

Gone With the (West) Wind: Shelley, Apostrophe, and Inept Interpellation

This paper explores Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and its speaker's engagement with a natural element - wind, through a rhetorical device, the apostrophe. I read the poem alongside Louis Althusser's formulation of 'interpellation' and the idea that ideology is a representation of the conditions of existence. I present the case that Shelley dramatizes the inability of humans to engage with components of the natural world - in this case, the wind - on our own terms. The wind that is addressed in the poem is not an individual who responds/reacts to the speaker's hailing. The poem begins with an inept vocative - "O wild West Wind". It is inept in failing to elicit a response or reaction from the west wind. This obvious ineptitude of the hailing is something that the speaker brings to our attention throughout the poem.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" has been hailed as one of the best examples of the "apostrophic mode" of engagement.¹ As Culler notes, the apostrophe in classical rhetoric tradition is "a diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge" (59). Critics of Shelley have worked, in interesting ways, with the idea that the speaker in the poem is addressing an individual. For instance, Harold Bloom in his book on Shelley and mythmaking argues that Shelley doesn't relate to the world—and in the case of "Ode to the West Wind", west wind itself—as an 'It', but as a 'Thou'. Buber argues that every 'It' is bounded by others whereas 'Thou' is unbounded. When one relates to the world as a 'Thou', there is only the animated reality. One does not differentiate between different forms of existence - plants, animals, wind, and so on. Every existence is an animate 'Thou'. However, when one experiences the world as an 'It', one sees forms of existences that aren't animate - hence the inanimate 'thing' as the other outside one's own reality (Bloom, 1 and 73). Hence, the apostrophe becomes a powerful device in animating the West Wind as an individual.

Why does the relation to the omni-animate world have to be conceived as a 'Thou'? And why does the 'It' accordingly have to be relegated to the realm of inanimate experience? If 'Thou' is an animate second person, one could wonder *who* this person is, in addition to thinking about, as most critics have, *why* this is a person. Given that Shelley himself addresses the west wind as 'Thou' on several occasions in the poem, the answer could be straightforward (the west wind!) But this proves more complicated when we consider the different instances where the West Wind is addressed in the poem.

The peculiar use of the article 'the' before 'West Wind' refuses to accord it the status of a proper noun. Given that 'the' is used before a common name only in an attempt to particularize a specific reference, we come to understand 'the West Wind' as Shelley's attempt to address one particular wind - the one that comes from the west - among a larger group of winds. But in Shelley's 'original' draft, the 'w' of 'wind' seems to have been overwritten to turn a small 'w' into a 'capital' one - as though 'West Wind' were a proper noun ("Mary Shelley Manuscripts"). This captures quite well the tension between identifying west wind as a specific 'Thou' in front of the speaker and also identifying it as a common noun. The ode is addressed to an individual *thing*/person whose membership in a larger group is also brought to the fore. As a result, Shelley sets this ode up to present the contradictions involved in addressing through the "Thou", elements of nature that are also seen as "things" without agency.

Althusser, speaking about individuals notes how the individual participates in the ideological state apparatus through thoughts and beliefs that he considers are "personal". He writes: "An individual believes in God, or Duty, or Justice, etc. This belief derives from the ideas of the individual concerned, i.e., from him as a subject with a consciousness which contains the ideas of his belief". Althusser goes on to define individuals as "always-already" subjects who perform different rituals that form a part of some ideology or the other (172,73).

To further explain this mechanism, he notes that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects (173).” In this formulation of individuals as always-already subjects, two aspects are essential: one, that the individual-and-subject possess consciousness; two, they respond to the hail of one ideology or the other. Given that all ideology functions in relation to the state in one way or the other, all individuals-and-subjects too are conceived of only in relation to the state.

Evidently, this formulation of the subject is anthropocentric. By contrast, Shelley offers us a *thing*, in the form of a ‘Thou’ that we can’t quite identify as a proper or a common noun. The West Wind that functions as the ‘Thou’ does not possess a consciousness the way we define and identify it. It doesn’t respond to the hail of the human speaker in the poem. Throughout the poem, Shelley dramatizes this failure to get the West Wind’s response.

In Shelley’s ‘original’ draft, there are no commas after “O wild West Wind” and “thou breath of Autumn’s being”; commas were added to the first line by the time the draft went for print. Shelley, we may conjecture, wants the readers, to wait - like the speaker does - after hailing the West Wind, twice in the very first line. To the embarrassment of the speaker and perhaps of the reader too, we get no response from the West Wind.

