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REMEMBERING SHELLEY

Shelley, who never got old, was the poet I cared about most in my youth. His watercolor likeness, once Newman White's, still hangs on the wall in my study. But I haven't often re-read him, and wonder if he isn't a poet for the young, his appeal fading as the shades of the prison house close upon us. They were all so young, Shelley and friends, collectively the Pisa Gang, Trelawny, Jane and Ned Williams—he did the watercolor with the mad electric eyes—Mary Shelley and Clare Claremont, half sisters by Godwin's two wives, Byron, the only one over thirty. Trelawny, a real Byronic hero, living into great old age, at the end came back to die in Rome. For half a year, no more, he saw Shelley plain and wanted to be buried beside him. Browning's poem gives the sense, the eagle-feather picked up on the moor, a hand's-breadth amid the blank miles.

Heir to a great estate, among the largest in England's southern counties, Shelley did what he could to throw this inheritance away. He was a fool for Christ's sake, rejecting Christ at first, coming round later. Once, meeting a barefoot woman hobbling over rough stones, he came home without his shoes. A nerve, he called himself, "o'er which do creep / The else unfelt oppressions of the earth." This sounds a little like the Sensitive Plant, not the poem, the poet, known for shrinking. He surprises you, though. "I go on until I am stopped," he said, adding, "and I am never stopped."

A boyhood friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, remembered him reading "for 16 out of every 24 hours." He read Homer in Greek, Lucretius in Latin, Calderon in Spanish, Goethe in German, Tasso in Italian. Living in the Italian countryside in his last years, he read Herodotus. He sat naked on the rocks beside a forest pool, then, folding back the page, dropped into the fountain. When he drowned at sea it was like that, his reading, Keats and Sophocles, thrust into his jacket as he got ready to die.

His commitment, vowed early, was to Intellectual Beauty, and later he asked rhetorically: "Have I not kept the vow?" But it thinned his

poetry, not provincial enough. Like his *Witch of Atlas*, “a sexless bee,” he tasted all blossoms, confining himself to none. Other poets make abstract things substantial; he turns this around, hard on those who loved him. “Don’t be like your brother,” said his father the baronet to a younger son. “Take care that you don’t learn too much.” The father is a heavy, but his conventional wisdom has its corner of truth. Shelley, soaring above the earth, didn’t see that.

Expelled from Oxford for an atheistical pamphlet, he took lodgings in London on Poland Street. It brought to mind Thaddeus of Warsaw and freedom. But he didn’t stay in London or any place for long, bitten by discontent, divine and prosaic. In Dublin at age nineteen—having gone there, he said, to forward the cause of Catholic emancipation—he stood on the balcony of his hotel, showering passersby with an *Address to the Irish People*. “O IRISHMEN, REFORM YOURSELVES!” he told them. From Lynmouth on the Bristol Channel, he issued a *Declaration of Rights*. Like a castaway’s message in a bottle, it went out in home-made boats on the water, or floated aloft tied to fire-balloons.

Stories like these endear him, anyway to me, but send up danger signals. Shelley talks too much and the talk is too declarative, the product of a mind often violated by ideas. He wrote quickly and carelessly, not always bothering to make his details square, even antecedent and pronoun. Like many poets of the last two hundred years, he puts his cards on the table, a fault. It seems a bizarre complaint to make of “modern” poetry, generally faulted for being obscure. But great poetry gives you the sense of meaning more than it says, and clamorous poetry like Shelley’s says at least as much as it means. *Prometheus Unbound*, often called his greatest poem, is pitched very high, a strain on the reader. Interspersed rhyming songs do what they can to lower the pitch, but nag at us all the same.

Though he tries out different verse forms, his experiments are more Swinburne than Sidney, like the spun-glass shapes of Murano, less impressive than the skill that went to make them. In “*The Sensitive Plant*” and “*The Cloud*,” the relentless beat tells of “poetry,” and it wearies. Sound is mesmeric and incantation does duty for thought. Matter goes one way, manner another, not a deliberate disjunction. See, for instance, his lines on the Euganean Hills, where the intellectualizing cast seems blurred by the meter, lulling intellect to sleep.

In the threnody for Keats, political asides vie for attention with the dead poet. This matter between the lines doesn't function, as with Shakespeare, to intimate a greater world, only a special bias. A brief dirge shows nature storm tossed and sounding like it ought to, but he himself hears it wailing "for the world's wrong." Paradoxically, this peg is too slight to hang his poem on. The wrong will be rectified someday, not yet, and "the world's great age" is always about to begin. Always tomorrow, never today, seems a bad recipe for poetry and life. Raising their eyes, writers like Shelley leave the foreground untended. But it isn't the politics of his vision that fatigues us. He isn't enough convicted of sin.

In his "Mont Blanc" he celebrates a "universe of things," but things don't crop up in the poetry much. Exceptions confirm the rule, like the song from his unfinished drama, *Charles the First*: a bird on a wintry bough, frozen wind, freezing stream, leafless forest, the sound of a millwheel. Auden and Pearson, liking Shelley best when least typical, make room for this poem in their Viking Portable Poets, regrettably no longer in print. Mostly, however, his ideal poet reserves attention to the noumenal world. Our physical world—the "painted veil"—was raw materials, and from them he created "forms more real than living man." Anyone could make the word flesh.

