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SHELLEY AS A LYRIC POET.¹

SO many biographies, records, comments, criticisms, of Shelley have lately appeared that I take for granted that all who hear me have some general acquaintance with the facts of his life. Of the biographies none, perhaps, is more interesting than the short work by Mr. J. A. Symonds, which has lately been published as one of the series edited by Mr. Morley, 'English Men of Letters.' That work has all the charm which intense admiration of its subject, set forth in a glowing style, can lend it. Those who in the main hold with Mr. Symonds, and are at one with him in his fundamental estimate of things, will no doubt find his work highly attractive. Those, on the other hand, who see in Shelley's character many things which they cannot admire, and in the theories that moulded it much which is deeply repulsive, will find Mr. Symonds's work a less satisfactory guide than they could have wished. Of the many comments and criticisms on Shelley's character and poetry two of the most substantial and rational are, the essay by Mr. R. H. Hutton, and that by the late Mr. Walter Bagehot. To these two friends Shelley, it would appear, had been one of the attractions of their youth, and in their riper years each has given his mature estimate of Shelley's poetry in its whole substance and tendency. We all admire that which we agree with; and nowhere have I found on this subject thoughts which seem to me so adequate and so helpful as those contained in these two essays, none which give such insight into Shelley's abnormal character and into the secret springs of his inspiration. Of the benefit of these thoughts I have freely availed myself, whenever they seemed to throw light on the subject of this lecture.

The effort to enter into the meaning of Shelley's poetry is not altogether a painless one. Some may ask, Why should it be painful? Cannot you enjoy his poems merely in an æsthetic way, take the marvel of their aerial movement and the magic of their melody, without scrutinising too closely their meaning or moral import? This, I suppose, most of my hearers could do for themselves, without any comment of mine. Such a mere surface, dilettante way of treating the subject would be useless in itself, and altogether unworthy of this place. All true literature, all genuine poetry, is the direct outcome, the condensed essence, of actual life and thought. Lyric poetry for the most part is—Shelley's especially was—the vivid expression of personal experience. It is only as poetry is founded on reality that it has any solid value; otherwise it is

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worthless. Before, then, attempting to understand Shelley's lyrics I must ask what was the reality out of which they came—that is, what manner of man Shelley was, what were his ruling views of life, along what lines did his thoughts move?

Those who knew Shelley best speak of the sweetness and refinement of his nature, of his lofty disinterestedness, his unworldliness. They even speak of something like heroic self-forgetfulness. These things we can in sort believe, for there are in his writings many traits that look like those qualities. And yet one receives with some decided reserve the high eulogies of his friends; for we feel that these were not generally men whose moral estimates of things we would entirely accept, and his life contained things that seem strangely at variance with such qualities as they attribute to him. When Byron speaks of his purity of mind we cannot but doubt whether Byron was a good judge of purity. We must, moreover, on the evidence of Shelley's own works demur; for there runs through his poems a painful taint of supersubtilised impurity, of aweless shamelessness, which we never can believe came from a mind truly pure. A penetrating taint it is, which has evilly affected many of the higher minds who admire him, in a way which Byron's own more commonplace licentiousness never could have done.

One of his biographers has said that in no man was the moral sense ever more completely developed than in Shelley, in none was the perception of right and wrong more acute. I rather think that the late Mr. Bagehot was nearer the mark when he asserted that in Shelley the conscience never had been revealed—that he was almost entirely without conscience. Moral susceptibilities and impulses, keen and refined, he had. He was inspired with an enthusiasm of humanity after a kind; hated to see pain in others, and would willingly relieve it; hated oppression, and stormed against it, but then he regarded all rule and authority as oppression. He felt for the poor and the suffering, and tried to help them, and willingly would have shared with all men the vision of good which he sought for himself. But these passionate impulses are something very different from conscience. Conscience first reveals itself when we become aware of the strife between a lower and a higher nature within us—a law of the flesh warring against the law of the mind. And it is out of this experience that moral religion is born, the higher law rather leading up and linking us to One whom that law represents. As Canon Mozely has said, 'it is an introspection on which all religion is built—man going into himself and seeing the struggle within him; and thence getting self-knowledge, and thence the knowledge of God.' Of this double nature, this inward strife between flesh and spirit, Shelley knew nothing. He was altogether a child of impulse—of impulse, one, total, all-absorbing. And the impulse that came to him he followed whithersoever it went, without questioning either himself or it. He was pre-eminently *τοῖς πάθεσιν ἀκολουθητικός*, and you know that Aristotle tells us that such an one is no fit judge