Culler argues that apostrophes don’t usually find a place in formal writing and hence when they do occur, they cause “a minor embarrassment”. Literary critics, he says, have tried to repress this embarrassment or transform it into a description. The hail is embarrassing for as long as it remains a vocative. For Culler, writing is perhaps averse to voice, which is why this awkward encounter between writing and speech is eased out by critics through repression or description. However, it is not just that the “O” in the poem is an “anti-narrative”, as Culler puts it, that we find it embarrassing. It is also because there is no response from West Wind to our hailing.

To explain how hailing functions, Althusser presents an “everyday” example where police personnel calls out to us saying “Hey, you there!” (174). In response to this, “the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him...” (174). In the case of the West Wind, there is no turning around. The speaker and every single reader call out to the West Wind in vain. This embarrassment is striking and is prolonged throughout the poem.

The speaker then implores the West Wind to pay attention to them, again and again before eventually giving up. After the initial embarrassment in the first line, the speaker fills the absence of response/reaction with a garrulous description. Here, the speaker themselves are guilty of Culler’s criticism of literary critics - repressing the apostrophe and its embarrassment through excessive description. The first three cantos of the poem, end with the speaker’s desperate attempts to draw West Wind’s attention. The refrain at the end of the first three cantos - “Oh hear!”, unlike Althusser’s “Hey you there!”, elicits no response/reaction. The speaker almost invokes the tradition of the refrain as a complaint - the complaint that the West Wind doesn’t heed their calls.

In canto IV, realizing the futility of addressing the West Wind, the speaker chooses instead to mull over a few subjunctive moods. The speaker explores a series of “if I were”s that are as difficult to be true as the West Wind’s response/reaction. We also get a glimpse of what would be explored in more detail in the next canto - futile requests. The speaker goes on to behave as though the West Wind did pay heed and heaps a pile of requests. In canto IV, the speaker says, “Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud” (line 53). The next and final canto of the poem is filled with a series of these requests that too fail to get West Wind’s attention. In an ultimate acceptance of defeat, the speaker eventually ends the poem with a rhetorical question. The embarrassment that begins in the first line of the poem is prolonged through all

five cantos of the poem, up until the last line of the poem. A rhetorical question assumes the presence of a person but doesn't require their response/reaction. However, after having spent sixty-nine lines in vain to get the West Wind's attention, this rhetorical question comes across as a weak attempt at assuaging the embarrassment, which only adds further to the speaker's failure.

Through this prolonged embarrassment which is a result of inept attempts at interpellation, the poem dramatizes the shortcomings of an anthropocentric understanding of ontology. As much as we try to treat non-human vibrancy² the way we treat human individuals-and-subjects, we fail at it quite embarrassingly. The 'Thou' that we assume exists in consciousness, in language, in ideology, and in relation to the state, does not hold true in the case of West Wind. Shelley, hence, presents us with an individual/subject that is not always-already a part of ideology; therefore, an individual-and-subject that can't in fact be conceived of in relation to the state. The ineptitude of this hailing in the poem and the ensuing embarrassment foregrounds the fallacy of an anthropocentric conception of animacy, especially one that's seen as part of the 'natural' world. This fallacy that all ontologies of vibrancy can be conceived of in relation and parallel to human ontology comes undone when one fails to get West Wind to respond/react.

Althusser notes how we are unaware of our existence within ideology even though we perform its "rituals" often. In order to achieve knowledge about ourselves and our relations, Althusser says, "we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e., subject-less) discourse on ideology" (173).

In the second line, the speaker addresses the West Wind as an "unseen presence". The West Wind's "presence" is underscored by the absence of a corporeal reality. This "in-concrete" "presence" however doesn't even have a "concrete" ontology. The fluidity of its

corporeality is complemented by the ambiguity of its ontology. In the final couplet of the first canto, we see the speaker refer to the West Wind as a “*Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver...*” (13,14; emphasis added). The speaker, thus, presents us not with an “individual” but a “dividual” - not a single entity, but a plurality, divisible into parts.

