THE ROMANTIC POETS
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[Note: Hough's chapter on Shelley begins with "Shelley and Godwin" (sect. i), followed by sections on "Prometheus Unbound" (ii), "Shelley as a Lyricist" (iii), and "the Defence of Poetry" (iv). Page numbers given below are those at top of page in the Grey Arrow reprint edition of 1964 given at Internet Archive at [accessed 24.08.2019; reviewed 11.05.2023.]

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Chapter IV: Shelley

i. Shelley and Godwin

Too much Shelley criticism has been biography in disguise. The contradictions and controversies of his life are apparently inexhaustible; but his poetry is not so closely bound up with circumstance as Wordsworth's or Byron's. Daily experience shaped and altered their thought; to Shelley it meant little. He is the solitary intellectual. His ideas come from his own mental processes, from study, from visions of the future or dreams of the past, not from the world around him; and he pays the penalty by isolation from the world. A sentimentalized picture of him has often obscured his sheer intellectual attainments. His reading, as his friend Hogg tells us, was enormous.[1]

> No student ever read more assiduously... . I never beheld eyes that devoured the pages more voraciously than his... . It is no exaggeration to say that out of the twenty- four hours he frequently read sixteen... . Few were aware of the extent and fewer still of the profundity of his reading.

His poetry is interwoven with innumerable threads of earlier literature, of philosophy, of science. His prose shows not only a great range of learning, but considerable power of argument and exposition, and his letters reveal for the most part a rather arid doctrinaire intelligence. Yet nearly all the contacts of this vivid and subtle mind with the outer world show a certain failure of adaptation. His reactions, political, social and personal, are violent; but very slightly related to the object that inspired them. The result is a strange gaseous force, overwhelming to some, to others tenuous and unreal.

He was bom in 1792, four years after Byron, and in the [123] same social class. He was the son of a conventional and rather foolish country gentleman and was educated at Eton in the tough days of Keate. A hard upbringing for a sensitive eccentric; and he reacted by alternate withdrawal and revolt. His childhood was filled with games of enchantment, the composition of terrifying romances and magico-scientific experiments—all revealing a mind to whom the realest objects were the denizen of its own unconscious. Haunted by imagery from within and harassed by the outer world, Shelley early felt the need for an intellectual order strong enough to withstand both pressures. He found it in the current revolutionary philosophy. There seems little connection between the venerable eleutherarchs, death-demons and vampires of Shelley's boyish imagination and the world of the mathematical Condorcet or the rationalist Godwin. It is the paradox of the young Shelley that he lives half in a world of anarchic fancy, half in the straitest of philosophical waistcoats. His early reading was mostly in the classics English poetry and a miscellaneous assortment of fantastic and imaginative literature. At Oxford he began to study philosophy and the moral sciences, and was drawn into the international stream of rationalist revolutionary thought. The sources were mainly French: in England the man who had

made the most scholastic summing-up of this moral tradition was Godwin. We have already seen him playing a part in Wordsworth's development: Shelley now conceived a fervent devotion to him. Godwin's philosophic anarchism led Shelley and Hogg into a crusade against organized religion and organized society. The result was a pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*, for which they were sent down from Oxford, Emboldened by the feeling that he had suffered in the cause of freedom, Shelley introduced himself to his master in 1812,

> The name of Godwin has been used to excite in me feelings of reverence and admiration. I have been accustomed to consider him a luminary too dazzling for the darkness which surrounds him. From the earliest period of my knowledge of his principles I have ardently desired to share on the footing of intimacy that intellect which I have delighted to [124] contemplate in its emanations... . I have just entered on the scene of human operations: yet my feelings and my reasonings correspond with what yours were. My course has been abort but eventful. I have seen much of human prejudice, suffered much from human persecution, yet I see no reason hence inferable which should alter my wish for their renovation... . Is it strange that, defying prejudice as I have done, I should outstep the limits of custom and prescription, and endeavour to make my desire useful by a friendship with William Godwin?[2]

The further history of Shelley's association with Godwin is a matter for biography. Its first and most obvious poetical fruit was *Queen Mab*. This seems to have been begun in 1810, when Shelley was eighteen, and it was finished two years later. Until long after his death it remained the most popular of his poems, being especially influential in working-class radical circles. Shelley only printed a few copies for private circulation; Mary Shelley, his first editor, doubted whether he would have included it among his collected works, and certainly he tried to prevent its circulation later in life. Partly on this account, partly because of its obvious crudities, it has had a subordinate place in the Shelley canon, and is commonly written off as versified Godwin, but it is actually a good deal more than this. There is wide and varied reading behind *Queen Mab*, as the notes attest; and much of the inspiration is actually from Holbach. The poem has weak patches, but for the most part it is powerfully written; and it expounds a system which Shelley later enriched, but never abandoned. With its assembly of ideas from Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Holbach and Godwin, it serves also as a convenient poetical handbook to the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

The structure of the poem owes something to Volney's *Ruins*; but it is very naive, and illustrates Shelley's way of clothing an incompletely human philosophy in fanciful and ethereal form. Ianthe, a lovely young girl, is visited in sleep by the fairy Mab, who takes her on a journey through interstellar space, and reveals to her the history of the past, the actual state [125] of the world, and the secrets of the future. The cosmos is a pantheist one, the movements of the stars are the fulfilment of Eternal Nature's law; and this, not any external deity, is the ultimate power in the Universe. The view of human history is largely Godwinian,[3] but with a good deal that derives directly from Godwin's own sources. Godwin, like many radical reformers, believed that his generation was just beginning to clear up the mess of all the preceding centuries. History is therefore a record of crimes and miseries. This was partially relieved for a brief episode in Athens and Rome; but a still grosser darkness was to succeed:

> Where Athens, Rome and Sparta stood
> There is a moral desert now.
> Where Cicero and Antoninus lived
> A cowled and hypocritical monk
> Prays, curses and deceives. (II, 162)

Superstition, embodied in the priest, is one root of evil: the other is the exercise of power, embodied in the king:

> The King, the wearer of a gilded chain.
> That binds his soul to abjectness, the fool

Whom courtiers nickname monarch, whilst a slave
Even to the basest appetites. (III, 30)

All authority of one being over another is evil.

