

## THE CRITICS' SHELLEY

NOWADAYS there are few professional critics who praise or condemn books for moral reasons. That custom, one of the virtues of the old *Edinburgh*, can be seen dying in the early Victorian reviews. For years critics have smiled good-humouredly at Dryden and Dr. Johnson for their pre-occupation with moral values, and writers have laughed at Milton and Sir Philip Sidney for their desire to instruct and improve. But the decline is less noticeable among those who do not have to write for money, who receive their books, not with the publishers' compliments, but through buying or borrowing, and are as a result more inclined to read them right through. Really most of us are ignorant of æsthetic principles: we are little interested in the Will o' the Wisp incantations of *La Poésie Pure*, nor do we care to try the slippery path across the Crocean bog. To the disgust of those critics who wish us to judge by their own mysterious esoteric standards, most of us insist on having a little index of our own. There are many books, said to be masterpieces, which we object to for moral reasons, and will not, whatever their artistic merits, admit to our shelves. Against this attitude, which is at least as old as Aristotle, the professional critics have often fought in vain. Most of us still insist on liking books for other than purely æsthetic reasons, and, to make more popular a writer of whom he thinks highly, the critic has to stoop to our level.

The cause of the early neglect of Shelley's poetry was certainly moral. He lived at a time when it was more than usually easy for a rather wild young man to make himself disliked. Most people were sick to death of the 'new' ideas which had fired the French Revolution and sustained the Napoleonic Wars. They knew as much as they wanted about Shelley, when they had heard that he was at one time proud to be the disciple of a notorious free-thinker, whose daughter he later married. They would

have as little to do with him as many people in present-day England would with a poet, disciple of Stalin. They very naturally refused to read most of what he had written.

The first poems of his to become popular were, of course, the lyrics, because they were not about ideas, but about things like clouds and larks. Little books of selections from Shelley appeared, containing only the lyrics and suitable even for the most impressionable Tory children, but giving as false an idea of Shelley as a similar selection would of Shakespeare. But the lyrics did a great deal to remove the public's chief objection to Shelley. How could a man who sang so divinely be wicked? The lyrics and the writings of Hogg, Mrs. Shelley, and other admirers encouraged people to think that the *real* Shelley was a beautiful star-like being, whose true province was the clouds, and who had strayed out of his course in coming to earth. 'Shelley wasn't immoral. Not a bit of it. How could he be? Never really a man, he never fully understood what morality was. He knew so little about life and worldly things. It would be absurd to take his philosophy seriously; indeed, it was never really his; the wild ideas which clog and encumber his naturally soaring verse were taken undigested from his father-in-law.' This view was common to Matthew Arnold and his readers when he wrote: 'He is a beautiful and enchanting spirit, whose vision, when we call it up, has far more loveliness, more charm for our soul, than the vision of Byron. But all the personal charm of Shelley cannot hinder us from at last discovering in his poetry the incurable want of sound subject matter, and the incurable fault, in consequence, of unsubstantiality.' When, seven years later, Dowson brought out a biography giving some rather unpleasant details of Shelley's relationship with Harriet, Arnold wrote a long essay 'to show that our former beautiful and lovable Shelley still survives,' and thought it necessary to repeat that 'in poetry no less than in life, he is a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.'

Critics do not commonly spare each other, yet scarcely any critic has challenged these sayings of Matthew Arnold. The essay by Francis Thompson, which the *Dublin* published in 1908, is altogether more splendid than Arnold's, but its view of Shelley is fundamentally the same. To Thompson, Shelley was 'the enchanted child.' 'Both as poet and man he was essentially a child . . . and the child appeared no less often in Shelley the philosopher than in Shelley the idler.' The phrase, 'the wild mask of revolutionary metaphysics,' over which Thompson peeped and saw 'the face of the child,' seems to indicate that he, too, thought little of Shelley's mind. Indeed, very few of Shelley's critics have taken his ideas at all seriously.

