

BREAKING AESTHETICS AND UNIVERSALISING PLAGUE IN MARY SHELLEY'S *THE LAST MAN*

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ABSTRACT

For Romantic poets imagination was understood as mainly a bridge to save distances between the world and the self; by means of imagination poets created an aestheticised world: nature was perceived either under the lineaments of beauty or of sublimity. Besides, the Romantic *Weltanschauung* favoured the resurgence of the *anima mundi* theme, which came to be very significant: firstly, because the spirit of nature favours poetic inspiration/ creation (wind and harp themes); and secondly, because nature is perceived as both an animated being and a nurturing-nursuring mother. Thus, my aim throughout this essay is to explore the concepts and themes stated above in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and to show how the author succeeds in subverting Romantic pretensions so that her work is to be understood as a dystopian vision of Romantic theory.

Key words: Romanticism, aesthetics, beauty, sublimity, nature, plague

RESUMEN

Para los poetas románticos la imaginación era un puente necesario para salvar las distancias entre el mundo y el yo, y haciendo uso de ella estetizaron el mundo según las categorías estéticas de belleza y sublimidad. Es más, la *Weltanschauung* romántica permitió el resurgir del motivo del *anima mundi*, donde la naturaleza era fuente de inspiración, un ser vivo y madre nutricia. A lo largo de este artículo, me propongo explorar las cuestiones arriba mencionadas en la obra de Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* para mostrar hasta qué punto la autora consigue subvertir las pretensiones románticas y presentar una visión distópica del pensamiento romántico.

Palabras clave: Romanticismo, estética, belleza, sublimidad, naturaleza, plaga

Darkness had no need
Of aid from them – She was the Universe¹.

I.

During the Romantic Period one concept came to be significantly influential, that of ‘imagination’. Its importance was mainly due to the fact that it turned the mind into an active principle which was able to transform and recreate the world. In this sense, M. H. Abrams’ seminal work *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) pointed out what can be considered one of the keystones in Romantic theory, namely, the movement from the mirror metaphor to that of the lamp or fountain (Cfr. Abrams, 1971). Thus, in the course of the eighteenth century the mind of man was placed in the central point of poetic creation; the relevance of this assertion lies not only in the fact that there is a new way of understanding literary composition but also of perceiving the human being and his relation with nature. Mind and imagination conferred to the subject new possibilities that traditional aesthetic dictates had restricted: the objectivity that a mirror was supposed to convey was enrichingly surpassed by the subjectivity that each individual was able to shed like a lamp.

The reference to this gnoseological movement aims at showing how universal and canonical aesthetic principles were put to the test and how the prevailing *Weltanschauung* supported the birth of the category of the sublime. Traditionally, beauty was the only concern of aesthetics; the universality of Platonic theory made clear what had to be liked or not, what according to certain standards was beautiful or not –proportion, symmetry, harmony, etc., were some of the constituents. However, during the eighteenth century it was realised that there was something missing; something that had to do with disproportion, irregularity and inadequacy. The aesthetic of the sublime was born to find room for all that had been considered marginal, obscure and non-canonical so far. Consequently, such aesthetic will first become emblematic of revolution and freedom, Byronic ideals, then it will be condemned for leading to devastation and destruction.

In 1674 the poet and critic Nicholas Boileau translated the Greek text *Peri Hupsous* (*On the Sublime*), attributed to the first-century writer Longinus. According to this treatise, the sublime was applied to the elevated style of discourse in classical oratory; and it was precisely the concept of ‘elevation’ that got the eighteenth-century thinker’s attention, since the essence of sublimity in language lay in its capacity to move or elevate the subject. Likewise, the sublime stressed the idea of passion instead of traditional order and moderation, which necessarily supported the thought of powerful mind, creative imagination and transcendence. Regarding all this, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was the result of a long process of aesthetic dissertation and the final crystallisation of what many writers had outlined before. Edmund Burke systematised the categories of the beautiful and the sublime according to two interrelated opposites, pleasure and pain respectively. The first fitted in traditional equation among beauty, harmony, virtue and love; the second opened challenging possibilities to the abruptness of the imagination and the experience of terror as an aesthetic delight.

¹ The quote alludes to Byron’s “Darkness” (1816), where the poet narrates the end of the world and to which Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) is somehow indebted.