of moral truth. But this peculiarity, which made him so little fitted to guide either his own life or that of others, tended, on the other hand, very powerfully to make him pre-eminently a lyric poet. How it fitted him for this we shall presently see. But abandonment to impulse, however much it may contribute to lyrical inspiration, is a poor guide to conduct; and a poet's conduct in life, of whatever kind it be, quickly reacts on his poetry. It was so with Shelley.

It is painful to recall the unhappy incidents, but we cannot understand his poetry if we forget them. 'Strongly moralised,' Mr. Symonds tells us, his boyhood was; but of a strange—I might say, an unhuman—type the morality must have been which allowed some of the chief acts of his life. His father was no doubt a commonplace and worldly-minded squire, wholly unsympathetic with his dreamy son; but this cannot justify the son's unfilial and irreverent conduct towards his parent, going so far as to curse him for the amusement of coarse Eton companions. Nobility of nature he may have had, but it was such nobility as allowed him, in order to hurl defiance at authority, to start atheist at Eton, and to do the same more boldly at Oxford, with what result you know. It allowed him to engage the heart of a simple and artless girl, who entrusted her life in his keeping, and then after two or three years to abandon her and her child—for no better reason, it would seem, than that she cared too little for her baby, and had an unpleasant sister, who was an offence to Shelley. It allowed him first to insult the religious sense of his fellow men by preaching the wildest atheism, then in the poem 'Laon and Cythna,' which he intended to be his gospel for the world, to outrage the deepest instincts of our nature by introducing a most horrible and unnatural incident. A moral taint there is in this, which has left its trail in many of his after poems. The furies of the sad tragedy of Harriet Westbrook haunted him till the close, and drew forth some strains of weird agony; but even in these there is no manly repentance, no self-reproach that is true and human-hearted.

After his second marriage he never repeated the former offence, but many a strain in his later poems, as in 'Epipsychidion,' and in his latest lyrics, proves that constancy of affection was not in him, nor reckoned by him among the virtues. Idolators of Shelley will, I know, reply, 'You judge Shelley by the conventional morality of the present day, and, judging him by this standard, of course you harshly condemn him. But it was against these very conventions which you call morality that Shelley's whole life was a protest. He was the prophet of something truer or better than this.' To this I answer that Shelley's revolt was not against the conventional morality of his own time, but against the fundamental morality of all time. Had he merely cried out against the stifling political atmosphere and the dry, dead orthodoxy of the Regency and the reign of George IV., and longed for some ampler air, freer and more life-giving, one could well have understood him, even sympathised with him. But he rebelled

not against the limitations and corruptions of his own day, but against the moral verities which two thousand years have made good, and which have been tested and approved not only by eighteen Christian centuries, but no less by the wisdom of Virgil and Cicero, of Aristotle and Sophocles. Shelley may be the prophet of a new morality, but it is one which never can be realised till moral law has been obliterated from the universe and conscience from the heart of man.

A nature which was capable of the things I have alluded to, whatever other traits of nobility it may have had, must have been traversed by some strange deep flaw, marred by some radical inward defect. In some of his gifts and impulses he was more,—in other things essential to goodness, he was far less,—than other men; a fully developed man he certainly was not. I am inclined to believe that, for all his noble impulses and aims, he was in some way deficient in rational and moral sanity. Many of you will remember Hazlitt's somewhat cynical description of him. Yet, to judge by his writings, it looks like truth. He had 'a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech, which mark out the philosophic fanatic. He is sanguine-complexioned and shrill-voiced.' This is just the outward appearance we could fancy for his inward temperament. What was that temperament?

He was entirely a child of impulse, lived and longed for high-strung, intense emotion—simple, all-absorbing, all-penetrating emotion, going straight on in one direction to its object, hating and resenting whatever opposed its progress thitherward. The object which he longed for was some abstract intellectualised spirit of beauty and loveliness, which should thrill his spirit continually with delicious shocks of emotion.