The man
Of virtuous soul commands not nor obeys.
Power, like a devastating pestilence
Pollutes whate'er it touches. (III, 174)

Yet every heart contains the germ of perfection.
Every slave, now dragging through the filth
Of some corrupted city his sad life,
Pining with famine, swol'n with luxury (V, 147)

—might imitate the wisest of the sages of the earth. The operative word is "might". Might—in what circumstances? The conditional sentence requires a consequent clause, which never [126] makes a satisfactory appearance. Every heart contains perfection's germ: what, then, prevents its burgeoning? Why is history the dismal record of crime and misery? In Godwin, the answer is delusively clear. The evil lies in "positive institutions"—all the organizations, all the organs of authority that man has created, political and religious. But man, as a pre-Godwinian philosopher remarked, is a political animal; a creature, precisely, of the kind that throws up these institutions. How can this consort with the natural goodness which for Shelley and Godwin is a dogma? The question is never satisfactorily resolved. In Godwin, evil though omnipresent is an accident which education will dispel: men act as they believe, and if but rightly informed, will act rightly too: an opinion also held by the early Socrates, but one startlingly at variance with the general moral experience of mankind.

Shelley's own answer is shifting and uncertain, as though no belief that could be formally expressed really corresponds to his deeper convictions. In one of the notes to *Queen Mab* the origin of moral evil is ascribed to the consumption of animal food; but even to Shelley this must later have seemed an oversimplification. At times he seems to preach the pure Godwinian doctrine; and it is certainly ascribed to him by Mary Shelley. But in fact the natural cast of his imagination seems rather to have been Manichaean; the forces of light, which are fundamental, natural and must in the end prevail, are at the same time opposed by a force of evil, which is just as strongly felt and, as far as the historical imagination can see, eternally recurrent. Its origin and status Shelley never succeeds in defining, or even in symbolizing adequately. It is not nature, it is kings, priests and statesmen who "blast the human flower even in its tenderest bud"; and this "unnatural line of drones" springs from "yice, black loathsome vice"; and the root of vice is venality and covetousness, and they in turn arise from— I know not what. For the most part, Shelley is too concerned with castigating and denouncing evil to inquire into its metaphysical status; and the hall-mark of his poetry is the black- and-white opposition between the world of ideal beauty, freedom and virtue which is to come, and the almost unrelieved [127] darkness of the past and present state of things. There is no bridge or explicable connexion between them; we pass in a sort of momentary trance from one world to the other, a feat which is not too difficult for the Jacobin poet, but leaves his exhausted political successors to explain why the arrival of the New Jerusalem has been unavoidably delayed.

The one possible link between present miseries and the glorious future is the appearance of a saviour.

Yes, crime and misery are in yonder earth,
Falsehood, mistake and lust;
But the eternal world
Contains at once the evil and the cure.
Some eminent in virtue shall start up
Even in perversest time:
The truth of their pure lips that never die

Shall bind the scorpion falsehood with a wreath
Of ever-living flame
Until the monster sting itself to death. (VI, 29)

Yet the Saviour the world has acknowledged was but a false prophet.[4] Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew of legend, is summoned by Mab to tell his story.

Humbly he came
Veiling his horrible godhead in the shape of man.
He led
The crowd; he taught them justice, truth and peace
In semblance, but he lit within their souls
The quenchless flames of zeal, and blest the sword
He brought on earth to satiate with the blood
Of truth and freedom his malignant soul. (VII, 163)

It is the religion he founded

Who peoplest earth with demons, hell with men
And heaven with slaves.

[128]

The true sacrificial hero is the atheist whose fate is described by Ianthe herself in a powerful passage. At the end of it Mab replies that there is no God indeed.

Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed.

An inexorable natural order called, in the system of Holbach and Godwin, Necessity is the true ruler of the Universe.

Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing power,
Necessity! thou mother of the world!
Unlike the God of human error, thou
Requir'st no prayers or praises; the caprice
Of man's we, will belongs no more to thee
Than do the changeful passions of his breast
To thy unvarying harmony. (VI, 196)

There is little in Shelley's later writing that would require him to recant any of this; though there is much to supplement it; and the raw violence in the treatment of the sanctities of others does not reappear. Much of what is to come—the Prometheus myth, tender or heroic according to Shelley's mood, is faintly suggested in the passage about the Saviour quoted above. "The eternal world"—the world of pre-existing Platonic ideas which was to become increasingly real to him, contains both evil and the remedy for evil—the saviour, who by some process that is never explained, will cause the evil to sting itself to death, leaving the good alone, and earth joining harmoniously in the music of the spheres. And the moving power of this regeneration is to be love.

So far we have had the exposition, somewhat cold and mechanical, but powerful and objective, of the radical anarchic creed. The statements of Queen Mab are universal historical propositions, true or false, coloured deeply by the black-and- white political antithesis in Shelley's mind, but not coloured at all by his private experience. The young revolutionary thinker preaches with more complete detachment from the young man who suffers than he was ever to achieve again. In *Alastor* (1815) the purely subjective side of his genius, his fondness for allegorizing his own situation, first appears. Its theme is a frequent one with Shelley—loneliness. The fragment *To the Moon* illustrates the projection of his own sense of isolation, the habit, endemic in Romantic verse, but surely used by no one else so constantly or so naively, of attributing his own state of mind to natural objects.

Art thou pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
Wandering companionless
Among the stars that have a different birth,
And ever changing like a joyless eye
That finds no object worth its constancy?

Alastor takes up the theme of isolation. The word in Greek means an avenging demon; it is not, it would appear, the name of the hero of the poem. Its subtitle is "The Spirit of Solitude'', and this is the Alastor that pursues the young poet-hero—at least if we are to believe Shelley's preface: "The poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin". It must be confessed that the moral is less evident in the poem itself, where the hero's loneliness on earth is viewed with complacency, if not approval. The poem is a dreamlike allegory of the fate of the poet in the world. The hero's infancy was nurtured by everything that was bright and lovely, in nature and in human thought. Having drunk deep at the fountains of divine philosophy, like Shelley himself,

when early youth was past, he left
His cold fireside and alienated home
To seek strange truth in undiscovered lands. (75)

He travels vaguely through a dream-geography, visiting the ruins of the past—Athens, l,re, Jerusalem and Babylon; then through Arabia and Persia and the wild Carmanian waste; till at last in the Vale of Cachmire he has a vision.

He dreamed a veiled maid
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones;
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul. (151)

He embraces her for a moment and then wakes to find the scene vacant. He sets out to travel through the world in search of her, but finding her nowhere, after many confused wanderings, he dies disappointed. We hear little, if anything, of the "self-centred seclusion" of the preface; the theme is rather the hero's vain search for one "whose voice was as the voice of his own soul". Vain because it was the voice of his own soul, incapable of actual embodiment—a notion which the romantic poets never succeed in grasping. For Shelley the search went on throughout his life and its predestinate impossibility accounts for the curiously dual nature of his personal relations: the delicacy and sensitiveness on the one hand, on the other, the strange callousness by which relations were terminated when they proved after all not to be the embodiment of the ideal. The schoolgirl Harriet whom he married on leaving Oxford for a time spoke with the voice of his own soul—indeed it would have been surprising if she had not, for she was subject to a heavy course of indoctrination. Then, for a time, she had to share her role and her household with Miss Kitchener; who shortly afterwards turned out to be not the day-star of Shelley's being, but a brown demon, and had to be got rid of at great trouble and expense. By the time *Alastor* was written poor little Harriet had been superseded by the more commanding attractions of Mary Godwin; and Mary was to see the process repeated, though not again with such tragic results, in half a dozen more ideal or sentimental passions. When not affected by any strong emotion Shelley was capable of great discrimination, even of considerable shrewdness: but the objects of his devotion never became independently existing beings, they remained inveterately a part of his subjectivity. *Alastor* presents the hopelessness of such a position.