Apart from the British influence in the elaboration of this fashionable topic, German Idealism came to consolidate the aesthetic of the sublime thanks to two leading philosophers and their corresponding works, Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1764) and *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and Schiller's *On the sublime* (1793). But German philosophy was also significant because of a decisive contribution to Romantic Literature: the *anima mundi* theme. F.W.J. Schelling was the one to rescue this myth of the World-Soul in his *Naturphilosophie* (1797), although such conception of an animated universe was first established in Plato's *Timaeus*. Consequently, nature turned into an organic entity that was, simultaneously, *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*: actively interacting with the individual and passively receiving from him. It is, then, easy to understand why the Eolian harp –another symbolic figure of the mind along with the lamp or the fountain– became the recurrent metaphor for referring to the poet, whereas the wind –the breath of the World-Soul– *animated* and inspired him. Wordsworth is surely the most representative English Romantic poet who showed the concept of nature as a nurturing mother and as a living being:

Emphatically such a Being lives,
An inmate of this *active* universe;
From Nature largely he receives; nor so
Is satisfied, but largely gives again,
For feeling has to him imparted strength,
And powerful in all sentiments of grief,
Of exultation, fear, and joy, his mind,
Even as an agent of the one great mind,
Creates, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds [*The Prelude* 1805, 265-275].

After this brief introduction that has attempted to outline aesthetics in the eighteenth century and some Romantic keystone motifs, I will analyse more profusely the ideas stated before in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). For carrying out that task, the article will specially focus on the relation that some of the characters maintained with the beautiful and the sublime and in which ways nature was transformed and structured following aesthetic patterns.

II.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is surely best known for her *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818); but from the time that work was published to the time *The Last Man* was issued (1826), the author witnessed a revolution of ideas encircled by the apogee and the twilight of Romantic period. She was brought up reading the works of her illustrious parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft; she knew the thinking of the time and, obviously, Burkean aesthetics and German philosophy; and she shared Percy's ideas concerning the redemptive skills of the imagination. However, by the moment she was writing *The Last Man*, everything was in decline: aesthetic categories started to collapse;

and the *heavenly* empire that the Romantic imagination had promised turned into a fallacy, since the poets were unable to redeem mankind from reality.

Mary Shelley takes great part of the book in describing and stereotyping two characters representative of both the beautiful and the sublime: Adrian, Earl of Windsor and Lord Raymond. It is not necessary to go into any depth to guess that under such personae you can discover P. B. Shelley and Lord Byron (*Cfr.* Spark, 1994: 182). Given these circumstances, the description of Adrian results in an idealised version of her husband, who embodies the Romantic prototype of the poet and of the saviour. For such purpose, Mary emphasises his powers of poetic creation by making use of the harp-lyre metaphor: “he seemed like an inspired musician, who struck, with unerring skill, the lyre of mind, and produced thence divine harmony” (1994: 7)². This quote, along with many others in the narration, reveals how the author is characterising Adrian and his relation with nature by means of both Platonic tradition –not in vain Percy was the translator of his *Symposium*– and the aesthetic of the beautiful; a category grounded on society and filial bonds, harmony and creation (*Cfr.* Burke 1998). He, like Wordsworth in *The Prelude* or in “Tintern Abbey”, believes in the benefits of loving nature, of understanding her as an organic whole: “Adrian felt that he made a part of a great whole. He owned affinity not only with mankind, but all nature was akin to him (...). His soul was sympathy, and dedicated to the worship of *beauty* and excellence” (my italics) (45). But also, he feels like a prophet who preaches the Wordsworthian maxim, “love of nature leading to love of mankind”:

O happy earth, and happy inhabitants of earth! A stately palace has God built for you, O man! And worthy are you of your dwelling! Behold the verdant carpet spread at our feet, and the azure canopy above; the fields of earth which generate all things, and the track of heaven, which contains and clasps all things. Now, at this evening hour, at the period of repose and reflection, methinks all hearts breathe one hymn of love and thanksgiving, and we, *like priests of old on the mountain-top*, give a voice to their sentiment (my italics) (74-5)³.

The counterpoint to Adrian’s feelings and attitudes is embodied by Raymond. As stated before, this character is emblematic of the Byronic hero for whom nature is something to grasp and conquer, something to transcend and surpass, not something to live in harmony with. He becomes emblematic of the sublime because he represents the (destructive) powers of the imagination unbound; of excess without the rudder of reason; of solitude, ambition and self-preservation (*Cfr.* Burke 1998):

His passions were violent; as these often obtained the mastery over him, he could not always square his conduct to the obvious line of self-interest, but self-gratification at least was the paramount object with him. He looked on the structure of society as but a part of the

² I will follow the edition of 1994 by Morton D. Paley in Oxford U.P.; parenthetical numbers refer to the page in this edition.