Before examining Shelley's poetry for signs of maturity, it would be as well to pay some attention to Godwin, whose influence, according to the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, 'Shelley never actively outgrew.' Astonishing, indeed, is the vision of Godwin which the critics call up. To some he is a kind of literary criminal, who not only pushed a wild mask on to Shelley's face, but misled Southey and caused Wordsworth to waste some of the best years of his life in sterile materialism. He is thought a fool, but nevertheless the dominating bogey of the romantic poets. According to others, he is Shelley's inspiration. For instance, Mr. Brailsford, Godwin's biographer, writes that 'it would be no exaggeration to say that *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas* are the greatest of Godwin's works.' This whets the appetite for Godwin. But though the style of *Political Justice* and *The Enquirer* is admirable, the doctrine quickly frosts all optimism. Not that Godwin's materialism can rival that of our own cold philosophers.

Godwin, like Shelley, is keenly alive to the evil in life. But, like Rousseau and most modern psychologists, he believes that it is the result, not of nature, but solely of education and environment. Man's subjection to environment he calls 'The Law of Necessity.' 'He, who affirms that all actions are necessary, means that, if we form a just

and complete view of the circumstances in which a living or intellectual being is placed, we shall find that he could not in any moment of his existence have acted otherwise than he has acted.' This doctrine we sometimes call 'determinism.' It follows that, if man's surroundings can be altered, man himself will be changed. The process is completely automatic and man will be perfect as soon as his environment is perfect. To Godwin man's *only* way of altering himself is by altering his environment. This he can only do by an effort of reason. Unaided reason can supply the cure for every ill.

Every book on Shelley is pretty sure to tell us that he came under Godwin's influence while still at Eton, and that he wrote *Queen Mab* when only eighteen. That Shelley was so influenced is not surprising. Boys of eighteen are commonly impressionable, and there was more reason in falling for Godwin then than for Marx now. He is, for one thing, easily comprehensible, and, for another, interested in something besides economics. What is remarkable is that Shelley did not, even at that age, swallow Godwin whole. In *Queen Mab*, embedded amid passages of orthodox Godwinian philosophy, are hidden sentiments like:

' But mean lust  
Has bound his chains so tight around the earth,  
That all within it but the virtuous man  
Is venal,'

which do not at all fit in with the doctrine that man is *entirely at the mercy of his environment*.

A subject of *Queen Mab*, as of many of Shelley's later poems, is the comparison of man as he is with man as he might be. Shelley draws a distinction, not in mere *condition* as Godwin does, but in *kind*. Men, as they are now, are leaves scattered by the autumn wind, 'loading with loathsome rottenness the land,' which yet they fertilise.

' Till from the breathing lawn a forest springs  
Of youth, integrity and loveliness,'

This regeneration is described three times in *Queen Mab* and on each occasion it is the result of a miracle, the work of an angel from heaven. Not once in Shelley is it the result of human reason changing man's environment, the doctrine we should expect from a disciple of Godwin.

The symbol which Shelley uses to express the change is that of the breaking of a veil, which is connected with time and hides eternity from the sight of man. The metaphor was possibly suggested by the flimsiness of the evening dress of the Empire period.

' Joy to the Spirit came  
Through the wide rent in Time's eternal veil.  
Hope was seen beaming through the mists of fear :  
Earth was no longer Hell ' ;

Thus there is plenty of non-Godwinian matter even in *Queen Mab*, quite enough to disprove the view that '*Queen Mab* is nothing but Godwin versified.' (Brailsford.) And the longer Shelley lived, the further he deviated from Godwin. He soon became a pupil who in almost everything contradicted his master. He cut most of the Godwinian passages out of the re-working of *Queen Mab* known as *The Dæmon of the World*. And in his mature poems it is often very difficult to find any trace at all of Godwin.

