Percy Bysshe Shelley

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"O like a rose-wing'd pelican
She hath bred blessèd babes to Pan!"
—The Wizard Way

In a story by Lord Dunsany Fame says to the poet, "I will meet you in the graveyard at the back of the Workhouse in a hundred years." If Shelley has been more fortunate—though it hardly matters to him!—it is not on account of his poetry, which passed as readable even among his contemporary detractors, but of his prophetic gift and the moral wizardry which made serious people consider seriously that in him *Diabolus incarnatus est, et homo factus est.*

It seems at first sight astounding that Shelley was sent down from Oxford for theological views which are accepted today by the youngest average undergraduate with scarce a mumbled protest from the oldest average don; that he should have been robbed of his children on account of a moral attitude which modern children themselves find reactionary rather then advanced; and that he should have been practically exiled from England because of political notions which the most case-hardened Tory of today would hardly dare to whisper in the gloom of his club.

The truth is that the "Sun-treader" (as Browning calls him in *Pauline*) happened to be on the crest of a true dawn. The world, save for sporadic outbreaks of Bourbon *folie des grandeurs,* has rolled steadily towards that slight, shrill angel figure in the East. The power of Shelley hardly matters, in a sense, by comparison with his ethical ideals. He was the voice of the Zeitgeist; and

it is relatively unimportant that it should have been, to English ears, so matchlessly musical.

Many of the best judges of poetry prefer Keats to Shelley; but the verdict implies purism. A poet is one who "makes" or "does" things, and Keats was preoccupied with eternal "Truth-Beauty"—to coin a term like the "Space-Time" of Einstein—of a far less potent and intricate quality.

In Egyptian lore Tahuti, the god of language, is also the god of wisdom and of creative thought; the word "gramareye" (dear to Sir Walter Scott) is indeed, like the French word *grimoire,* etymologically equivalent to "grammar." Poets must not be ranked by their lyrical exaltation any more than by their technical ability: wisdom is justified of her children, and a poet of his!

The children of Keats are people like Rossetti, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, whose eyes were fixed sadly and languorously on the sunset of things.

But the spilth of Shelley's seed flooded foreign and innumerable fields: James Thompson, Swinburne, and other poets of revolution and passion are only a minor branch of his great family. The reformers, the humanitarians, the feminists, the transcendentalists, from Bradlaugh and Huxley to Nietzsche and Anna Kingsford, were all suckled on that pale gold wine of Dionysus which issued from his martyred veins. The young lady was within her rights when she asked "What are Keats?"; and if she was a wise child she knew hew own father to be Shelley.

Keats remains perfect and imperishable like his own Greek Vase; he is the chief treasure of the Museum of Humanity; but Shelley is the High Priest of the Temple of Spiritual Progress, the Prophet of the most High God of Freedom, and the King of the Republic of "gentleness, wisdom, virtue, and endurance."

He is dynamic as Keats is static; and the nature of the Universe is Becoming rather than Being. The nineteenth century stripped the gilded rags of religion from

the mummy of existence, and found a crumbling corpse, but the twentieth sees that dust dissolved into a glittering film of motion and light.

Modern physical and mathematical research are making it clearer every day that the structure of matter is indeed that subtle spiritual vibration which Shelley perceived it to be. By a parallel argument, man himself is no longer conceived as a fixed quantity established in a world six thousand years old, and subject to a single law. He is an immutable Essence indeed, perhaps, in some ultimate spiritual sense, but his manifestation is mutable; his sensible form is a vehicle of Energy surging in infinite variety against the shores of experience. Shelley speaks of an immanent Spirit of the Universe, and is sufficiently a Pantheist to have identified himself, or any other existing thing, with that Spirit, had he been challenged directly on the point by, let us say, Mr. Eddington or Mr. Bertrand Russell. If Shelley is not always explicitly in line with the latest mathematico-mystical thinkers, it is because the world was so far behind his intuitive perception of truth that there was no intellectual instrument capable of registering his vibrations, except possibly the ambiguous jargon of the school of Fludd. But he everywhere implies, more by the sheer form and tone of his verses than by their rational meaning, that existence is an unconditioned Unity (or Nihil), which has invented infinite modes of phantasmal and illusory duality for the purpose of becoming conscious of itself. It is not necessary for an animal to use our arbitrary language to express its feelings intelligibly; and, in point of fact, poets who have made the attempt to explain their spiritual consciousness in terms of philosophy have obscured their light rather than made it manifest. Blake is a notable example of this circumstance. We learn more of the essence of his soul-structure from "Tiger, Tiger", "The Crystal Cabinet", or "The Mental Traveler" than we do from his professedly "prophetic" books. The English language, as understood by scholars and developed by