³ *Cfr.* Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805):

Prophets of nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how [442-445].

machinery which supported the web on which his life was traced. The earth was spread out as a highway for him; the heaven built up as a canopy for him (44-5).

Mary Shelley condemns, as she had already done in *Frankenstein*, this unmeasured power of the imagination that results in destruction and devastation –and final Plague. The category of the sublime is not very positively evaluated by the author, since it is based on an unrestrained attitude and it favours the experience of pain and terror. However, she also mistrusts the category of the beautiful, considering it as a delusive veil under which the enemy can be more easily hidden.

Raymond does not perceive society and nature as a whole where every one shares the same *anima mundi*, but contemplates society as a structure of power over which he wants to rule. His scope and universality as a Byronic figure is made clear along the narration by means of epithets like these: “ornament of England, deliverer of Greece, hero of unwritten story” (200) –Raymond, like Byron, fought against the Turks to liberate Greece. However, universal fame becomes a trap. He declares: “Earth is to me a tomb, the firmament a vault, shrouding mere corruption. Time is no more, for I have stepped within the threshold of eternity” (187). Empowered by such vanity, ambition and dreams of glory and carried out by his desire of massacre and submission, he will open the doors to universal plague in chapter 13 to find no triumphant laurel but a grave without name.

Adrian and Raymond epitomise the contrary –and complementary– attitudes towards nature according to the aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime as systematised by Burke and revised by Kantian philosophy. The fact that Mary Shelley makes use of these two categories to characterise both personae is not arbitrary. During the Romantic period nature had been represented following aesthetic patterns; beauty and sublimity became two powerful tools for the ruling and controlling of landscape, either harmonically or dominantly –whereas the first was based on love and favoured inclusion (Adrian’s attitude), the second was grounded on fear and supported exclusion (Raymond’s one). However, both of them result in a deceptive approach to the world, which imposes its own conditions.

The categories had its origin in the mind and were born as the prelude of an Apocalypse by imagination. As M.H. Abrams suggested in *Natural Supernaturalism* Romantics were in the belief that art and its contributory imagination could render Earth heavenly (*Cfr.* 1973: 329 and *fol.*). In fact, poets were convinced that their creations were in some way related to reality, or even that their imaginings were more real than reality itself⁴. As P.B. Shelley had written “imagination kills error”, since the creations of the mind could be deprived of whatever might be non-aesthetic⁵; following this maxim, Romantic poets categorised a world where everything was aesthetically outlined and, consequently, under control. Nature was perceived under the lineaments of beauty or of sublimity; and the task of the imagination was that of articulating subject and world, saving distances between what man had aesthetically created and what the senses could empirically verify (*Cfr.* Pyle, 1996: 8). Regarding this gnoseology, Raymond and Adrian deal with the world according to such parameters, trying to turn the world (England) into a Paradise; but

⁴ See, Sir Maurice Bowra’s *The Romantic Imagination* (1969).

⁵ Shelley’s “Epipsychidion”, 164-169.

whether under passionate excess or restrained harmony, nature had been represented and at the very bottom of representation lies the aim of power (*Cfr.* Said 1979; 1994). Thus, Mary Shelley first puts forward the Romantic expectations via these two characters, then subverts them both nullifying human expectations.

Since the moment the plague breaks out, the initial bucolic representation of nature where they were “the Arcadian shepherds of the tale” (131) begins to collapse; nature is not the mother-earth any more, nor her inhabitants are her happy nurselings, but she is to be perceived as a step-mother unto them:

Nature, our mother, and our friend, had turned on us a brow menace. She shewed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth a finger, we must quake. She could take our globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man’s mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand, and cast it into space, where life would be drunk up, and man and all his efforts for ever annihilated (232).

Nature rejects any representation, any reductive categorisation; she rises powerfully: a lethal elusive virus conveyed with the garments of beauty. There is no sublime thunder, nor storm; instead the plague turns more aggressive in springtime, which constitutes a significant inversion in aesthetics since destruction was associated with environmental sublimity. So, spring, the much-lauded season by Romantic poets as indicative of regeneration, is substituted by winter and its “purifying cold” (237). Consequently, the plague is never described but for its effects; and its appearance takes place not under the veil of sublimity but of beauty. Transgression is then produced: eighteenth-century aesthetics had prescribed that the experience of the beautiful was related to harmony, generation and society; whereas the sublime arose from the experience of obscurity, death and solitude (*Cfr.* Burke 1998). The plague should have emerged in a sublime terror-evoking atmosphere, but such monster is released in a springtime scenery:

Hear you not the rushing sound of the coming tempest? Do you not behold the clouds open, and destruction lurid and dire pour down on the blasted earth? See you not the thunderbolt fall, and are deafened by the shout of heaven that follows its descent? Fell you not the earth quake and open with agonising groans, while the air is pregnant with shrieks and wailings — all announcing the last days of man?