When Mary complained that one of the poems lacked "human interest," he agreed it was so. "You might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton," he said, "as expect anything human or earthly from me." But the poetry quivers with erotic feeling. A rose is like a nymph stepping into her bath, disrobing all the way (in "The Sensitive Plant"), a woman, when her lover's being overflows, is a chalice receiving his wine (in *Prometheus Unbound*). Sexuality itches at him in "Epipsychidion," among other things a defense of free love. (Scholars heatedly deny this.) Heaping praises on a young Italian girl, Emilia Viviani ("Seraph of Heaven!" etc.), he composes a litany better suited to the Virgin. He isn't a through-and-through Platonist, however, and his heroine's "loose hair" smells like a woman's. The "wild odor" it gives off invades him, he says, to the soul.

Both cranks and eleemosynary men line up beneath his standard. Newman White, his best scholar and a man of feeling, chaired the Socialist Party of North Carolina. Others, dinosaur Marxists, sponsor a

turgid professor of political science. Christopher Caudwell, who wrote nonsense but died bravely in the Spanish War, saw in Prometheus the bourgeois capitalist “trameled by the restraints of the era of mercantilism” (*Illusion and Reality*, 1936). Shelley, though never so crude, makes love to this trivializing employment.

Keats criticized his “magnanimity,” just the right tactful word for political zeal when it seeks to take over the poem. Curb it, he said, “and be more of an artist.” But doing that would have warped the grain of his genius. In 1817, the publishers C. & J. Ollier brought out “A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote throughout the Kingdom,” signed by “the Hermit of Marlowe.” Up river on the Thames, Marlowe was one of his many way stations. In the same year the same firm published *Poems, by John Keats*, a conjunction that might have distressed him. Loving art, however, he loved humanity more.

But love of the world begins with love of self, and of that he had too little. Trelawny said he “loved everything better than himself.” This accounts for his abjectness, the other side of the blithe spirit. In his imagination, he was Actaeon, savaged by the world or his own thoughts. Bowed by “a heavy weight,” he envied the wind that blows where it wants to, and the skylark’s unmeditated gladness. Ill health tormented him, and like Coleridge he shook with spasms of pain, but no one has ever said why. His grief bears such an emphasis—too many tears for the man “whom men love not”—that we wince when we don’t turn away.

I am quoting from his “Stanzas Written in Dejection,” a poem that lives up to its title. In the last stanza, however, he seems to judge himself, condemned, like Dante’s sinners, for melancholy in the light of the sun. “When the Lamp Is Shattered,” a sentimental lyric, often anthologized, continues the self-regarding strain. But like the Dejection poem, it pulls itself together, and the ending redeems many sins:

 every rafter
Will rot, and thine eagle home
 Leave thee naked to laughter,
When leaves fall and cold winds come.

This impersonal voice that makes little of palliatives isn’t often Shelley’s.

At his best, he controls it, however. Uneven in quality, he is a poet of peaks and troughs.

Admirers, lavishing praise, don't discriminate between them, and most critics in our time haven't given the former their due. The machinery of the elegiac poem—winds sobbing in their dismay, etc., etc.—nearly does for *Adonais*. But Shelley, though much falling, reaches heights unequaled since the greater Jacobeans. E.g. the “leprous” corpse that turns into flowers and mocks “the merry worm that wakes beneath.” Sorrow is the meat he feeds on, but accommodating its opposite, he sets against death's pallor the color of sky and earth. Hecticity all gone, the note of quiet seems a throwback to earlier times, before poetry began raising its voice:

Great and mean

Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.
As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.

Shelley isn't invariably Romantic, pejorative sense. *Adonais*, the bleakest of funerary poems, offers for consolation only “shelter in the shadow of the tomb.” In “The Sensitive Plant,” truth, crushed to earth, stays there, while the wicked rise up from their charnels. Purposive Shelley takes a holiday in the “Letter to Maria Gisborne,” suiting his informal couplets to a polite occasion. Civilized discourse is the stuff of “Julian and Maddalo,” a.k.a. Shelley and Byron under Italian skies. Berlioz sets the scene in his “Harold in Italy”—you can hear the two of them galloping across the Lido—and in the viola part captures all Romanticism's sweetness and yearning. For once, Shelley leaves this alone. He wants a different voice, fluent, masculine, and natural.

Couplets, fitted to a shorter line, surface again in a sexy “Invitation,” meant for Jane Williams, his friend's pretty wife. A virile seduction piece, his makes no bones about it.

“I am gone into the fields
To take what this sweet hour yields;—
Reflection, you may come to-morrow,

Sit by the fireside with Sorrow.—
You with the unpaid bill, Despair,—
You, tiresome verse-reciter, Care,—
I will pay you in the grave.”

This sophisticated Shelley harks back two hundred years to Restoration poets. But I mustn't make exceptions the norm.

Essential Shelley is the one who agonizes at every pore, attuned, like his Witch of Atlas, to inchoate feelings and thrilling sounds we hear in our youth. Both are gone soon enough, but his poems record their pressure. Byron called him the Snake, tall beyond the average and leaning forward when he walked. In person he was tense, in sensibility morbid, but these case-history terms say too little. In *Prometheus Unbound*, he is the lonely man who drinks oracular vapor from the dark underworld, or drains to the dregs the maddening wine of life. Ideas, his fatal chimera, led him to elaborate a world where men have quit being wicked, “women too, frank, beautiful, and kind.” But he lives with an intensity few can support, knowing “the pain of bliss / To move, to breathe, to be.”

He isn't that perfect Shelley convention used to insist on, and misses the mark as often as he hits it. Living in a high place, he has a long way to fall. But his ardor is enormously taking. Emotion, no doubt excessive, belongs to his youthful time, when “tears throng to the horny eyes, / And beatings haunt the desolated heart.” It “should have learnt repose,” he says, and with the coming of age this happens. An ambiguous privilege, it wasn't his.