This yearning, panting desire is expressed by him in a thousand forms and figures throughout his poetry. Again and again the refrain recurs—

I pant for the music which is Divine,
 My heart in its thirst is a dying flower;
 Pour forth the sound like enchanted wine,
 Loosen the notes in a silver shower;
 Like a herbless plain for the gentle rain
 I gasp, I faint, till they wake again.

Let me drink the spirit of that sweet sound;
 More, O more! I am thirsting yet;
 It loosens the serpent which care has bound
 Upon my heart, to stifle it;
 The dissolving strain, through every vein,
 Passes into my heart and brain.

He sought not mere sensuous enjoyment, like Keats, but keen intellectual and emotional delight—the mental thrill, the glow of soul, the 'tingling of the nerves,' that accompany transcendental

rapture. His hungry craving was for intellectual beauty, and the delight it yields; if not that, then for horror, anything to thrill the nerves, though it should curdle the blood and make the flesh creep. Sometimes for a moment this perfect abstract loveliness would seem to have embodied itself in some creature of flesh and blood; but only for a moment would the sight soothe him—the sympathy would cease, the glow of heart would die down—and he would pass on in the hot, insatiable pursuit of new rapture. ‘There is no rest for us,’ says the great preacher, ‘save in quietness, confidence, and affection.’ This was not what Shelley sought, but something very different from this.

The pursuit of abstract ideal beauty was one form which his hungry, insatiable desire took. Another passion that possessed him was the longing to pierce to the very heart the mystery of existence. It has been said that before an insoluble mystery, clearly seen to be insoluble, the soul bows down and is at rest, as before an ascertained truth. Shelley knew nothing of this. Before nothing would his soul bow down. Every veil, however sacred, he would rend, pierce the inner shrine of being, and force it to give up its secret. There is in him a profane audacity, an utter awelessness. Intellectual *Αἰδώς* was to him unknown. Reverence was to him another word for hated superstition. Nothing was to him inviolate. All the natural reserves he would break down. Heavenward, he would pierce to the heart of the universe and lay it bare; manward, he would annihilate all the precincts of personality. Every soul should be free to mingle with any other, as so many raindrops do. In his own words,

The fountains of our deepest life shall be
Confused in passion’s golden purity.

However fine the language in which such feelings may clothe themselves, in truth they are wholly vile; there is no horror of shamelessness which they may not generate. Yet this is what comes of the unbridled desire for ‘tingling pulses,’ quivering, panting, fainting sensibility, which Shelley everywhere makes the supreme happiness. It issues in awelessness, irreverence, and what some one has called ‘moral nudity.’

These two impulses, both combined with another passion, he had—the passion for reforming the world. He had a real, benevolent desire to impart to all men the peculiar good he sought for himself—a life of free, unimpeded impulse, of passionate, unobstructed desire. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—these of course; but something far beyond these—absolute Perfection, as he conceived it, he believed to be within every man’s reach. Attainable, if only all the growths of history could be swept away, all authority and government, all religion, all law, custom, nationality, everything that limits and restrains, and if every man were left open to the uncontrolled expansion of himself and his impulses. The end of this process of making a clean sweep of all that is, and beginning afresh, would be that family, social ranks, government, worship, would dis-

appear, and then man would be king over himself, and wise, gentle, just, and good. Such was his temperament, the original emotional basis of Shelley's nature; such, too, some of the chief aims towards which this temperament impelled him. And certainly these aims do make one think of the 'maggot in his brain.' But a temperament of this kind, whatever aims it turned to, was eminently and essentially lyrical. Those thrills of soul, those tingling nerves, those rapturous glows of feeling, are the very substance out of which high lyrics are woven.

The insatiable craving to pierce the mystery, of course, drove Shelley to philosophy for instruments to pierce it with. During his brief life he was a follower of three distinct schools of thought. At first he began with the philosophy of the senses, was a materialist, adopting Lucretius as his master and holding that atoms are the only realities, with perhaps a pervading life of nature to mould them—that from atoms all things come, to atoms return. Yet even over this dreary creed, without spirit, immortality, or God, he shouted a jubilant 'Eureka,' as though it were some new glad tidings.

From this he passed into the school of Hume—got rid of matter, the dull clods of earth, denied both matter and mind, and held that these were nothing but impressions, with no substance behind them. This was liker Shelley's cast of mind than materialism. Not only dull clods of matter, but personality, the 'I' and the 'thou,' were by this creed eliminated, and that exactly suited Shelley's way of thought. It gave him a phantom world.

