



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Emma Marešová, *An Ecocritical Study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's Selected Lyrical Works*

BA Thesis

Opponent's Report

Emma Marešová's BA thesis discusses the way in which P. B. Shelley, as one of the major British Romantic poets, makes use of nature images in his poetry. She attempts to apply an ecocritical perspective, realizing that the term "nature" was understood in a considerably broader sense by the Romantics as compared to the previous generations. Not only did, as she argues, this term apply to the outer environment, landscape, but it included "human nature" (emotionality, consciousness, etc.) as well. In her analysis she very appropriately points to the historical and political circumstances of the early 19th century marked by severe economic restrictions, which participated in the changing attitudes towards the "natural" (both in terms of nourishment and political oppression). She presents an interesting account of Shelley's vegetarianism showing that nature was predominantly taken as a moral term; in Shelley's philosophy of a gradual reform of humanity towards a harmonious form of existence this means liberation from violent tyranny and acceptance of natural justice. Such passages prove the student's fairly good knowledge of Shelley's thought and its sources.

These background facts are more or less organically incorporated in the chapters which focus on four poetical texts, two earlier ones, *The Revolt of Islam* and "Ozymandias" (both composed in 1817), and two later ones, "Ode to the West Wind" and *Prometheus Unbound* (published in one volume in 1820). In her detailed commentary on these works, the student finds political overtones in all of them; her conclusion about *The Revolt* can encapsulate her understanding of them all: "Nature is, therefore, according to Shelley, a healing force; fostering a closer connection to the natural world will eliminate despotism and restore humanity to its natural state." (11) Let us add that Shelley really extends W. Cowper's late 18th century concept of "healing nature" to the socio-political context.

Even though I'm quite impressed by Emma's treatment of her subject, I cannot help raising several objections and asking a few questions:

The title indicates that the works under scrutiny will be lyrical. This sounds inaccurate as especially *The Revolt of Islam* seems a far cry from what we commonly understand as lyrical. This should be explained.



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The student's method is declared to be ecocritical. I would appreciate a brief introduction of this critical approach in the opening chapter, its history and purpose, as defined in such sources as Greg Gerrard's *Ecocriticism* (2012), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014) by the same author and editor, or Suresh Frederick's *Ecocriticism: Paradigms and Praxis* (2019).

In her analysis of Shelley's poetry, the student somewhat undervalues the fact that Shelley's images are mostly metaphorical. Thus in "Ozymandias" the desert image rather seems to stand for the working of time which finally levels down ("The lone and level sands"!) everything into meaninglessness. It is then problematic to assert that "If a society is morally polluted and therefore unsustainable, it will not last"; though the emphasis is no doubt political in this poem, the sands of time will hardly be able to distinguish between polluted and unpolluted societies, and this is exactly the irony and desperation time and mutability bring.

Oddly enough, the thesis never mentions the figure of Napoleon as a prototype of the tyrant. Shelley's critique is, however, openly anti-Napoleonic. *The Revolt* stands for the poet's reflection on the atrocities of the French Revolution, true, but his other poems respond to a more acute problem of the Napoleonic armies plundering the Continent and threatening to invade the British Isles, a situation Shelley experienced in his younger years. Especially in *Prometheus Unbound* this historical context reverberates intensely, including even some personal aspects. One of Shelley's earliest sonnets, "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte" opens: "I hated thee, fallen tyrant!" In this context, *Prometheus Unbound* reads as a redefinition of personal attitudes to tyranny.

In "Ode to the West Wind" and in *Prometheus Unbound* nature has a more specific meaning: Shelley argues here for the necessity of application of natural *laws* to human society and to the human mind. In this task, poets play a prominent role (as "unacknowledged legislators"; see *A Defence*). In the ode Shelley examines some basic universal force (called, metaphorically, wind), which invigorates all material world, the elements of earth, air and water, and which is identical with or analogical to an inspiring stimulus activating imagination in the human mind. The poetic mind, which is also viewed as elemental (already in *Alastor*'s opening line "Earth, Ocean, Air, beloved brotherhood!"), should then operate on the same basis. Similarly, the last act of *Prometheus Unbound* presents hymnic celebration of the achieved universal harmony after the reformed society, devoid of oppressive tyranny, accepted the laws of nature as its governing principle. (Let's not forget the fact that Shelley was well read in natural sciences.)



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There are also a few inaccuracies in the student's interpretation. The assertion that Jupiter is a part of Prometheus which he has cast out (34), taken from Scrivener, sounds farfetched and overspeculated. The conclusion that the "desert embodies death, as a landscape lacking in water, essential for the support of any living organism, while the ocean represents life, as an environment teeming with it" (in the ode, 27) is a simplified statement missing Shelley's point. The ocean here, as well as the Mediterranean Sea, is metaphorically analogical to the human mind, whose ideas (seaweed) must be sometimes awakened forcefully, sometimes mildly. The statement "The flowers' sweet scents lull the sea into a sense of security" can hardly find support in the text of the poem; the sea is lulled into its illusory dreams by the gone pomp and beauty of Baie (destroyed partly by the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius), i.e. the supremacy of culture over nature.

There are occasional linguistic slips (such as "to make was for Spring", 26) but they don't affect the text seriously. Only one statement on p. 6 should be rephrased in a more lucid manner. The student says: "The poem references the murder of Abel, at the hands of his brother, Cain: [...] According to Shelley, and contrary to biblical lore, this betrayal was man's first fall, not the later fall of Adam and Eve." Put this way, it seems that she antecedes the fratricide to the expulsion from Eden, which is indeed wrong.

In spite of all these reservations I consider Emma Marešová's BA thesis to be a considerable contribution to ecocritical debates and recommend it for the defence. I incline to suggest the preliminary mark to be "**velmi dobrá**" (very good) but if the viva turns out to be convincing I will not object upgrading the result.

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