

The Visuality of Personification in Richard Savage's *The Wanderer: A Vision* (1729)¹

SANDRO JUNG

Richard Savage's masterpiece, *The Wanderer: A Vision*,² has hardly received any critical attention.³ Published in 1729, it is a poem that is innovative and in many respects unconventional in an age that stressed the predominance of reason, the intellect, order and perfection. Praised by Pope, *The Wanderer* recalls the "tastes of his friend Thomson"⁴ whom he visited at Richmond and whose magnum opus, *The Seasons*, Savage might have influenced.⁵ "Though *The Wanderer* may reveal the influence of Thomson and the new school of Augustan nature poets, Pope's connection with it is . . . close."⁶ While it can be called a "contemplative poem"⁷ one should not overlook the fact that *The Wanderer* possesses certain poetological features that were to find clearer expression in the mid-eighteenth century, e.g. in the poems of Collins, the Wartons and Akenside.⁸ These features of *The Wanderer* help elucidate the common eighteenth-century understanding of personification as well as the central role of the imagination. Savage introduces a kind of visuality to his personifications which serves to animate them and—rather than presenting them merely as lifeless deities—bridges the gap between human life and the qualities personified.

Bonamy Dobrée, in his criticism of *The Wanderer*, does not take into account the central role played by the imagination in the perception of the reality Savage creates for the solitary wanderer. The initial plan of the poem, that is, "O'er ample Nature I extend my Views" emphasises, together with the subtitle *A Vision*, the significance of visual perception in *The Wanderer*. To help him to arrive at these 'views', the personification of Contemplation has to be invoked, for "Thy-self the

various View can't find / Of Sea, Land, Air, and Heav'n, and human Kind." Contemplation alone, however, is not able to provide the vision the poet-speaker longs for, but has to be supported by Fancy:

Oh, leave a-while thy lov'd, sequester'd Shade!
 A-while in wintry Wilds vouchsafe thy Aid!
 Then waft me to some olive, bow'ry Green;
 Where, cloath'd in white, thou shew'st a Mind serene;
 Where kind Content from Noise, and Court retires,
 And smiling sits, while Muses tune their Lyres:
 Where Zephyrs gently breathe, while Sleep profound
 To their soft Fanning nods, with Poppies crown'd
 Sleep on a Treasure of bright Dreams reclines,
 By thee bestow'd; whence Fancy colour'd shines
 And flutters round his Brow a hov'ring Flight,
 Varying her Plumes in visionary Light.

Savage's defining Contemplation in terms of the imagination may have served as a model for Mark Akenside's *Ode to Cheerfulness*, in which Cheerfulness is used metonymically for the imagination. Contemplation, in Savage's poem, not only implies rational thinking, reasoning and deduction but also the creative and imaginative reworking of reality. Contemplation can enrich and redefine the "wintry Wilds" and provide "Aid" for the speaker by transporting him to "some olive, bow'ry Green," a place of retirement where it can show a "Mind serene." Though retired, this is not a place of confinement, for the Muses' songs and the sparkling "Treasure of bright Dreams" on which "Sleep . . . reclines" are the origin ("whence") of colourful Fancy, which is presented as a bird that "flutters round his [i.e. Sleep's] Brow a hov'ring Flight, / Varying her Plumes in visionary Light." The ability to change in the light of vision makes the embodiment of Fancy partake of its visionary nature and thus provides a perspective transcending the self-enclosed state of Sleep. By combining Fancy with the visions he will perceive, the speaker seems to anticipate, for example, Mrs. Barbauld's poetological definition of the creative faculty of the mind, according to which the "Imagination is

the very source and well-head of Poetry, and nothing forced or foreign to the Muse could easily flow from such a subject."⁹

Savage goes on to juxtapose the personification of Frost with Fancy and emphasises the clear contrast between the statuesqueness of Frost, his inability to move and his intention of freezing the whole scene, and the very active and inspiring bird of Fancy that tries to dissolve the "deform[ation]" of the scene that had been caused by Frost. Fancy tries to dissolve the gloom and the paralysis Frost has inspired, who "O'er cheerless Scenes by Desolation own'd, / High on an Alp of Ice he sits enthron'd." The animated and organic quality of Fancy is thus meant to warm and reanimate the icy scene and destroy the foundation and source of Frost's power. At the same time, by playing on the homophonic qualities of "freeze" and "frees" Savage implicitly suggests that Frost can certainly hinder the imagination from giving new life, whilst to old age Frost might even be a source of hope in that paralysis and death mean deliverance.