From Hume he went on to Plato, and in him found still more congenial nutriment. The solid, fixed entities—matter and mind—he could still deny, while he was led on to believe in eternal archetypes behind all phenomena, as the only realities. These Platonic ideas attracted his abstract intellect and imagination, and are often alluded to in his later poems, as in 'Adonais.' Out of this philosophy it is probable that he got the only object of worship which he ever acknowledged, the Spirit of Beauty. Plato's idea of beauty changed into a spirit, but without will, without morality, in his own words:—

That Light whose smile kindles the universe,
That Beauty in which all things work and move,
That Benediction which the eclipsing curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
Which, through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst.

To the moral and religious truths which are the backbone of Plato's thought he never attained. Shelley's thought never had any backbone. Each of these successively adopted philosophies entered into and coloured the successive stages of Shelley's poetry; but through them all his intellect and imagination remained unchanged.

What was the nature of that intellect? It was wholly akin and

adapted to the temperament I have described as his. Impatient of solid substances, inaccessible to many kinds of truth, inappreciative of solid, concrete facts, it was quick and subtle to seize the evanescent hues of things, the delicate aromas which are too fine for ordinary perceptions. His intellect waited on his temperament, and, so to speak, did its will—caught up one by one the warm emotions as they were flung off, and worked them up into the most exquisite abstractions. The rush of throbbing pulsations supplied the materials for his keen-edged thought to work on, and these it did mould into the rarest, most beautiful shapes. This his mind was busy doing all his life long. The real world, existence as it is to other minds, he recoiled from—shrank from the dull, gross earth which we see around us—nor less from the unseen world of Righteous Law and Will which we apprehend above us. The solid earth he did not care for. Heaven—a moral heaven—there was that in him which would not believe in. So, as Mr. Hutton has said, his mind made for itself a dwelling-place midway between the two, equally remote from both, some interstellar region, some cold, clear place—

Pinnacled dim in the intense inane—

which he peopled with ideal shapes and abstractions, wonderful or weird, beautiful or fantastic, all woven out of his own dreaming phantasy.

This was the world in which he was at home; he was not at home with any reality known to other men. No real human characters appear in his poetry; his own pulsations, desires, aspirations, supplied the place of these. Hardly any actual human feeling is in them; only some phase of evanescent emotion, or the shadow of it, is seized—not even the flower of human feeling, but the bloom of the flower or the dream of the bloom. A real landscape he has seldom described, only his own impression of it, or some momentary gleam, some tender light, that has fled and vanishingly over earth and sea he has caught. Nature he used mainly to cull from it some of its most delicate tints, some faint hues of the dawn or the sunset clouds, to weave in and colour the web of his abstract dream. So entirely at home is he in this abstract shadowy world of his own making, that when he would describe common visible things he does so by likening them to those phantoms of the brain, as though with these last alone he was familiar. Virgil likens the ghosts by the banks of Styx to falling leaves—

Quam multa in silvis auctumni frigore primo
Lapsa cadunt folia.

Shelley likens falling leaves to ghosts. Before the wind the dead leaves, he says—

Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.

Others have compared thought to a breeze. With Shelley the breeze is like thought; the pilot spirit of the blast, he says—

Wakens the leaves and waves, ere it hath past,
 To such brief unison as on the brain
 One tone which never can recur has cast
 One accent, never to return again.

We see thus that nature as it actually exists has little place in Shelley's poetry. And man, as he really is, may be said to have no place at all.

Neither is the world of moral or spiritual truth there—not the living laws by which the world is governed—no presence of a Sovereign Will, no all-wise Personality, behind the fleeting shows of time. The abstract world which his imagination dwelt in is a cold, weird, unearthly, inhuman place, peopled with shapes which we may wonder at, but cannot love. When we first encounter these we are fain to exclaim, Earth we know, and Heaven we know, but who and what are ye? Ye belong neither to things human nor to things divine. After a very brief sojourn in Shelley's ideal world, with its pale abstractions, most men are ready to say with another poet, after a voyage among the stars—

Then back to earth, the dear green earth ;
 Whole ages though I here should roam,
 The world for my remarks and me
 Would not a whit the better be :
 I've left my heart at home.