No! none of these things accompanied our fall! The balmy air of spring, breathed from nature’s ambrosial home, invested the lovely earth (...). The buds decked the trees, the flowers adorned the land: the dark branches, swollen with seasonable juices, expanded into leaves (...). The brooks flowed murmuring, the sea was waveless, and the promontories that overhung it were reflected in the placid waves (...). Where was pain and evil? Not in the calm air or weltering ocean; not in the woods or fertile fields (...). Plague is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty (315-6).

Another blow to poetic composition concerns the motif of the wind. If the wind was invoked by poets, for example P. B. Shelley in “Ode to the West Wind”, to get inspiration —since the wind was something like the breath of the *anima mundi* and helped the poet to

create—, Mary Shelley makes the wind a universal negative force that, far from creating, carries with it the seed of death:

Then mighty art thou, O Wind, to be throned above all other vicegerents of nature's power; whether thou comest destroying from the east, or pregnant with elementary life from the west (...). Why dost thou howl! Thus, O wind? By day and by night for four long months thy roarings have not ceases...; thy ministers, the clouds, deluge the land with rain...; the wild torrent tears up the mountain path; pain and wood, and verdant dell are despoiled of their loveliness (220-230).

However, the importance of these passage lies not only in the fact that the author subverts the traditional image of the wind as a positive force, but that she is also about to deconstruct the statement “thou comest destroying from the east, or pregnant with elementary life from the west”.

The dichotomy between the East and the West is based on ideological grounds, according to which, in an attempt to gain power and control over, the East has been perceived as a potential threat and consequently, whatever may come from beyond those boundaries is represented as the Otherness (*Cfr.* Said, 1979: 26). So, the fact that the plague in *The Last Man* may be introduced in Europe reveals “Romantic anxieties about the dangers of Oriental infection” (Fulford and Kitson, 1998: 262)⁶. Accordingly, what Verney and the rest of characters have heard about the plague is restricted to Oriental boundaries and is narrated in sublime terms stressing the terror and menace this aesthetic category conveys:

It was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose: an orb, the size of that luminary, but dark, defined, whose beams were shadows, ascended from the west (...). Night fell upon every country, night, sudden, rayless, entire (...). The shadows of things assumed strange and ghastly shapes. The wild animals in the woods took fright at the unknown shapes figured on the ground (...). Whether this story were true or not, the effects were certain (224).

Such are the commentaries coming from the East concerning the plague; but the fact that those happenings take place outside European boundaries make characters in the novel circumscribe the epidemic disease to Eastern lands. So, in this regard, the plague rises as the absolute other that, supposedly, has no room in Western grounds:

It is of old a native of the East, sister of the tornado, the earthquake, and the simoon. Child of the sun and nursling of the tropics, it would expire in these climates. It drinks the dark blood of the inhabitants of the south, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt (233).

Emphasising the idea of Otherness, the plague is described like a selective vampire who “drinks the dark blood of the inhabitants of the south”. However, *The Last Man*'s chief novelty lies in the transgression of traditional limits and the breaking of geographical

⁶ See also, A. Ballesteros: “A Romantic Vision of Millenarian Disease: Placing and Displacing Death in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*” (1996), *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 17: 51-61.

and ideological boundaries. The plague grows universal, going beyond European borders and even reaching America. England's insularity proves to be useless and its pretended impermeability results in a complete fallacy. Needless to say that, when Shelley's novel was published, *The Monthly Review* branded the narrative as "the offspring of a diseased imagination and of a most polluted taste" and went on saying that the author "amplifies beyond all the bounds of moderation" (1826: 335). Such a comment just hinted that *The Last Man* had deeply and disturbingly opened the door to a new *Weltanschauung* that started to differ from the one she had known at the beginning of the century.

In fact, Mary Shelley had never witnessed a real plague, so she makes use of previous descriptions concerning this topic from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn: Memoir of the Year 1793* (1817) and John Wilson's *The City of the Plague* (1816). In this sense, *The Last Man* becomes the next stop for the plague motif to make its appearance in a good example of literary transmission and cross-cultural influence:

I had never before beheld one killed by pestilence (...). Does the reader wish to hear of the pest-houses, where death is the comforter... of harrowing shrieks, despair, and death? There are many books which can feed the appetite craving for these things; let them turn to the accounts of Boccaccio, De Foe, and Browne. The vast annihilation that swallowed all things – the voiceless solitude of the once busy earth (259; 267).

