

THE ENGLISH REVIEW

though they be. And Shelley was pre-eminently the "Sun-reader":—he should have remembered Phaeton.

Much, however, of this defect of Shelley is inseparable from his supreme quality as a technician. He was the first to realise the rhythmical power of the intonation of the English language, to see in it an armoury of striking and stabbing weapons. Shakespeare, with all his vigorous rhetoric, never understood the possibilities of pure form to play upon the passions; he trusted to the rational meaning of the words themselves. Milton made but a slight advance in this respect. Samuel Butler forged a hammer of the rhythm of *Hudibras*; but the stroke does not vary. Some of Shelley's contemporaries made the way plain for him by introducing freedom of metre; but none of them, not even Byron, was able to consummate the marriage of poetry and music. The result of the alliance was to unite the intellectual and emotional power of words with the direct spiritual action on the nerves which even the West African drum or the Papuan bull-roarer can exercise.

It is not too much to say, therefore, that Shelley was to the Revolutionary Epoch what Shakespeare was to the Renaissance. He created, in fact, a new heavens and a new earth of language. The perfection of Keats, the sublimity of Blake, the simplicity of Wordsworth, the mystery of Coleridge, the independence of Byron: these are feathers in the scale against the sword of Shelley. For language is the word which "was with God," and "was God"; it is the most intimate sheath of the soul, its first and simplest expression. The creation of a new language is therefore a stupendously significant event in the history of a planet, as important as the invention of the wheel, or the discovery of a fundamental principle in Nature. The influence of Shakespeare and the Bible is due not to their contents, or even their style, but to their having conferred upon the English people a new intellectual instrument. We are not yet at a sufficient distance from Shelley to estimate the real effect of his work. We are apt to be misled: we observe the triumph of many of his ideas, and associate that phenomenon with his success. The truth lies much deeper. Such questions as atheism are really of transitory importance: the tides of human opinion sway with the moon of popular favour, and (to a less degree) with the sun of