In that dear green earth, and the men who have lived or still live on it, in their human hopes and fears, in their faiths and aspirations, lies the truest field for the highest imagination to work in. That I believe to be the haunt and main region for the songs of the greatest poets. The real is the true world for a great poet, but it was not Shelley's world.

Yet Shelley, while the imaginative mood was on him, felt this ideal world of his as real as most men feel the solid earth, and through the pallid lips of its phantom people and dim abstractions he pours as warm a flood of emotion as ever poet did through the rosier lips and brightest eyes of earth-born creatures. Not more real to Burns were his bonny Jean and his Highland Mary, than to Shelley were the visions of Asia and Panthea, and the Lady of the Sensitive Plant, while he gazed on them. And when his affections did light, not on these abstractions, but on creatures of flesh and blood, yet so penetrated was his thought with his own idealism, that he lifted them up from earth into that rarefied atmosphere, and described them in the same style of imagery and language as that with which he clothes the phantasms of his mind. Thus it will be seen that it was a narrow and limited tract over which Shelley's imagination ranged—that it took little or no note of reality, and that boundless as was its fertility and power of resource within its own chosen circle, yet the widest realm of mere brain creation must be thin and

small compared with existing reality both in the seen and the unseen worlds.

We can now see the reason why Shelley's long poems are such absolute failures, his short lyrics so strangely succeed. Mere thrills of soul were weak as connecting bonds for long poems. Distilled essences and personified qualities were poor material out of which to build up great works. These things could give neither unity, nor motive power, nor human interest to long poems. Hence the incoherence which all but a few devoted admirers find in Shelley's long poems, despite their grand passages and their splendid imagery. In fact, if the long poems were to be broken up and thrown into a heap, and the lyric portions riddled out of them and preserved, the world would lose nothing, and would get rid of not a little offensive stuff. An exception to this judgment is generally made in favour of the 'Cenci'; but that tragedy turns on an incident so repulsive that, notwithstanding its acknowledged power, it can hardly give pleasure to any healthy mind.

On the other hand, single thrills of rapture, which are such insufficient stuff to make long poems out of, supply the very inspiration for the true lyric. It is this predominance of emotion, so unhappy to himself, which made Shelley the lyricist that he was. When he sings his lyric strains, whatever is most unpleasant in him is softened down, if it does not wholly disappear. Whatever is most unique and excellent in him comes out at its best—his eye for abstract beauty, the subtlety of his thought, the rush of his eager pursuing desire, the splendour of his imagery, the delicate rhythm, the matchless music. These lyrics are gales of melody blown from a far-off region, that looks fair in the distance. Perhaps those enjoy them most who do not inquire too closely what is the nature of that land, or know too exactly the theories and views of life of which these songs are the effluence; for if we come too near we might find that there was poison in the air. Many a one has read those lyrics and felt their fascination without thought of the unhappy experience out of which they have come. They understood 'a beauty in the words, but not the words.' I doubt whether any one after very early youth, any one who has known the realities of life, can continue to take Shelley's best songs to heart, as he can those of Shakespeare or the best of Burns. For, however we may continue to wonder at the genius that is in them, no healthy mind will find in them the expression of its truest and best thoughts. Other lyric poets, it has been said, sing of what they feel. Shelley in his lyrics sings of what he wants to feel. The thrills of desire, the gushes of emotion, are all straining after something seen afar but unattained, something distant or future; or they are passionate despair, utter despondency for something hopelessly gone. Yet it must be owned that those bursts of passionate desire after ideal beauty set our pulses a-throbbing with a strange vibration even when we do not really sympathise with them. Even his desolate wails make

those seem for a moment to share his despair who do not really share it. Such is the charm of his impassioned eloquence and the witchery of his music.

Let us turn now to look at some of his lyrics in detail.

The earliest of them, those of 1814, were written while Shelley was under the depressing spell of materialistic belief, and at the time when he was abandoning poor Harriet Westbrook. For a time he lived under the spell of that ghastly faith, hugging it, yet hating it; and its progeny are seen in the lyrics of that time, such as 'Death,' 'Mutability,' 'Lines in a Country Churchyard.' These have a cold, clammy feel. They are full of 'wormy horrors,' as though the poet were one

who had made his bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black Death
Keeps record of the trophies won from Life,

as though by dwelling amid these things he had hoped to force some lone ghost

to render up the tale
Of what we are.