The ardent desire of the poet-speaker for a vision that takes him beyond Sleep (and his mother country) is expressed by the invocation of Contemplation, in which the speaker articulates the function it ought to assume in his quest:

O Contemplation, teach me to explore,
 From *Britain* far remote, some distant Shore!
 From Sleep a Dream distinct, and lively Claim;
 Clear let the Vision strike the Moral's Aim!
 It comes! I feel it o'er my Soul serene!
 Still Morn begins, and Frost retains the Scene!

Contemplation is needed to succeed in "explor[ing]" those countries that are "far remote" from Britain. It is a quest that is motivated by the urge to experiencing a vision that had partly been foreshadowed and incompletely painted by the imagination. The "Dream distinct" refers to a specific understanding of this vision that in turn has moral implications for the poet-speaker's existence. Contemplation, and consequently the imagination, thus fulfil a moral purpose by helping the speaker to let his vision come true. The short exclamatory sentences

express the rashness and immediacy of the poet-speaker's sensation. The dream, however, is juxtaposed with the sad realisation that "Frost [still] retains the Scene" and that the speaker has not yet managed to reconquer the scene and establish, as it were, a *paysage moralisé*.

The imagination does not have the power to fight the negative imagination of Frost which sets free all "secret Terrors" imaginable. The spleen as an extreme and unhealthy representation of the imagination produces deceptions that "strike [...] the mental Eye" and not only harass the speaker but torture him. The sanative powers of the imagination are not as strong as the fear incited by Frost, who exerts mental as well as psychological torture on the speaker.

By the Blue Fires, pale Phantoms grin severe!
 Shrill-fancied Echoes wound th'affrighted Ear!
 Air-banish'd Spirits flag in Fogs profound,
 And all-obscene, shed baneful Damps around!
 Now Whispers, trembling in some feeble Wind,
 Sigh out prophetic Fears, and freeze the Mind!

His imagination has now been turned into an instrument with which Frost takes control of the speaker. The "pale Phantoms" as well as the "Shrill-fancied Echoes" that are produced by spirits all serve to intimidate him and make him approach a state of insanity. The whole scene assumes a mysterious character in that the only concrete colour adjective ("Blue") refers to the "Fires." The "affrighted Ear" appears to evoke the "Shrill-fancied Echoes" itself through the great psychological tension and stress the speaker is under. The "Fogs profound" are impenetrable, that is, the speaker cannot see through them but has to speculate what might be hidden within them. The "baneful Damps" as well as the "Whispers" contribute to the animation of the whole landscape and the speaker's discovering evil in practically every object or sound he perceives. The coldness of the whole scene, indicated by the "Blue Fires," the Fogs and the "baneful Damps" illustrate the way in which Frost proceeds to "freeze the Mind."

This entire vision of horror culminates in one of the most interesting personifications of the eighteenth century,¹⁰ that is, the personification

of suicide, the Hag. The depiction of the Hag corresponds to what Steven Knapp has called "sublime personification":

With its individuality utterly absorbed by the ideal it embodies, the personification is the perfect fanatic. It is both devoid of empirical consciousness and perfectly, formally conscious of itself. But the reassuring condition of such perfection is its sheer and obvious fictionality.¹¹

James J. Paxson refers to Lord Kames and his distinction between "passionate" and "descriptive" personification. He points out that what Ruskin called "pathetic fallacy" may be considered the essential quality of Kames's "passionate" personification. Paxson's definition of Ruskin's idea implies the "verbal externalization of an intensified interior state,"¹² a state that seems to be reflected in Savage's presentation of the Hag:

Loud laughs the Hag!—She mocks Complaint away,
 Unroofs the Den, and lets in more than Day.
 Swarms of Wild Fancies, wing'd in various Flight,
 Seek emblematic Shades, and mystic Light!
 Some drive with rapid Steeds the shining Car!
 These nod from Thrones! Those thunder in the War!
 Till, tir'd, they turn from the delusive Show,
 Start from wild Joy, and fix in stupid Woe.
 Here the lone Hour, a Blank of Life, displays,
 Till now bad Thoughts a Fiend more active raise;
 Death in her Hand, and Frenzy in her Eye!
 With Life's Calamities embroider'd o'er.
 A Mirror in one Hand collective shows,
 Varied, and multiplied that Group of Woes.
 This endless Foe to gen'rous Toil and Pain
 Lolls on a Couch for Ease; but lolls in vain;
 She muses o'er her woe-embroider'd Vest,
 And Self-Abhorrence heightens in her Breast.
 To shun her Care, the Force of Sleep she tries,
 Still wakes her Mind, though Slumbers doze her Eyes:
 She dreams, starts, rises, stalks from Place to Place,
 With restless, thoughtful, interrupted Pace;
 Now eyes the Sun, and curses ev'ry Ray,
 Now the green Ground, where Colour fades away,
 Dim Spectres dance! Again her Eyes she rears;

Then from the blood-shot Ball wipes purpled Tears;
 Then presses hard her Brow, with Mischief fraught,
 Her Brow half bursts with Agony of Thought!
 From me (she cries) pale Wretch thy Comfort claim,
 Born of Despair, and Suicide my Name!
 [...]
 Here e'vry Object proffers Grief a Cure.
 She points where Leaves of Hemlock black'ning shoot!
 Fear not! Pluck! Eat (said she) the sov'reign Root!
 Then Death, revers'd, shall bear his ebon Lance;
 Or leap yon Rock, possess a watry Grave,
 And leave wild Sorrow to the Wind and Wave!
 Or mark—this Ponyard thus from Mis'ry frees!
 She wounds her Breast!—the guilty Steel I seize!
 Straight, where she struck, a smoaking Spring of Gore
 Wells from the Wound, and floats the crimson'd Floor.
 She faints! She fades!

The hag, clearly reminiscent of Spenser's Duessa (*Faerie Queene* I.viii.46 ff.), is only a phantom evoked by the speaker's irritated and bewildered imagination. The term 'hag' derives from OE 'hægtesse' and has a variety of different meanings the most prominent of which defines it as "the nightmare."¹³ Another definition reads: "A woman supposed to have dealings with Satan and the infernal world; a witch; sometimes, an infernally wicked woman."¹⁴ The personification may also be understood as the embodiment of "evil or vice."¹⁵ The Hag of Savage's poem, however, is clearly the personification of the grief and the helplessness the poet-speaker cannot utter. Her supernatural and non-human character is revealed when she "Unroofs the Den, and lets more in than Day." Day, which earlier on had been associated with the light of vision is here suddenly linked with those evil spirits the Hag has invoked. "Swarms of Wild Fancies" intrude the speaker's mind and "Seek emblematic Shades" in which they can live and produce even greater horrors. "[E]mblematic Shades" supposes a pictorial and symbolic quality of the shade that is conferred to it by means of the speaker's imagination. He appears to discover various meaningful pictures that lie concealed in these shades and are thrown into relief by a "mystic Light." The speaker's fancies seek these shades,

however, only to emerge from them again in order to perform their "delusive Show." The "shining Car" on which they come might be associated 'emblematically' with the mythological car of Phoebus, even though it is hardly expressive of the brightness of the Sun-god but rather underscores the aggressiveness and "thunder" of the "War" in which it is used. This car is actively involved in the process of establishing dominance over the speaker's mind.

It is the primary task of the imagination to discover and create a "strange visionary Land" that is not exposed to the cruel coldness of Winter. Winter will have to be confined in a cave and "bound in icy Chains" in order for him not to do any harm to the scene Fancy inspires. The "Morn" as well as the "glorious Sun" are meant to be life-affirming and accordingly the "orient Beauty" of "Morn" not only indicates the east where the sun rises but also for the "brilliant, lustrous, shining, glowing, radiant [and] resplendent"¹⁶ character of Nature that has now returned to an imaginary pre-lapsarian state. "Orient" may thus be read as implying a new beginning¹⁷ and, especially if one bears in mind the implications of Latin *oriri* ('to rise'), going back to Greek *oros* ('mountain'), it may also refer to a protected place that lies far above the level of the surrounding country.¹⁸

The Sun is central not only because it stands for the warmth that destroys frost but also because it is evident that Savage regards it as the ultimate source of "vegetative Life." The personification of the Sun is unique in that it departs from the statuesqueness and formulaic character frequently associated with eighteenth-century personification.