The problem of regeneration from evil is Shelley's constant theme. Only for the space of a few short lyrics could he forget the plight of Prometheus and the difficulties of his unbinding. Rebirth from evil is the top-tune of his early philosophical poem, *The Revolt of Islam*. Quite early in the poem Shelley makes it clear that he believes that man is born sinful. His doctrine of original sin is very similar to ours. He believed, as we believe, in a far distant golden age, when everything, even the snake, was good. But there was war in the heavens,

'A blood-red comet and the morning star  
Mingled their beams in combat . . . . ,'

and the fair star fell,

' . . . evil triumphed, and the Spirit of Evil,  
 One power of many shapes which none may know,  
 One shape of many names; the Fiend did revel  
 In reigning o'er a world of woe,  
 For the new race of man went to and fro,  
 Famished and homeless, loathed and loathing, wild,  
 And hating good—for his immortal foe,  
 He changed from starry shape, beauteous and wild,  
 To a dire snake, with man and beast unreconciled.'

If this passage means anything, it means that Shelley believed in a positive evil force, in what we call the Devil. The succeeding stanzas show that he believed also in a Spirit of Good, the Morning Star of his myth:

' . . . the Great Spirit of Good did creep among  
 The nations of mankind, and every tongue  
 Cursed and blasphemed him as he passed . . .'

Soon the Spirit of Good

' with that fiend of blood  
 Renewed with doubtful war.'

We all know that while at Oxford Shelley tried to distribute a pamphlet on *The Necessity of Atheism*, but this is quite insufficient as evidence that he was always an atheist. He was not; he was rather a dualist, a not uncommon thing among those who are too much concerned with the problems of evil. His belief in man's natural sinfulness divided him by a high fence from the sad, free-thinking children of Rousseau, who were common at his time. This belief, which is as important to Shelley's thought as to ours, is put forth in all Shelley's considerable adult poems, but nowhere so clearly as in the *Cenci*, itself a dramatic study in evil. The following passage, however, does more than reinforce my argument; it seems a prophecy of the psychoanalysts, who bewilder men in our days.

' . . . 'tis a trick of this same family  
 To analyse their own and other minds.  
 Such self-mastery shall teach the will  
 Dangerous secrets; for it tempts our power,  
 Knowing what may be thought and must be done,  
 Into the depth of darkest purposes;

So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,  
 Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,  
 And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,  
 Show a poor figure to my own esteem,  
 To which I grow half-reconciled.'

No child could have written this passage. Of English poets only Shakespeare could have successfully tackled this complex characterisation. The passage has the air of being knowledge communicated in the most accurate and concise way possible, an air which only great poetry has. It shows, I think, an altogether rarer genius than that in the lyrics; with many others it goes to refute the view that Shelley's poetical gift is essentially lyrical. The lyrics are, in fact, not the poems which best represent Shelley, nor is there, as Francis Thompson thought, no poem 'more purely Shelleyan than *The Cloud*.' Care-free, birdlike lyrics make up but a small part of the quality and bulk of his work. To be carefree was something a little foreign to him; not even in addressing the skylark can he get quite away from the misery of men:

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

Shelley was no ethereal being. He was passionately concerned with the great human problems. He was all his life aware of being up against sin, one of the first of worldly realities.

It does not matter very much which of Shelley's longer poems you examine to disprove Matthew Arnold's charge of 'incurable want of sound subject-matter'; all have fine themes. *Prometheus Unbound* is well known and contains some of his best poetry. The theme is regeneration from evil; the treatment mythological, which Francis Thompson considered an indication of Shelley's childishness. Prometheus had once in scorn and pride cursed the Gods, and for this he and the whole earth are enchained in agony and

plague. Earth cannot free herself; Prometheus alone can release her. Prometheus is still proud and defiant, but when he is told of the suffering he has caused he makes a great effort, swallows his pride and retracts the curse:

'It doth repent me: words are quick and vain . . .  
I wish no living thing to suffer pain.'