The scenic descriptions which make up the bulk of the poem are dreamlike—in the quite literal sense that they are composed of fragments of waking experience transposed and condensed in obedience to interior necessities. Fragments of the Alps, the sea, of English pastoral scenes are confused with passages of purely bookish inspiration to make a series of

untraceable wanderings with no intelligible course. Byron takes his two pilgrims, the [131] misanthropic and the amorous, on a perfectly describable journey through named and identified places: Keats's *Endymion*, like the hero of *Alastor*, goes on phantasmagoric travels, but each individual scene is realized with a profusion of sensuous detail: Shelley's scenes are suggested rather than described, and it is their emotional tone rather than their sensuous exterior to which attention is called. His pictures are tranquil or violent, ghastly or tender, and composed of a few recurring elements—the crags, the stars, the torrents, the forests of his interior landscape, rather than the particularity and variety of nature. Few poets use natural images more than Shelley, yet they rarely exist in their own right. They are symbols of states of mind—unlike the minnows and sweet peas of the early Keats, which are just minnows and sweet peas. No more than the Beloved could Nature become for Shelley an independently existing object.

Queen Mab and *Alastor* have hardly any points of contact. But the abstract political passions of the one, and the need for love and human sympathy of the other combine in *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) to produce a long revolutionary narrative in which a tender personal love combines with the abstract Godwinian benevolence. It is one of Shelley's most characteristic concepts—personal love overflowing to become the love of humanity: or the love of humanity concentrating and refining itself in personal love. In the original version of the poem, the lovers were also brother and sister, but this was altered for reasons of discretion. The original form of the story is significant, however; it is another example of the curious romantic fascination with incest. In Shelley's case this has certainly nothing to do with Byronic Satanism. The beloved is apt to appear as a sister in Shelley's imagination because a sister is the closest likeness to oneself. The moon in the lyric quoted above is pale for weariness because she is lonely "among the stars that have a different birth"; and Shelley's wish for the heroine of *Epipsychidion* was "would we two had been twins of the same mother".

The ideal relationship depicted in *The Revolt of Islam* is partly that of brother and sister, partly that of lovers, and [132] partly that of comrades in a great enterprise of liberation. For Laon and Cythna are confederates in a radiant and bloodless revolution. Cythna is in the first place an infinitely tender and loving child; then she becomes the confidante of the hero's revolutionary hopes; and later she comes to precede him in experience as a liberator, and give back the inspiration originally received from him. It seems an unintentional allegory of the process by which Shelley, out of some almost accidental afiinity, creates a new being filled with his own hopes and ideals; and then expects it to maintain a separate existence, yet still true to the qualities with which he has endowed it. This is more likely to succeed in a poem than in life. But even in the poem the success is incomplete. The vein of narcissistic fantasy that is the main inspiration of *Alastor* is still present here. *The Revolt of Islam*, according to Shelley's preface, is "a story of human passion ... diversified with moving and romantic adventures" —almost a novel in verse: but the necessary objectivity is hardly attained. Laon is so much Shelley, and Cythna "the voice of his own soul"; and a sameness of imagery (acutely noted by Leigh Hunt) is a consequence of this peregrination round the same inward landscape, unenriched by any real view of the outer world, the necessary source of novelty and variety. The most striking part of the poem is the symbolical Canto I, which shows up the Manichean tendency in Shelley's thought. It tells of the strife between a serpent and an eagle—the serpent, as in Blake and other antinomian moralists representing the power of good, the eagle "Fear, Hatred, Faith and Tyranny". The struggle between them jjs eternally recurrent. Whenever mankind strives with its oppressors, whenever Justice and Truth wage war with "custom's hydra brood";

> The Snake and Eagle meet—the world's foundations tremble.

Shelley has not yet found a myth adequate to express his conceptions. The fabulous machinery of *Queen Mab* is a mere makeshift framework for straightforward rhetoric. The story of *Alastor* is very slender, and drowned in beautiful but nebulous [133] description; and the poem does not seem to express the concept announced in the preface. *The Revolt of Islam*

succeeds in bringing together the outer and the inner sources of his inspiration, but it does so in the form of a long capricious narrative where his weak sense of structure is only too evident. Shelley's way of writing is naturally symbolical: but there is apt to be a thinnesil and insubstantialitv about symbols that spring too directly from the personal imagination. Even Yeats, in his subtle and sympathetic studies of Shelley, finds that his symbolism has an air of "rootless fantasy because it has never lived in the mind of a people. An increase of power is evident as soon as he makes use ot traditional myth.

ii. Prometheus Unbound

Shelley left England in 1818; and the colour and richness of Swiss and Italian scenes did much to fertilize his mind, and to provide a fuller and more varied store of symbols for his speculative intuitions. A renewed reading of the Greek tragedians turned his mind tawards the ancient myths. From among other projects he settled on the Prometheus story as a subject for a lyrical drama. In *Prometheus* Shelley found one of the saviour-figures on whom his imagination loved to dwell. Prometheus had stolen fire from heaven and given it to man, and with a little forcing of the original legend could become the revolutionary "Friend of Humanity" and be made to fit the political myth of Shelley's own time. Yet he was not the product of a private imagination. Embodied already in the play of Aeschylus, he had already become a part of European consciousness, and had the kind of quasi-solidity that belongs to the great figures of ancient myth. In Shelley, therefore, he remains very close to the Aeschylean original—the embodiment of moveless fortitude.

But in Aeschylus there is a problem: the sympathy aroused for the bravery and suffering of Prometheus inevitably presents Zeus as a tyrrannical oppressor: and this conflicts with the [134] almost monotheistic exaltation of Zeus as the author of justice that we find elsewhere in Aeschylean tragedy. The *Prometheus Bound* is the first play of a trilogy, and from what we know of the rest it appears that both of these stern and moveless figures in the end modified their position and reached an ultimate reconciliation. This did not suit Shelley's philosophy. "Tn truth," he says, "I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of conciling the champion with the oppressor of mankind." Yet though he felt the presence of evil so powerfully it was an essential of the Godwinian system and at least a part of Shelley's formal creed "that evil is not inherent ih the system of creation, but an accident that might be expelled."[6] Zeus must be consistently a tyrant, but he must ,,appear, and Prometheus must be unequivocally victorious: The substance of the Aeschylean drama is contained in Shelley's first act. The rest of the play is concerned with the overthrow of Jupiter and the liberation of Prometheus. And other characters and other motives appear, only faintly foreshadowed in Aeschylus.