Now in his Tabernacle rouz'd, the Sun
 Is warn'd the blue, ætherial Steep to run:
 While on his Couch of floating Jasper laid,
 From his bright Eye *Sleep* calls the dewy Shade.
 The crystal Dome transparent Pillars raise,
 Whence beam'd from Saphirs living Azure plays;
 The liquid Floor, in-wrought with Pearls divine,
 Where all his Labours in Mosaic shine,
 His Coronet, a Cloud of Silver-white;
 His Robe with unconsuming Crimson bright,

Varied with Gems, all Heaven's collected Store;
While his loose Locks descend, a golden Shower.

Unlike the "shining Car," the Sun is not presented in terms of destruction but of life and ornament. The brightness and radiance that surrounds the personification are underscored by the various royal attributes such as a crown or gems. The crimson of his robe is "unconsuming," that is it does not consume the objects it touches but only provides them with the light and warmth they need to grow. The "golden Shower" thus may be understood as rain that goes down onto the earth, fertilises and nourishes it and at the same time provides the light so necessary for "vegetative Life." This life-giving role of the personified sun corresponds to Savage's belief in the animation and interrelatedness of all elements of the cosmos. In *Windsor Forest*,¹⁹ Pope had already asked Nature to "unlock [her] Springs" and to reveal the ordering principle of life to him. Savage, like Pope, attempts to discover a harmonic order inherent in nature but for him this goes together with a mysticism that Pope and the Augustans, in general, avoided. As Pope was to maintain in his *Essay on Man* that "All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee" and "All Discord, Harmony, not understood,"²⁰ the speaker of *The Wanderer* points out that "Were the whole known, what we uncouth suppose, / Doubtless, wou'd beautiful Symmetry disclose." This view, however, is given up later in the poem in favour of the wonder and the mysticism the speaker discovers in Nature. He focuses on the imaginative reworking of elements of Nature which he transforms into personifications and adorns with attributes they naturally do not possess. Neither does Savage share the Augustan ideal of clarity and regularity, symmetry and order in poetry: it has been noted repeatedly that *The Wanderer* lacks any precise plan,²¹ that the poem is a "kaleidoscope of disconnected images succeed[ing] each other"²² and "uses the solemn diction of Augustan ceremony to describe those intensely introverted states of elation, despair and wish-fulfilment which we have come to associate with Romanticism."²³ We are thus reminded that the fragment as a literary genre is not an exclusively Romantic genre but a traditional one and

includes compositions as Savage's *The Wanderer* and Collins's *Ode to Evening* (1746).²⁴

In *The Wanderer*, it is the whole ensemble of colours and of bright hues that attract the poet-speaker's imagination and help him overcome the grief he first experienced on the occasion of his beloved Olympia's death. His "wand'ring Eye," however, is not only led by the visuality of the colourful objects he perceives but also by the visions that are partly perceived through his real eyes, partly through those of Fancy. Like a phoenix, "He sunk a Mortal, and a Seraph rose": this juxtaposition of "Mortal" and "Seraph" already alludes to the great change that has taken place within the poet-speaker, for the imagination has helped him overcome his immediate grief and rise above the common station of man by becoming a "Bard." The bard himself has managed to be rewarded with immortality and a position that resembles an angel's. He has thus found a way of being reunited with Olympia without having to wait for his death, a thought that would have been deeply impious. The "Bard, now [...] apotheosized into a seraph, his rags transformed into shining vestments, delivers himself of an harangue suggestive of the words of the Almighty at the Last Judgment."²⁵ Savage's speaker thus succeeds in bridging the gap between his own existence and that of the personifications he encounters—including the Hag, who is turned into a deity who may grant his wish of being reunited with his deceased wife. His quest is rewarded in the end in that he achieves a state of existence that resembles the spiritual realm in which he encounters the personifications. On his quest, the poet-speaker has discovered the spirituality of life in various manifestations and it is now Savage, the "Poet [who] seeks a *Body*, to *maintain* and *support* that Spirit."²⁶

NOTES

¹A shorter version of this paper was presented at the conference of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Oxford, 3-5 January 2001.