This repentance shows an important advance on Shelley's thought in *The Revolt of Islam*. The typical pagan hates remorse and fears repentance. He depends for courage to live upon pride and self-confidence. Remorse and humility are anathema to him because they will make him less capable of facing life. D. H. Lawrence, to take a fashionable example, disliked Christianity because it counselled men not to be proud and self-assertive. Once a pagan begins to lose self-confidence and to feel sorry, he is lost, as a pagan. He must feel as sure of himself as he can. His way of living consists in trying to stave off remorse and humility; the Christian's way of living is to embrace both. Shelley's position as a remorseful pagan is almost unique in modern European thought.

The immediate effect of Prometheus' retraction is to submerge Earth in still sharper pain. Final death seems to have come. The Furies approach, hoping to devour Prometheus. But Mercury descends from Olympus and drives them back. He tells Prometheus to let 'the will kneel' within his haughty heart. Prometheus refuses and the Furies gather. Prometheus suffers until he tells a Fury that he feels pity for men. The Fury replies:

'Thou pitiest them. I speak no more.'

and vanishes. The action is continued by Asia and Panthea. They go through a forest, climb a pinnacle of rock among mountains and then discover their way:

'To the deep, to the deep,  
Down. Down.'

There, in the depths, they enter a cave and meet Demogorgon, who tells them that 'Almighty God' made the



living world, and 'thoughts, reason, passion, will,' all that it contains. Mysterious things happen in his cave. Then Asia, 'whose soul is an enchanted boat,' tells the account of their journey: The remarkable thing about it is that everything has gone backwards:

' We have passed Age's icy caves,  
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves,  
And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray :  
Beyond the glassy banks we flee  
Of shadow-peopled infancy,  
Through Death and Birth, to a diviner day.'

The release of Prometheus and the regeneration of the world are accomplished. They happen in the conventional way, through humility and child-like simplicity, and through dying the death of simplicity. Such is the great spiritual theme which is the subject of *Prometheus Unbound*. To call it unsound is to show insufficient respect for man's highest strivings, to call it unsubstantial is to show little understanding of the weight of spiritual things. Shelley's theme has been that of some of the finest poetry of every age. Measured by the amount of first-rate poetry it has inspired, it is perhaps the greatest of all literary themes. For a Catholic to call the treatment child-like is to be a little ungracious. True, we have in our charge the truth about rebirth, and the truth has superseded the myths. But this gives us the right, not so much to dismiss the myths as childish, as to praise them whenever they come near to the truth. Light is yet light, wherever it shines, even though it be one of many thousand reflections.

Shelley's thought and poetry develop both together till in his last poem, *The Triumph of Life*, his poetry is at its best and most Dantesque and his thought most fundamentally opposed to the revolutionary thought of Rousseau and Godwin. All his poetry, from *Queen Mab* to *The Triumph of Life* is, in the broad sense, philosophical. To follow most of the critics, and to disregard this, is to ignore Shelley's main poetic purpose. It is like reading *King*

*Lear* without following the plot, or hearing a performance of Wagner's *Ring* deaf to words and story. There are, of course, critics who advocate these things, who tell us, further, that it is not the look of piety on the face of an old Florentine Madonna that matters, but the picture's 'significant form.' But they are only difficult to refute when dead to reason and have influenced our public but little.

The etherialised Shelley of the critics is only a fraction of the complete Shelley. Most of his poetry is not that of an angel, but of a man deeply concerned with the greater of the problems which concern us. To a Christian there is little revolutionary in his philosophy, and his most frequent theme is as old as wind and tide. He is, after Spenser, the greatest of English philosophical poets, and, but for his early political views, would be as safe as Spenser in a child's hands. The Victorians need never have feared corruption from one who hated evil and passivity as much as Shelley. He was right in most of the things he said, and wrong chiefly because of the things he did not say. He was no angel, but a rather unhappy pagan poet, who lived in glorious independence of other pagans, and ended by stoutly reaffirming some of the eternal truths.

GEORGE SAYER.