Prometheus is the spouse of Asia and she, with her sisters Panthea and Ione, daughters of Ocean, are, as in Aeschylus, spirits of sympathy and tenderness. Asia in a special sense represents the spirit of love. It is probably a mistake to fit the poem out with a set of symbolical equations, but we can perhaps say that Prometheus, besides being the Titan of legend, symbolizes the aspiring and enduring spirit of humanity, and that Asia represents love, with which, when the liberation is complete, humanity will be reunited. In the first act she is exiled from Prometheus, waiting in a lonely valley. Prometheus, chained to his rock, suffering but defiant, begs Earth his mother for a repetition of the words with which he has defied Jupiter. In order that his own lips and the lips of those who love him shall not be defiled by a curse, the phantasm of Jupiter is called up from the shades to repeat the words of Prometheus' execration (I, 262). By this curious device the hatred and defiance that is necessary to the good characters, yet in some sense inconsistent with their goodness, is itself fathered on the oppressor. Prometheus repents the bitterness of his imprecation. [135]

It doth repent me, words are quick and vain;
Grief for a while is blind, and so was mine.
I wish no living thing to suffer pain. (I, 303)

Mercury and the Furies appear in their traditional r 61 e of intensifying Prometheus' sufferings; and a chorus of spirits conclude the act by prophesying obscurely the ultimate triumph of love.

In the second act Asia takes the leading part, and becomes the prophet and the instrument of the liberation. She dreams that their lot is about to change; and she and Panthea are summoned by spirit voices to an unknown journey. The scenery is again visionary with shifting prismatic colours and evanescent glimpses of pastoral or mountain landscapes. Though they melt dreamlike into one another, the individual pictures are more clearly realized than in Alastor, The attendant fauns and spirits who surround the active characters inhabit a world of natural fantasy; they belong to no accepted mythology; yet they are a vital part of the poem. Surrounding the characters whose life and being are moral, they represent the world of wayward impersonal forces, the bright inhuman spirits of nature, which are also part of Shelley's vision, and furnish much of its strange loveliness.

I have heard those more skilled in spirits say,
The bubbles, which the enchantment of the sun
Sucks from the pale faint water-flowers that pave
The oozy bottom of clear lakes and pools,
Are the pavilions where such dwell and float
Under the green and golden atmosphere
Which noontide kindles through the woven leaves;
And when these burst, and the thin fiery air,
The which they breathed within those lucent domes,
scends to flow like meteors through the night,
hey ride on them, and rein their headlong speed.
And bow their burning crests, and glide in fire
Under the waters of the earth again. (II, ii, 70)

[136]

This seems to be a quasi-scientific account of the origin of the *ignis fatuus*, or will o' the wisp: and Shelley is perhaps the first to domesticate such concepts in poetry. The struggle and the victory of Prometheus are not everything, and his liberation is not the only source of happiness; much of the spontaneous joy is in these passages of natural magic, in which nature is not seen as something opposed to moral activity, but as the lovely matrix from which moral activity arises.

The journey of Asia and Panthea takes them to the cave of Demogorgon —a mysterious being, only seen as "a mighty darkness, filling the seat of power". Jupiter is the present ruler of the world, but in Demogorgon we see an echo of the idea, immanent in Greek tragedy, of Moira or Fate, as stronger than the gods. Demogorgon is a power who stands behind the other beings in the play: we have met him before in Queen Mab under the colder title of Necessity. In a dialogue with Asia he ascribes the creation of the living world (Nature), as well as thought, passion, reason, will (moral experience) to "merciful God". But when asked who made terror, madness, crime, remorse, he will only reply obscurely "He reigns". The whole dialogue is designedly oracular, and to parap,ase this central passage of the poem is inevitably to deform it: but an answer to Asia's questions dimly shapes itself. Jupiter is the supreme of living things, but he is only a demiurge, his hour will come. Indeed, no sooner is Asia made aware of this than the hour is come. The Spirit of the Hour appears. Asia and Panthea mount his chariot, and pass on

another strange journey through clouds and over the tops of mountains. Asia becomes transfigured before the eyes of her sister, and spirits address her in an entranced hymn.

Life of Life! thy lips enkindle
With their love the breath between them;
And thy smiles before they dwindle
Make the cold air fire; then screen them
In those looks, where whoso gazes
Faints, entangled, in their mazes.

[137]

Child of light! thy limbs are burning
Through the vest which seems to hide them;
As the radiant lines of morning
Through the clouds ere they divide them;
And this atmosphere divinest
Shrouds thee wheresoe'er thou shinest.
(II, V, 48)

Jupiter's hour is also her hour. The destruction of tyranny is accompanied by an expansion of the realm of love.

The first brief scene of Act III sees the actual downfall of Jupiter. He proclaims his onmipotence: but no sooner are the I words out than the car of the hour arrives: Demogorgon descends and advances towards him, and Jupiter simply fdls. The conflict is not externalized or elaborated: from being an fall-powerful ruler, Jupiter just disappears: his hour is come, I and that is all. Just so in Shelley's political philosophy there is (no bridge between the actual state of misery and oppression I and the new glad world that is to come. When the time is ripe the one will be transformed on to the other: the gap in the dramatic action of Prometheus corresponds to an actual gap in Shelley's thinking.

The downfall accomplished, Heracles frees Prometheus, Prometheus is reunited with Asia, Earth is rejuvenated, disease I and pain disappear, and death becomes a mother's evening I embrace. The world of mutability is purged and rejuvenated I by the loving acceptance of its conditions; toads and snakes ,and efts become beautiful, yet with little change of shape or i hue, and the kingfisher feeds unharmed on nightshade berries.

The spirit of the Hour re-enters and describes what he has seen in the world of men.

but soon I looked
And behold, thrones were kingless, and men walked
One with another, even as spirits do;
None fawned, none trampled... .
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains,
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man—
(III, iv.)