III.

Bucolic image of Romantic nature is never more; Nature has bred an invisible enemy that wipes out the entire human race with the exception of Verney. The plague becomes a mobile force that cannot be reduced or secluded by aesthetic imaginings: it spreads crossing boundaries and what should have remained Eastern turns Universal. Much of chapter 21 is dominated by an aria-like 'Farewell to Romanticism', an inflection point that marks the decline not only of humanity but also of its pretended (pretentious) powerful imagination:

Farewell to the patriotic scene, to the love of liberty and well earned need of virtuous aspiration! (...). Farewell to the desire of rule, and the hope of victory; to high vaulting ambition, to the appetite for praise, and the craving for the suffrage of their fellows! (...). Farewell to the arts —to eloquence, which is to the human mind as the winds to the sea, stirring, and then allaying it; —farewell to poetry and deep philosophy, *for man's imagination is cold, and his enquiring mind can no longer expatiate on the wonders of life* (...). Farewell to sculpture, where the pure marble mocks human flesh, and in the plastic expression of the culled excellencies of the human shape, shines forth the god! —farewell to painting, the high wrought sentiment and deep knowledge of the artist's mind in pictured canvas —to paradisiacal scenes, where trees are ever vernal, and the ambrosial air rests in perpetual glow; —to the stamped for of tempest, and the wildest uproar of universal nature encaged in the narrow frame, O farewell! (my italics) (321-2).

Along the passage, Mary Shelley recollects some of the topics stated throughout this article: Adrian's virtuous aspirations, Raymond's high ambition, Romantic powers of

creation and aesthetic representations of nature are nullified once the plague has left only one survivor. Since that moment, it can be appreciated how the Romantic ethos concerning human imagination presents enormous fissures; as Morton D. Paley has suggested “the nature of imagination in *The Last Man* is teasing. It presents itself as a saviour only to be revealed as a creator of phantasm” (1989: 13). In fact, this is first significantly realised when Lionel, Raymond having opened the door to the plague and to his own destruction, searches for the Byronic hero: “For a moment I could yield to the creative powers of the imagination, and for a moment was soothed by the sublime fictions it presented to me. The beatings of my human heart drew me back to blank reality” (200).

None of the efforts of redeeming humanity are fruitful: Raymond’s assertion, “I have much to do before England becomes a Paradise” (108), lies with him in an unknown grave; Adrian’s confidence in society and nature, “earth will become a Paradise. The energies of man were before directed to the destruction of his species: they now aim at its liberation and preservation” (219), was drowned by the *sublime* storm –as P. B. Shelley was. And Verney’s last attempt to find salvation through imagination is ultimately unsuccessful. He tries to repeople the world with the past, with “the floating figures of *The Italian*” (462); however, his imaginings prove to be useless and ruins, that should have been considered sublime and given transcendental wings, just set reality more apart from the world of imagination:

Suddenly the soul fell ten thousand fathom deep, into the abyss of the present – into self-knowledge – into tenfold sadness. I roused myself – I cast off my waking dreams; and I (...) now beheld the desert ruins of Rome sleeping under its own blue sky; the shadows of tranquillity on the ground (...). I was alone in the Forum; alone in Rome; alone in the world (463).

Thus, the so desired universal Apocalypse by imagination never took place; in this sense, *The Last Man* is to be understood as a dystopian vision of Romantic theory, since Mary Shelley’s novel clarifies how aesthetic creations do not exist outside human referentially and how Romantic imagination fails in filling the gap between mind and world. Furthermore, the author sets out to show that nature has not outline and that, contrary to Wordsworthian beliefs, nature *can* betray “the heart that loved her”⁷. By breaking the margins of the beautiful and the sublime, Mary Shelley manages to create an invisible aesthetic object that cannot be categorised nor reduced, that avoids any representation and that transforms the *anima mundi* theme (nature blowing life) into the *mors mundi* one (nature depriving the world of life). By universalising the plague, the author reveals how an exclusive categorisation turns into a fallacy and how traditional limits are always subjected to both influence and transmission.

Finally, we come to discover that Verney, witnessing the extinction of humanity, turns out to be Mary Shelley’s *alter ego* saying farewell to Romanticism. By the time she was writing the novel, Percy and Byron had already died; and in her diary it can be read: “The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me” (Spark, 1994: 180).

⁷ Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”: “Knowing that Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her” [122-3].

Consequently, the last man is also the last woman; the last Romantic witnessing the end of a universe she once knew and extinct now.

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