them, is an instrument of doubtful value to the poet. The soul of man lurks rather in the lilt of a lyric than in the most imposing *lavallière* that glitters on the velvet of the shop-window of literary effort.

Now Shelley was saturated with the spirit of the planet in its subtlest and strongest distillation: and that spirit overflowed into song. He possessed the utter simplicity and self-confidence of an immortal; if our ears are attuned to his thought, we can catch the choral rapture as is swings with the stars through the centuries. But his conscious efforts to express his essential idea are relatively lame.

Identical phenomena occur in every connection; and this is the ultimate reason for the apparent failure of the poet to maintain his hold on our hearts as we reach an age when our spirits are less sensitive to subtle and subconscious stress. Mr. Augustine Birrell remarks that Browning in later life lost his enthusiasm for this "strange and unaccountable being" We are not all, fortunately, so middle-class and middle-aged as either of these gentlemen; but, even so, it is hard to read Shelley with enjoyment after one has turned forty. The reason, however, is this: one either has or has not assimilated the Unconscious of the poet in one's youth; in the one case the verse seems a mere husk, while in the other it screams the doom of spiritual death. The damned detest him, therefore, and the redeemed can only find pleasure in remembering the raptures which wrought the white-hot steel of their youth into the shapes of royalty and righteousness.

It is in the nature of things that even the greatest intellectual attempts to grapple with any given problem appear ill-adjusted in after years; for the thought has been frozen into crystalline beauty, while the problem has changed with the succession of suns. It is always an error for an artist to abdicate his throne in eternity in order to enter the lists of temporal things: *ne sutor ultra crepidam*. Few people, even among philosophers, seem

to understand that eternity differs in quality from time. It is commonly supposed to be a mere unlimited extension thereof. Yet the consideration that time is but one of the conditions of dualistic consciousness ought to make the true aspect of the matter immediately apparent. It is the prerogative of men like Shelley to think in terms of the absolute, which is out of all relation with the measurable, and not to be obtained therefrom by removing the landmarks, any more than one can make Beauty by effacing the marks on a steelyard, or prolonging the lever indefinitely. When, therefore, Shelley says

> *"Next came Fraud, and he had on,*
> *Like Eldon, an ermined gown"*

he risks his intelligibility only in a slightly less degree than Mr. Frankau in *One of Us,* or the ephemeral leader-writer of this Ile des Diurnals. Eldon is already for us merely a judge who happened to annoy Shelley. *One of Us* is a very valuable historical document, of its kind, but the more it is history the less it is literature. It has already become difficult to identify the mourners for *Adonais,* immortals though they be. And Shelley was preeminently the "Sun-treader":—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 realize 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 the enlightenment of the ruling classes. But the advance in the development of the larynx marks off definitely man from monkey, and the perfecting of the weapon of speech by Shelley made the essential difference between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England. The issue is masked for the moment by the Press. The English language is fallen into disrepute and impotence. But the wood pulp period of brain and paper will soon pass. Unless England is destroyed altogether by the vermin

that are gnawing at her entrails, unless the speech of the greatest minds on earth since the Fall of Rome is rotted through by the cancer of senseless slang, venal vulgarity, alien abominations, the weapon of Shelley will wing its way through the centuries, and enable mind to inform mind by virtue of subtle cadences, harmonies, and hammer-strokes.

That is, above all, the problem of the day, now that the "hard facts" of materialism are thawing into a gossamer dew. It is becoming impossible to write sober science in prose: the subtleties of Nature demand rhythm to respond to, and to record, their own. By Wisdom, that is, by the Word, He created the worlds; and the Wonder-World of today has been created by the Word of the Winged Serpent, whom the men of his own day took to be Satan, him whose centenary we celebrate under his pseudonym of Percy Bysshe Shelley.