²The standard edition of the poetical works of Savage will be used. All references are to this edition: Clarence Tracy (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Richard Savage* (Cambridge: CUP, 1962) 94-159.

³Cf. Heinrich Döring, *Richard Savage: Ein Genrebild* (Jena: Friedrich Mauke, 1840); S. V. Makower, *Richard Savage: A Mystery in Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 1909) and Clarence Tracy, *The Artificial Bastard: A Biography of Richard Savage* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1953); B. Boyce, "Johnson's Life of Savage and its Literary Background," *Studies in Philology* 53 (1956): 576-98; Richard Holmes, *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

⁴Tracy, *Artificial Bastard* 81.

⁵Edmund Gosse, *A History of Eighteenth-Century Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1896) 217 commented on Thomson's influence on Savage: "The influence of Thomson, enlarging the range of poetic observation, and encouraging an exacter portraiture of natural objects. The last book of Savage's poem is remarkably full of brilliant if often crude colour, and the reader is startled to meet with [...] attempts to give new landscape-features"; cf. Makower 181.

⁶Tracy, *Artificial Bastard* 104.

⁷Bonamy Dobrée, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century, 1700-1740*, *The Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1959) 512.

⁸But cf. Dobrée's critical view (512): "The poem [...] tends to resolve itself into phrases which were commonplace even in Savage's day, though now and again he uses or invents a rare word."

⁹*The Pleasures of Imagination by Mark Akenside to which is prefixed a Critical Essay on the Poem by Mrs. Barbauld* (London: T. Cadell, 1825) 8.

¹⁰Good discussions of 'personification' include Rachel Trickett, "The Augustan Pantheon: Mythology and Personification in Eighteenth-Century Poetry," *Essays and Studies* ns 6 (1953): 71-86; Bertrand H. Bronson, "Personification Reconsidered," *ELH* 14 (1947): 163-77; Earl R. Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of Eighteenth-Century Personification," *PMLA* 65 (1960): 435-63 as well as Chester F. Chapin, *Personification in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (New York: Octagon, 1974).

¹¹Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1985) 83.

¹²James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) 29.

¹³OED "hag" n.¹ 1.tc.

¹⁴OED "hag" n.¹ 2.

¹⁵OED "hag" n.¹ 3.b.

¹⁶OED "Orient" B. *adj.* 2.b.

¹⁷Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 457.

¹⁸Partridge 458.

¹⁹As Warton points out the principal aim of 'descriptive poetry' and thus of *Windsor Forest* as the "greatest and most pleasing arts" is "to introduce moral sentences and instructions in an oblique and indirect manner, in places where one naturally expects only painting and amusement." Cf. Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Maiden, 1806) 1: 29.

²⁰"Epistle I" 289 and 291; quoted from Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: OUP, 1978) 249.

²¹Cf. Sir A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, *From Steele and Addison to Pope and Swift*, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964) 9: 186: "The *Wanderer* may not be the worst of the descriptive didactic verse-tractates of its century, but, to the usual enquiry whether, as poems, they have any particular reason for existence, and the usual answer in the negative, there has to be added, in this case, the discovery that it has really no plan at all."

²²Holmes 149.

²³Holmes 151.

²⁴Cf. Sandro Jung, "The Allusiveness of the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetry: William Collins' *Ode to Evening* and the Visuality of Landscape," *Symbolism: A Journal of Critical Aesthetics* 4 (forthcoming). As Richard Holmes has shown, Savage, together with Mallet, Hill and Thomson, belonged to a circle of literati that were called "The Brotherhood of Sublime-Obscure." Their "agreed aim was to develop a genre of long, meditative, Nature poems capable of carrying deep personal feeling, and observation, but also with a unified dramatic structure and philosophy" (88).

²⁵Tracy, *Artificial Bastard* 100.

²⁶Hildebrand Jacob, *Of the Sister Arts: An Essay* (London: William Lewis, 1734) 4.