And what does it all come to?—what is the lesson he reads there?—

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call life. . . . Behind lurk Fear
And Hope, twin destinies, who ever weave
Their shadows o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.

That is all that the belief in mere matter taught Shelley, or ever will teach anyone.

As he passed on, the clayey, clammy sensation is less present. Even Hume's impressions are better than mere dust, and the Platonic ideas are better than Hume's impressions. When he came under the influence of Plato his doctrine of ideas, as eternal existences and the only realities, exercised over Shelley the charm it always has had for imaginative minds; and it furnished him with a form under which he figured to himself his favourite belief in the Spirit of Love and Beauty as the animating spirit of the universe—that for which the human soul pants. It is the passion for this ideal which leads Alastor through his long wanderings to die at last in the Caucasian wilderness without attaining it. It is this which he apostrophises in the 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' as the power which consecrates all it shines on, as the awful loveliness to which he looks to free this world from its dark slavery. It is this vision which reappears in its highest form in 'Prometheus Unbound,' the greatest and most attractive of all Shelley's longer poems. That drama is from beginning to end a great lyrical poem, or I should rather say a congeries of lyrics, in which perhaps more than anywhere else Shelley's lyrical power has reached its highest flight. The whole poem is exalted by a grand pervading idea, one which in

its truest and deepest form is the grandest we can conceive—the idea of the ultimate renovation of man and the world. And although the powers and processes and personified abstractions which Shelley invoked to effect this end are ludicrously inadequate, as irrational as it would be to try to build a solid house out of shadows and moonbeams, yet the end in view does impart to the poem something of its own elevation. Prometheus, the representative of suffering and struggling humanity, is to be redeemed and perfected by union with Asia, who is the ideal of beauty, the light of life, the spirit of love. To this spirit Shelley looked to rid the world of all its evil and bring in the diviner day. The lyric poetry, which is exquisite throughout, perhaps culminates in the well-known exquisite song in which Panthea, one of the nymphs, hails her sister Asia, as

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.

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.

Lamp of Earth! where'er thou movest
 The dim shapes are clad with brightness,
 And the souls of whom thou lovest
 Walk upon the winds with lightness,
 Till they fail, as I am failing,
 Dizzy, lost, yet unbewailing.

The reply of Asia to this song is hardly less exquisite. Everyone here will remember it:—

My soul is an enchanted boat,
 Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
 Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
 And thine doth like an angel sit
 Beside the helm, conducting it,
 Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing;
 It seems to float ever, for ever,
 Upon the many-winding river,
 Between mountains, woods, abysses,
 A paradise of wildernesses!
 Till, like one in slumber bound,
 Borne to the ocean, I float down, around
 Into a sea profound of ever-spreading sound.

Meanwhile thy spirit lifts its pinions
 In music's most serene dominions,
 Catching the winds that fan that happy heaven.
 And we sail on, away, afar
 Without a course, without a star,
 But, by the instinct of sweet music driven ;
 Till through Elysian garden islets
 By thee, most beautiful of pilots,
 Where never mortal pinnacle glided,
 The boat of my desire is guided :
 Realms where the air we breathe is love,
 Which in the winds on the waves doth move,
 Harmonising this earth with what we feel above.

In these two lyrics you have Shelley at his highest perfection. Exquisitely beautiful as they are, they are, however, beautiful as the mirage is beautiful, and as unsubstantial. There is nothing in the reality of things answering to Asia. She is not human, she is not divine. There is nothing moral in her—no will, no power to subdue evil; only an exquisite essence, a melting loveliness. There is in her no law, no righteousness; something to enervate, nothing to brace the soul. After her you long for one bracing look on the stern, severe countenance of Duty, of whom another poet sang—

Stern lawgiver ! yet thou dost wear
 The Godhead's most benignant grace ;
 Nor know I anything so fair
 As is the smile upon thy face ;
 Flowers laugh before thee in their beds,
 And fragrance in thy footing treads ;
 Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
 And the most ancient heavens through thee are fresh and strong.