[138]

The fourth act was an afterthought,[7] a lyrical rhapsody in which the powers of Nature, the Earth and the Moon, hours and spirits rejoice at their liberation. It is not, however, unrelated to Shelley's deepest thought. The moral regeneration of the world through love is in his system also accompanied by a physical regeneration; nature takes part equally in the redemption. Shelley was not indeed inclined to separate natural and spiritual forces. Professor Grabo has shown[8] that Shelley echoes or seems to echo Newton's identification of electrical energy with a quasi-immaterial "Spirit of the Universe", which is also the physical expression of that which in

the moral sphere is love. It is hard to accept all these speculations and harder still for literary students to accept Whitehead's judgement of Shelley's scientific preoccupations.

> What the hills were to the youth of Wordsworth, a chemical laboratory was to Shelley. It is unfortunate that Shelley's literary critics have, in this respect, so little of Shelley in their own mentality. They tend to treat as a casual oddity of Shelley's nature what was, in fact, part of the main structure of his mind, permeating his poetry through and through. If Shelley had been born a hundred years later, the twentieth century would have seen a Newton among chemists.[9]

To the shoemaker there is nothing like leather: but the literary critic, to give that unscientific observer his due, is perhaps more likely than the scientist in a literary moment to notice how fragmentary and capricious were Shelley's dealings with science. The important substratum of truth in this way of thinking about Shelley is that he does not see a dualism between material and spiritual life; each is one aspect of the same reality; and the rejuvenation of the one can only be accomplished (though not by any process expressible in scientific terms) by the parallel regeneration of the other. Thus the cosmic and natural imagery of *Prometheus* is not inessential to it, an additional lyrical rhapsodizing, as is sometimes said: it is a vital part of the whole imaginative concept. [139]

Of course a poem conceived in this way is not likely to obey the rules of ordinary dramatic construction. (Neither does the Promethus of Aeschylus for that matter.) Aristotelian peripeteias and recognitions are human, all too human devices for poetry conceived on a cosmic scale. *Prometheus Unbound* is the first of a long line of nineteenth-century poems cast in dramatic form, but with no conceivable relation to the theatre. Indeed drama in the ordinary sense was not the direction in which Shelley's work tended. The realization of his own conceptions was too personal and too intense to allow the "negative capability", the ability to become everything and everyone, that the dramatist requires; and his constructive weakness is far more damaging here than in other forms. His one attempt at a stage drama was *The Cenci*. It is surprisingly powerful in character and atmosphere, and direct and concentrated in style: it is also surprisingly unShelleyan. The story, a horrible one of incest and revenge, seems very little related to the main lines of Shelley's thought; the dramatic structure is extremely weak and disordered; and most of its striking passages are derivative, largely from Shakespeare and Webster, as Shelley never is elsewhere. It appears from the preface that he is extremely conscious of attempting what is for him an unusual kind of composition:

> I have endeavoured as nearly as possible to represent the characters as they probably were, and have sought to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right and wrong, false or true... . I have avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry...

Heroic self-denial, indeed, but the result is to produce only a diversion from the main line of Shelley's work. A later dramatic poem, Hellas, is described by Shelley as "a mere improvise"; and though much slighter it is really more congenial to him. It celebrates the opening of the Greek revolt, in a form suggested by the Persae of Aeschylus. Shelley's sympathy with a contemporary struggle for freedom unites with his adoration of ancient Greece; and the two are fused into a [140] visionary hope for the restoration of Hellenic glories in the famous final chorus.

iii. "Shelley as a Lyricist"

To many readers Shelley's genius is primarily lyrical: which commonly implies emotional. This is very doubtful—intense and unremitting intellectual activity seems to have been the main characteristic of his mind. The slender wisps of song that are perhaps the most familiar of Shelley,s works were mostly written in moments of dejection or emotional abandonment. About half a dozen of them are exquisite; but many pages of Shelley's work are occupied with such

brief lyrical fragments; and outside the famous anthology pieces most of them are bad. Many readers of *O Worlds O Life, O Time and Music, When Soft Voices Die* imagine that there is a great deal more on the same level. In fact there is very little. More characteristic of Shelley is the longish, elaborated poem, lyrical in spirit, though not in form. This may be outwardly elegy, like *Adonais*; narrative, like *The Sensitive Plant*; a love-rhapsody, like Epipsychidion; or a fragment of a fairy tale, like *The Witch of Atlas*: but all exhibit the same mixture of speculation, the elaboration of a private mythology, and the element of song. Midway between the two in scale and complexity are *The Cloud*, *To a Skylark*, the *Lines Written in the Euganean Hills* and the *Ode to the West Wind*. Two formal odes, very much in the eighteenth-century manner, *Naples* and *Liberty*, make a rather disconcerting appearance: very competent performances of their kind, but hard to fit in to the prevailing picture of Shelley's genius.

Shelley's command of melopoeia, musical suggestion, the use of words as song, is at its best exquisite; butit is capricious. Or rather, command is not the word. "Poetry," he says in the *Defence*, "differs in this respect from logic, that it is not subject to the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connexion with the consciousness or will." His most delicate music comes unsuspected like, wandering breeze, usually associated with some intense feeling, abstracted from particular circumstance. The hym of Asia, [141] "Life of Life" in *Prometheus*, is one example; the last chorus of *Hellas* is another. Both are ecstatic; the first a vision quivering with brilliant light, the second a serener glow. Sometimes it is despondency that awakens Shelley's Aeolian harp.

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight.
Fresh spring, and summer and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more, O never more.

On the level of easier emotion, this uncertain instrument breathes a melodious sentimentality that sometimes recalls Tom Moore.

Though the sound overpowers,
Sing again, with your dear voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.

(To Jane: "The keen stars were twinkling".)

It is worth mentioning this, for Shelley is so often seen as "pinnacled dim in the intense inane" that too much has been claimed for poems that themselves make no such claims: and this in turn has called forth quite unnecessary blasts of depreciation. Many of his shorter lyrics are occasional poems, like *The Aziola*, which is charming; or *With a guitary to Janey* which is less so. zAt times—we can see it in this poem, in the *Lines Written in the Euganean Hills* —a kind of rhythmical automatism seems to overtake him:

For it had learned all harmonies
Of the plains and of the skies
Of the forest and the mountains
And the many-voiced fountains
The clearest echoes of the hills
The softest note of falling rills
The melodies of birds and bees
The murmuring of summer seas.

("With a Guitary to Jane") [142]

There seems no reason why the catalogue should ever end, and he seems to be going on largely because he does not know how to stop. Octosyllabics are particularly liable to bring on these attacks; but it may happen with any of the more facile measures —there is a good deal of it in *Epipsychidion*, Which means, not only that Shelley's musical gift is a shy, uncertain visitant, but that he has no certain command of style when it is absent.

The same contrast is found if we look at his images and structure. *Ozymandias* is an extremely clear and direct poem, advancing to a predetermined end by means of one firmly held image. "When the lamp is shattered', a poem that has been both admired and condemned, proceeds in a wholly different way. Images are put together, often in no logically comprehensible sequence. The series of analogies—flight will not survive the shattering of the lamp, music the breaking of the instrument—are all piled up to illustrate the statement that

> The heart's echoes render
> No song when the spirit is mute.

