Reading: The history of Shelley criticism in the past thirty to forty years is a disgrace. However, J. Holloway's selections of the poems, *Selected Poems of P. B. Shelley*, London, 1960, points the way forward to a more sensible evaluation of this poet. Unfortunately the text is not as authoritative as it might have been, but the introduction and notes (especially) are excellent. E. R. Wasserman's recent *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Baltimore and London, 1971, is the best full-length study, in spite of its (not always necessary) difficulty. G. Hough, 'Shelley' in *The Romantic Poets*, London, 1953, as a clearly written introduction. D. Davie, 'Shelley's Urbanity', in *Purity in Diction of English Verse*, London, 1952, is interesting, but somewhat at a tangent to the subject. The devil's advocate is, of course, F. R. Leavis, 'Shelley', in *Revaluation*, London, 1936, which must be read in order to see what all the fuss is about.