Perfect as is the workmanship of those lyrics in 'Prometheus' and many another, their excellence is lessened by the material out of which they are woven being fantastic, not substantial, truth. Few of them lay hold of real sentiments which are catholic to humanity. They do not deal with permanent emotions which belong to all men and are for all time, but appeal rather to minds in a particular stage of culture, and that not a healthy stage. They are not of such stuff as life is made of. They will not interest all healthy and truthful minds in all stages of culture and in all ages. To do this, however, is, I believe, a note of the highest style of lyric poem.

Another thing to be observed is, that while the imagery of Shelley's lyrics is so splendid and the music of their language so magical, both of these are at that point of over-bloom which is on the verge of decay. The imagery, for all its splendour, is too ornate, too redundant, too much overlays the thought, which has not strength enough to uphold such a weight. Then, as to the music of the words, wonderful as it is, all but exclusive admirers of Shelley must have felt at times as if the sound runs away with the sense. In some of the 'Prometheus' lyrics

the poet, according to Mr. Symonds, seems to have 'realised the miracle of making words, detached from meaning, the substance of a new ethereal music.' This is, to say the least, a dangerous miracle to practise. Even Shelley, overborne by the power of melodious words, would at times seem to approach perilously near the borders of the unintelligible, not to say the nonsensical. What it comes to, when adopted as a style, has been seen plainly enough in some of Shelley's chief followers in our own day. Cloyed with overloaded imagery, and satiated almost to sickening with alliterative music, we turn for re-invigoration to poetry that is severe even to baldness.

The 'Prometheus Unbound' was written in Italy, and during his four Italian years Shelley's lyric stream flowed on unremittingly, and enriched England's poetry with many lyrics unrivalled in their kind, and evoked from its language a new power. These lyrics are on the whole his best poetic work. To go over them in detail would be impossible, besides being needless. Perhaps his year most prolific in lyrics was 1820, just two years before his death. Among the products of this year were, the 'Sensitive Plant,' more than half lyrical, the 'Cloud,' the 'Skylark,' 'Love's Philosophy,' 'Arethusa,' 'Hymns of Pan and Apollo,' all in his best manner, with many besides these. About the lyrics of this time two things are noticeable: more of them are about things of nature than heretofore, and there are several on Greek subjects.

Of all modern attempts to reinstate Greek subjects I know nothing equal to these, except perhaps one or two of the Laureate's happiest efforts. They take the Greek forms and mythologies, and fill them with modern thought and spirit. And perhaps this is the only way to make Greek subjects real and interesting to us; for if we want the very Greek spirit we had better go to the originals and not to any reproductions.

You remember how he makes Pan sing—

From the forests and highlands
 We come, we come;
 From the river-girt islands,
 Where loud waves are dumb,
 Listening to my sweet pipings.

* * * *

Liquid Peneus was flowing,
 And all dark Tempe lay
 In Pelion's shadow, outgrowing
 The light of the dying day,
 Speeded with my sweet pipings.
 The Sileni, and Sylvans, and Fauns,
 And the nymphs of the woods and waves,
 To the edge of the moist river-lawns,
 And the brink of the dewy caves,
 And all that did then attend or follow,
 Were silent with love, as you now, Apollo,
 With envy of my sweet pipings.

I sang of the dancing stars,
 I sang of the dædal Earth,
 And of Heaven, and the giant wars,
 And Love, and Death, and Birth,
 And then I changed my pipings—
 Singing how down the vale of Menalus
 I pursued a maiden and clasped a weed.
 Gods and men, we are all deluded thus !
 It breaks in our bosom, and then we bleed :
 All wept, as I think both ye now would,
 If envy or age had not frozen your blood,
 At the sorrow of my sweet pipings.

Of the lyrics on natural objects the two supreme ones are the 'Ode on the West Wind' and the 'Skylark.' Of this last nothing need be said. Artistically and poetically it is unique, has a place of its own in poetry; yet may I be allowed to express a misgiving about it which I have long felt, and others may feel too? For all its beauty, perhaps one would rather not recall it when hearing the skylark's song in the fields on a bright spring morning. The poem is not in tune with the bird's song and the feelings it does and ought to awaken. The rapture with which the strain springs up at first dies down before the close into Shelley's ever-haunting morbidity. Who wishes, when hearing the real skylark, to be told that

We look before and after,
 And pine for what is not :
 Our sincerest laughter
 With some pain is fraught ?

If personal feeling is to be inwrought into the living powers of nature, let it be such feeling as is in keeping with the object, appropriate to the theme in hand.