But there is nothing within the context of the poem (and I have not been able to discover anything outside it) to tell us what this means. Many of the succeeding images are kept together only by a community of emotional tone. Yet the poem does make a unified impression, in spite of the extremely loose relation of its parts. A demand for "metaphysical" clarity would be quite out of place here. Poems can attain unity by more than one means; and among the possibilities is that of retaining vaguely connected images in an informal pattern, floating, as it were, on a breeze of rhythm and music. This air-borne dance has always been recognized as one of Shelley's especial achievements. (The last act of Prometheus is a supreme example.) But the breeze has only to flag, and the whole becomes a heap of jarring atoms, or the spasmodic scurrying of loose papers in an idle gust.

The Skylark has great beauty in individual stanzas; it has been pointed out that the order of the stanzas is insignificant [143]—they could be rearranged almost anyhow without loss. This is not as damaging as is sometimes supposed: it is in fact a not unusual poetic situation: it is not obligatory for poems to progress in a temporal or logical sequence; they have often a timeless, synoptic point of view; and this is appropriate enough to a poem about the song of a far-off, almost unseen bird. But the *Skylark* is rather a long lyric: and the absence of internal structure is more felt the longer a poem becomes. And it remains true that a more conscious designer than Shelley would either have given the poem a clearer sense of direction, or have made it a shorter poem.

The process in much of Shelley's lyric poetry is to find natural objeas a symbol for his own emotional pattern. His best poetry, arises when one of his major passions finds an adequate symbol; as it does in the *Ode to the West Wind*, The wind does not become, like the moon in the fragment quoted earlier, an arbitrary projection of an emotional state. It exists. in its own right, a a destroyer and preserver, sweeping away the old in storms, and gently fostering the new with zephyrs. Thus it becomes linked with another symbolism-—the cycle of the seasons. The poem begins with autumn and ends with spring, or the foretaste of spring: and the wind is the spirit of destruction and regeneration, the common power that moves through both. The theme of death and rebirth, destruction and regeneration. Doubly powerful to Shelley; first it is the great natural process of which political revolution is the human and social example; secondly because it affords an escape from the crushing personal despondency with which he was so often afflicted, which which bring about his not infrequent lapses into mere self-pity.

The death and rebirth themes are announced in the opening stanza. The wind drives away the dead leaves and conducts the seeds, apparently cold and dead, to their graves; but the graves are also cradles in which they are to be reborn in the spring. The second stanza pictures the wind in its stormy and terrible aspect. The third opens with an iridescent picture of the other west wind, the Zephyrus or Favonius of the ancients, who produced flowers and fruit by the sweetness of

his breath. It [144] is a shimmering, Turneresque Mediterranean scene. But the stanza concludes with a return of the spirit of terror—the same wind which ruffles the surface of the Mediterranean also cleaves the Atlantic into chasms and frightens the submerged vegetation of the ocean. These three stanzas are built up on the antithesis between the two powers of the wind—its terrifying powers of destruction and its gentle fostering influence. They are descriptive, the imagery is largely visual, and the arrangement is a symmetrical one of contrasts of light and shade. The dark tones and brilliant sombre colours of the opening lines are contrasted with the lightness and softness of the lines on spring in the latter half of the stanza. Stanza two is all dark with brilliant flashes: and stanza three reverses the order of stanza one—the soft, light-toned Mediterranean picture giving place to the sombre depths of the Atlantic.

These three stanzas are something like the octave of a sonnet, announcing and elaborating a theme. The fourth and fifth stanzas are like the sestet, reflective and personal applications of the theme. The impression of the first three stanzas has been one of unimpeded energy and power: and it has been quite objective and impersonal. The poet and his sensibility have made no individual appearance. In the fourth stanza his own sense of oppression and constraint is related to the wind's freedom and strength. He would like to be a dead leaf, a cloud or a wave to be swept along by the wind's power; yet once he had been able to imagine that the wind's power was his own: and a similar power is naturally and by right his own: he too is tameless and swift, but has been crushed by the weight of the world.

At this point we might be on the way to more stanzas written in dejection. The wind is a power of destruction; and in his despondency the poet could wish to be swept away by it like a dead leaf. But that is not the final direction the poem is to take: the wind is also a power of regeneration, and so it can be to him. The last stanza is a prayer that it may be so. Why pray to an insentient natural force? Mere poetic "personification", to use a crass phrase for what can often be a crass device? No. As a force of death and rebirth the wind is one manifestation of the creative principle that runs through the whole universe. Therefore the poet can say

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is
> What if my leaves are falling like its own?

—and rightly ask to be used by the creative power even if his personal life is dejected and decayed. He then takes up the dead leaf image of the opening lines and gives it a new turn. Destruction, the sweeping away of the old, is necessary before recreation can begin; and that is implied in the opening stanza, for the wind sweeps away leaves and seeds together. But in the fifth stanza the withered leaves themselves "quicken a new birth"—they provide the soil in which the new seeds can grow. Dead thoughts, words which seem useless and unheeded, can nevertheless nurture a new life. If possessed by the wind, the creative power, the dead thoughts need not even be dead; and they become in the next line ashes and sparks, to kindle, not merely to feed a new conflagration. Death is only the prelude to renewed life; and the poem ends as it began, with the cycle of the seasons—

> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The structure of this ode is quite different from that of a typical seventeenth-century lyric, which may, as we have been told, have a logical argument almost syllogistic in completeness. Nor is there any very close linkage between the individual images; nor is there any very marked use of the sound effects, assonances and alliterations, by which sorne poets organize their verse. The logic here is the logic of feeling, which has its own order, and its own possibilities of formal perfection. I have tried to analyse this structure; but after a poem has been split up that it may be better understood, it must be put together again. And the reader's final impression is not of separable parts, feelings or images, but of a continuous powerful movement, sweeping through the whole. It is in this sense of continuous and directed energy that the *West Wind* is superior to *The Cloud*, *The Skylark*, or any other of Shelley's lyrics on the same scale.