The absence of a concrete corporeal and ontological existence further aids the West Wind’s mobility. Its “presence” is felt in the sky by the clouds, the blue Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and heaven itself. The speaker, hence, rightly addresses it as the “uncontrollable” along with another inept apostrophe. This revolutionary ontology is what the speaker craves for. At this point, the speaker moves from an apostrophe to prayer, asking the West Wind to alter their own individual-as-subject position. “...thus, with thee in prayer in my sore need. / Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!” (lines 52,53). The speaker craves to break out of their current subject position. They ask the West Wind to unchain them from their current mode of existence. In doing this, the West Wind would be reinvigorating the speaker the way it reinvigorates the Mediterranean.

In Canto III of the poem, the speaker notes how the West Wind “didst waken from his summer *dreams/* The blue Mediterranean, where he lay...” (lines 29,30; emphasis added). The West Wind has the power to bring the Mediterranean out of his dream, which in Marxist lexicon would be the Mediterranean’s “ideology”. Althusser notes, how in *The German Ideology* Marx conceives of ideology as “an imaginary assemblage (bricolage), a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the 'day's residues' from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence. (160)” The West Wind awakens the Mediterranean from this kind of a dream and the speaker implores that they too be helped by the West Wind. As if anticipating Marx and Engels’ clarion call, our speaker notes how “A heavy weight of hours has *chain’d* and bow’d” (line

55, emphasis added) them, who essentially still are like the West Wind, “tameless, and swift, and proud. (line 56)”. But, it is not just the deeds that the West Wind performs that make it revolutionary but its nature of existence itself. Adding further to their earlier prayer of asking the West Wind to lift them as “a wave, a leaf, a cloud”, the speaker says, “Make me thy lyre” (line 57).

Soon, the speaker, as though unsatisfied with their own prayer to be *under* the West Wind’s influence as a wave, leaf, a cloud, and a lyre wants to subsume and later even become that revolutionary self themselves. In lines 61 and 62, the speaker says, “Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My Spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!” Here, the prayer is for an annihilation of individualities that form the crux of the “I-Thou” frame through which, according to Bloom, the speaker engages with the world. However, the speaker wants no relation with the West Wind anymore. They want to be the West Wind - or as they put it, want the West Wind to be them - which is possible only through a thorough decimation of individualities leading to an absence of all relations. The failure of this elaborate prayer, along with the failed apostrophe, presents us again with the embarrassment that the speaker, and all subsequent readers, must confront. This embarrassment comes to define the nature of the relationship that exists between us and elements of nature.

West Wind, even though personified, does not adhere to the “single will” enforced by the speaker of our poem, who seems to assume that all personhoods can necessarily be interpellated. The ineptitude of the speaker’s interpellation is not an individual’s failure but an entire “episteme’s”, as Foucault would call it. The West Wind is a vibrancy that by way of a popular contemporary aesthetic practice could be treated as an individual, through the device of personification. Shelley draws our attention to a vibrancy that exists outside our conception of human agency and one that doesn’t behave in human ways, responding to hails and apostrophes. In presenting this case, Shelley disrupts a popular representation of human

relationships with their surroundings. This imaginary representation that conceives different vibrancies in corporeal forms and behaviors is disrupted by the ineptitude and the ensuing embarrassment of our speaker's attempt at interpellation.

Shelley's formulation presents a case that Althusser's anthropocentric proposal of a theory of individuals, subjects, ideology, and state cannot account for. The ode manages to give the reader a subject-less discourse that is "scientific" and one that disrupts the imaginary representation of individuals' imaginary relations to their conditions of existence - one that Althusser would perhaps approve of. In addition to that, the poem also presents a vibrancy, a form of animacy, that has a certain modality of material existence that doesn't adhere to our ideas of an anthropocentric corporeal conception of agency, motion, and action. This vibrancy that functions in a sphere where there is no question of acceptance or even willful rejection of interpellation and the state; an existence for which state or voice bears no referentiality or relation even, is Shelley's revolutionary non-subject.

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Notes

¹ Barbara Johnson, for instance, notes "Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," ... is perhaps the ultimate apostrophic poem..." (31). Jonathan Culler notes "Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is perhaps the clearest example of the way in which the apostrophic mode poses the problem of the poetic subject as a problem of the wind's relation to him" (63).

² Here, I borrow Jane Bennett's concept of vibrancy that accounts for affect produced even by nonhuman forms. Her equation of this "affect with materiality... rather than posit(ing) a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body (xiii)" is of significance to our understanding of the West Wind.