Such is that personal invocation with which Shelley closes his grand 'Ode to the West Wind,' written the previous year, 1819—

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is :
 What if my leaves are fallen like its own !
 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
 Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit fierce,
 My spirit ! be thou me, impetuous one !
 Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
 Like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth ;
 And, by the incantation of this verse,
 Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind !
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth
 The trumpet of a prophecy ! O Wind,
 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind ?

This ode ends with some vigour, some hope; but that is not usual with Shelley. Everyone must have noticed how almost habitually his intensest lyrics—those which have started with the fullest swing of rapture—die down before they close into a wail of despair. It is as though, when the strong gush of emotion had spent itself, there was no more behind, nothing to fall back upon, but blank emptiness and desolation. It is this that makes Shelley's poetry so unspeakably sad—sad with a hopeless sorrow that is like none other. You feel as though he were a wanderer who has lost his way hopelessly in the wilderness of a blank universe. His cry is, as Mr. Carlyle long since said, like 'the infinite inarticulate wailing of forsaken infants.' In the wail of his desolation there are many tones—some wild and weird, some defiant, some full of despondent pathos.

The lines written in 'Dejection,' on the Bay of Naples, in 1818, are perhaps the most touching of all his wails: the words are so sweet they seem, by their very sweetness, to lighten the load of heart-loneliness:—

I see the Deep's untrampled floor
 With green and purple seaweeds strown;
 I see the waves upon the shore,
 Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown:

I sit upon the sands alone;
 The lightning of the noon-tide ocean
 Is flashing round me, and a tone
 Arises from its measured motion.

How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

Alas! I have nor hope, nor health,
 Nor peace within, nor calm around,
 Nor that content, surpassing wealth,
 The sage in meditation found.

* * * *

Yet now despair itself is mild,
 Even as the winds and waters are;
 I would lie down like a tired child,
 And weep away this life of care
 Which I have borne, and yet must bear,
 Till death like sleep might steal on me,
 And I might feel in the warm air
 My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
 Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Who that reads these sighing lines but must feel for the heart that breathed them! Yet how can we be surprised that he should have felt so desolate? Every heart needs some real stay. And a heart so sensitive, a spirit so finely touched, as Shelley's needs, far more than unsympathetic and narrow natures, a refuge amid the storms of life. But he knew of none. His universe was a homeless one, had no centre of repose. His universal essence of love,

diffused throughout it, contained nothing substantial—no will that could control and support his own. While a soul owns no law, is without awe, lives wholly by impulse, what rest, what central peace, is possible for it? When the ardours of emotion have died down, what remains for it but weakness, exhaustion, despair? The feeling of his weakness woke in Shelley no contriteness or brokenness of spirit, no self-abasement, no reverence. Nature was to him really the whole, and he saw in it nothing but ‘a revelation of death, a sepulchral picture, generation after generation disappearing and being heard of and seen no more.’ He rejected utterly that other ‘consolatory revelation which tells us that we are spiritual beings, and have a spiritual source of life,’ and strength, above and beyond the material system. Such a belief, or rather no belief, as his can engender only infinite sadness, infinite despair. And this is the deep undertone of all Shelley’s poetry.

I have dwelt on his lyrics because they contain little of the offensive and nothing of the revolting which here and there obtrudes itself in the longer poems. And one may speak of these lyrics without agitating too deeply questions which at present I would rather avoid. Yet even the lyrics bear some impress of the source whence they come. Beautiful though they be, they are like those fine pearls which, we are told, are the products of disease in the parent shell. All Shelley’s poetry is, as it were, a gale blown from a richly gifted but unwholesome land; and the taint, though not so perceptible in the lyrics, still hangs more or less over many of the finest. Besides this defect, they are very limited in their range of influence. They cannot reach the hearts of all men. They fascinate only some of the educated, and that probably only while they are young. The time comes when these pass out of that peculiar sphere of thought and find little interest in such poetry. Probably the rare exquisiteness of their workmanship will always preserve Shelley’s lyrics, even after the world has lost, as we may hope it will lose, sympathy with their substance. But better, stronger, more vital far are those lyrics which lay hold on the permanent, unchanging emotions of man—those emotions which all healthy natures have felt and always will feel, and which no new stage of thought or civilisation can ever bury out of sight.

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