Here the principle of organization is entirely his own, without particular literary precedent. *Adonais*, on the death of Keats (1821), is a formal elegy, taking its place in a long tradition of such poems. It includes many features from the Sicilian pastoral elegies of Theocritus, Bion/and Moschus, long familiar in the vernacular literatures through poems written in imitation of them. Like *Lycidas*, also in the. same tradition, it is inspired by no very vivid sense of personal loss, but takes over a traditional pattern and uses it to expi,ss the writer's own preoccupations and his own philosophy. Shelley takes from the Sicilian elegies the machinery of the lament and the summoning of the powers of Nature to mourn for the dead shepherd, as Milton did in *Lycidas*: and as Milton expanded the convention by introducing the awful figure of St. Peter, so Shelley adds to it by introducing the mourning of Urania and the brother poets. Among these he brings in himself:

> one frail form,
> A phantom among men, companionless—

in lines where self-pity seems a little obtrusive. But they again serve to do what Milton did in *Lycidas* to relate the formal elegy to his own situation and to that of his subject. Adonais has been killed by the world's hostility, and the fellow-poet who celebrates him is exiled by its neglect. Shelley is depicting the fate of the romantic poet in the world of Eldon, Castlereagh and the *Quarterly Review*, as Milton that of the young Puritan poet in the world of Laud and Strafford.

An already consecrated feature of the traditional elegy is the turn at the close: after the lament, the recantation—he is not dead: but the cast which is given to this defiant assertion of immortality depends on the philosophy of the writer, pagan, Christian or modern pantheist. Milton, incurably classic as well as Christian, gives us two versions of the fate of Lycidas— he has become a nature-spirit, the genius of the shore; and he is received among the solemn troops and sweet societies of the [147] saints in heaven. The Shelleyan immortality foretold for Adonais is hardly of a personal kind.

> He is made one with Nature: there is heard
> His voice in all her music, from the moan
> Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
> He is a presence to be felt and known
> In darkness and in light from herb and stone,
> Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
> Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
> Which wields the world with never wearied love,
> Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above. (XLII)

A sort of pantheism: but Adonais is not, like Wordsworth's Lucy, simply "rolled round in earth's diurnal course, with rocks and stones and trees". He has become part of the spirit which governs the Universe, which is the Universe—for Shelley ends with a Platonic or neo-Platonic or Brahmanistic assertion that eternity alone is real, that the phenomenal world is an illusion, is Maya, a veil that hides us from the one true light.

> The One remains, the many change and pass;
> Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass
> Stains the white radiance of eternity. (LII)

But it would be a mistake to suppose that Shelley lives consistently on that plane. Though the world is illusion, it has a kind of fairy-tale reality in whose dominion his poetry is often I willing to linger: indeed, in which poetry must linger. The I white radiance of eternity leaves the poet with few subjects.

Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire, as Yeats puts it. *In The Witch of Atlas* and *The Sensitive Plant* Shelley is mythologizing, gracefully and half playfully: and the [148] lines "To Mary" which introduce *The Witch* show that he was willing enough to allow his muse to play.

> What hand would crush the silken-winged fly
> The youngest of inconstant April's minions,
> Because it cannot climb the purest sky,
> Where the swan sings, amid the sun's dominions?

In a study as short as this these diaphanous pieces may be spared the burden of an exposition. *Epipsychidion* (1821), however, claims rather more. It is the fruit of a short-lived passion for a young Italian girl, Emilia Viviani; one of those sudden devotions with which Shelley's life is punctuated; and it is a poem of idealized and ecstatic love. In a fictitious introduction Shelley presents it as the work of a dead friend, and compares it, in its refined and esoteric sentiment, to the *Vita Nuova*, It is prefaced by a seductive Platonic-romantic motto, taken from an essay by Emilia herself:

> "L'anima amante si slancia fuori del creato, e si crea neir infinito un mondo tutto per essa, diverse assai di questo oscuro e pauroso baratro."
>
> (The soul of the lover flings itself out from the created world, and creates in infinity a world all for itself, far different from this abyss of fear and darkness.)

And this should give us the key to the realm in which the poem moves. Emilia is a "Seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human"; she is" the veiled Glory of the lampless Universe"; she is a sister, a vestal sister, rather than a mistress: so tliat when we are told, at the hundredth line, that a ship is waiting in the harbour to bear them away to the Ionian islands we may be fairly sure that what follows is more a piece of fanciful self- indulgence than an3rthing else. Yet the poem contains a good deal of disguised and often obscure autobiography, Mary Shelley appears as the moon, to which Emilia is the sun, and they are to share the poet's life between them. The facility with which Shelley effects the transition from the actual to the ideal plane is disconcerting; the proposition "I do not at present intend to make you my mistress" does not really entail [149] the consequence "This is therefore a great spiritual love." It is probable that opinions will always differ about the value of this kind of sublimation; but I think we can say that it should be both a more arduous and a less conscious process than Shelley seems to contemplate. The verse, too, has the kind of facility that is apt to overtake Shelley when he is possessed by a single one-way passion: and for all its reputation *Epipsychidion* has little importance except as a document of the romantic sensibility.

The last and most obscure fragment of Shelley's verse is the *Triumph of Life* (1822), the poem on which he was engaged at the time of his death. Over five hundred lines exist; but we cannot deduce from them what the ultimate purpose of the poem was to be. The first half of it describes the procession of Life, led by a blind charioteer—a rout of captives in which all humanity is enslaved. In the second half a distorted form which is all that is left of Rousseau explains how, having once seen a brighter vision, he too became enslaved to life. There is much obscurity which the completion of the poem might or might not have removed; and it is not clear whether the sombre view of human destiny so far presented would have been the ultimate one. Wliat is clear is the decision and rapidity of the verse. The poem is written in terza rima, and this has suggested the influence of Dante to some commentators. Both Dowden, however, and Shelley's latest biographer, Professor Newman Ivey White, remark what should be obvious, that the actual model is Petrarch's *Trionfi*, especially the Triumph of Love. The spare directness of the style and the clear visualization, quite divorced from the conventionally poetic, is, however, almost Dantesque in places, and is certainly new to Shelley. Even in detail there is much that is obscure, but enough remains to suggest that Shelley at the end of his life may have been on the threshold of a new technical development.

Development, however, is not a word that we naturally use of Shelley's poetry. The characteristic qualities of his mind were fixed early: though his ideas expanded, the fundamentals changed little, and he is not an industrious experimenter in various techniques. He writes as he must, and if he had lived [150] longer it is not likely that the impelling necessities of his poetry would have become very different.

iv. On *The Defence of Poetry*

It remains to say something of Shelley's beliefs about the nature and functions of poetry. There is something to be found in the letters (though his letters are not nearly so illuminating as those of Keats); much in the prefatory notes to the poems; but the principal place is the Defence of Poetry. There seems always to have been some uncertainty in Shelley's mind between didactic and purely artistic aims; but there is little doubt that the first predominate. The preface to the Revolt of Islam describes the poem as an experiment on the public mind to discover "how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral or political society" has survived the tempests of the times. Shelley goes on to say, "I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality". It will be noted that "all the elements which essentially compose a poem" are enlisted as subordinates in a moral cause that is separate from themselves. Writing to Peacock in January 1819, at the time of the composition of PrometheuSy Shelley says quite bluntly, "I consider poetry very subordinate to moral and political science". In similar vein he confesses in the preface to Prometheus to "a passion for reforming the world": yet adds "it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform... . Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse". A contradiction is apparent, but it is reconciled in the passage that follows.

> "My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence, aware that until the mind can love and admire and trust, and hope and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are [151] seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passengers trample into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness."

Poetry is to work by its own imaginative processes, but the aim is still to awaken and stimulate the moral sense. From this point of view Shelley never departed, and the Defence of Poetry is largely an expansion of it.

The *Defence of Poetry* appeared in 1821. It was originally intended to be a reply to a pamphlet by Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*. This is a brilliant piece of work, satirical and only half serious, which maintains that in the current era of science and philosophy the poet is a relic of primitive barbarism "wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age". Shelley was indignant and resolved to break a lance with him. But what results is something different from a mere answer to Peacock; it is an exalted defence of the honours of poetry and the imagination, an extension of the tradition of Sidney and the Renaissance champions of the Muses, and the best statement in English of the early Romantic theory of poetry. Coleridge attempts to give his ideas a philosophical foundation wliich Shelley is content to assume; and he is more attractive to the speculative mind because it is never quite clear exactly what he is saying. Wordsworth's preface seems a more massive piece of polemic. But Shelley is a clearer expositor than either of these more celebrated theorists—and he remains a poet even in his prose. *The Defence* is itself a work of art—a claim which could not be made for the prose writings of Wordsworth or Coleridge.

He begins by stating as an axiom what Coleridge tries to prove—the power of the imagination to perceive, in some sense, essential reality with a directness impossible to the discursive faculties. His language here is partly Coleridgean; and since he had read Biographia Literaria in the year of its appearance, we need not doubt that this is the source of his theory of the imagination and its functions. Poetry is the expression of the imagination, and it has access, therefore, to this special [152] kind of imaginative knowledge. All men have some imagination, so all are in some degree poets. But there is an absolute standard of beauty, to which every artistic representation approximates more or less closely. The poet is simply the man whose faculties for approximation to this standard are exceptionally great. Since he is able then to express essential truth in the form of beauty, from which all men of uncorrupted taste receive pleasure, the poet is not only the inventor of the arts, but the institutor of laws and the founder of civil society. Without him the beauty of order and the beauty of holiness would never have been perceived; and if their beauty had never been perceived, they would never have been desired. The poet is even a prophet, for by seeing the present as it really is he sees in it the seeds of the future.

A critical passage on the distinction between prose and poetry follows (Shelley does not equate poetry with verse; for him Plato and Bacon are poets); and there is a passage, Aristotelian in origin, but echoed by all the great Romantics, about the universality of poetry. Then succeeds a long panoramic survey of poetry from Homer onwards, which occupies the bulk of the essay. Historical surveys of this kind are apt to date. Shelley's is remarkably fresh; and the whole passage is a testimony to the extent and sensitiveness of his reading. Its purpose is to show the effect of poetry on society, and to show that "the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form, has been found to be connected with good or evil in conduct or habit". The reason for this is at the core of Shelley's belief.

> The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another, and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry ministers to the effect by acting upon the cause.

[153]

An objection to many such lofty transcendental claims for poetry is that they fail to account for minor poetry and the lesser kinds. To this Shelley provides an admirable answer. Without interrupting the majestic sweep of his own theory, he does beautiful justice to the more modest kinds of imaginative writing. Such compositions, he says, may be read simply as fragments or isolated portions; but the more perceptive will "recognize them as episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world''.

In modern times (and here the specific answer to Peacock begins) "poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists"—on the plea of utility. Shelley opposes this, on hedonist and utilitarian grounds. Utility is whatever conduces to pleasure. But it has a narrow and a wider sense. The first is all that satisfies the mere animal needs, that conduces to transitory pleasure: the second is whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the understanding, and conduces to durable and universal pleasure. It is to this second kind of utility that poetry contributes. We owe a debt of gratitude to the philosophers, to Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and Rousseau: but if they had never lived

> a little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women and children burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment be congratulating ourselves on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain;

—but without the poets and creative artists the moral condition of mankind would be inconceivably degraded; for the analytical reason can itself do nothing to arouse men's generous faculties. The passage which follows has even more relevance today than when it was written.

> We have more moral, political and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice: we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it [154] multiplies. … There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government and political economy, or at least what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act on that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life. ...
>
> The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature."

It is evident enough that by this time poetry has become something very different from making verses. It includes all the means by which the sympathetic and generous emotions are aroused. But of these the arts are the chief. Since imagination shows us the real nature of the world it inevitably takes us out of the small circle of self-regarding feeling. Since it sounds the depths of human nature it shows not only the goings on in the poet's mind, but in the mind of the age, and can see in them the germs of the future. Hence when Shelley in his final paragraph calls the poets "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present", he is not merely using a rhetorical phrase, but expressing a real conviction—that the poet's intuitions often show him the direction in which the world is moving more clearly than the speculations of the political philosopher. And it would not be hard to find examples to substantiate this claim. But from this we pass to the final phrase; "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"; we look forward into the succeeding century and observe thiat if the poets are legislators they have some very formidable competitors—soldiers, historians, economists, physicists. All that Shelley says about the gap between our natural science and our moral ability to use it is manifestly true—but is it really the business of poetry to bridge the gulf?

Many later nineteenth-century writers agreed that it was. Poetry, for Arnold, is to replace religion as the guide and [155] teacher of mankind: for Pater and his successors, art itself is to become a sort of religion. Shelley's argument is more reasoned and his position stronger than theirs. It is a poor thing not to feel the purity and generosity of his enthusiasm; but there is, after all, a fallacy in the Romantic apology for poetry, as in all later attempts to save the world by literature; two senses of the word poetry are confused. Poetry as the whole imaginative and sympathetic life of man is one thing; poetry the work of art is another; and to transfer what is true of the first bodily to the second is only rhetorically eflfective. In Shelley's philosophical system there is always a gap between the wretched actuality and the radiant and possible ideal. In some of his expository prose writing, he is prepared to fill it laboriously by the methods of patient reformism. But his imagination was more impatient: the gap must be bridged by a spark, and the spark is to be poetry. Poetry becomes the instrument of redemption; it invades the territory of faith and sets up a succession of shortlived governments: while a horde of intrusive busybodies in the meantime invade its own domain. The generous confusion of the nineteenth century has begun.

NOTES

[…]

11. To Jane: "The keen stars were twinkling".

12. With a guitary to Jane.

13. N. I. White, *Shelley*, III, 630, note 35.