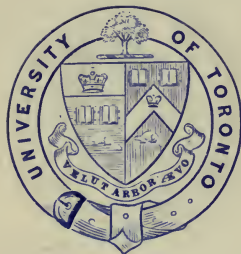




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# SHELLEY





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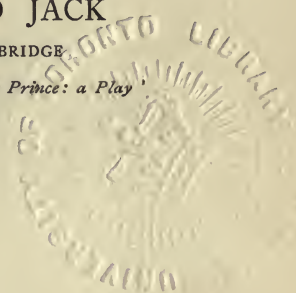
# SHELLEY

AN ESSAY

BY  
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### NOTE

This short essay is an attempt, founded upon some experience in lecturing upon the English Poets, to answer the question who is Shelley and what is the attitude in which, to understand him, we ought to approach his poetry ?



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WHAT do you read, my lord? Words, words, words! And, indeed, there is nothing more fit to occupy attention. Everything changes, and words alone remain. Perpetual permanences in a perpetual flux; they alone, I have often thought, perpetually deceive. Religion, Art, Poetry, there are collocations of letters for them in Russian and Japanese. A good man, a poet; they are words that have been bandied about time out of mind, and yet what do they mean, what do they not mean? A poet, it is popularly said, is a maker; and again, he is a speaker of beautiful but un-

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truthful things, and Poetry itself, to borrow the language of the schools, but a noble form of lie.

In what sense is there real criticism in this latter phrase? Undoubtedly it embodies much that is popularly felt about Poetry. The poet, as the populace understands him, does not love truth as the man of science loves it; he deludes himself and his public with fancies. He is the lover of legend rather than of fact, the generalizer of what is noble, one who would represent the world to us as peopled with bright creatures protected by interested gods. There is Eros and there is Psyche, and in the end the world is propitious to them both. The poet is an optimist who translates 'would-be' into 'is.' It is a view of Poetry which is by no means

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without countenance from history. "Brave men were living before Agamemnon," and, till the modern literal spirit invaded poetry too, we were not told much in poetry about any men who were not brave. To select the best and to say this is a type; to select the fine things in our feelings and to say they are everywhere in Earth and Sky, to neglect parching summer and the winter's cold, the dull moments and the dull days, is to do what—we need not be surprised at it — provokes the modern literal spirit, the spirit of science. This popular view of poetry, then, will cover a great deal of poetry, and covering it will partially condemn. It will cover the poetry of Virgil, with his world of heroes and majestic cares; it will cover the poetry, great part of the poetry, of

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- Browning with its keynote, "All's right with the world"; and it will cover so
- much of Tennyson's poetry as is dictated by the belief that our civilization and our views of life can be represented and judged by what we like in them without reference to what we do not like. But
- does it bear at all upon the poetry of Shelley, which is based upon the primary notion that the world is evil and the times are late? Assuredly if to be a poet is to represent things as brighter than they are, man's habits less in need of amendment and his prospects less drear, and to do this with a peculiar noble blindness, with an incapacity to see that the best is not everywhere nor hope all,—if this is to be a poet, Shelley is not one.

Is there more useful matter for us in

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the more radical definition ? A poet, it is said, is a maker. By this phrase it is not meant merely that a poet having to deal with imagination gives to airy nothing a local habitation or bodies forth the forms of things unknown ; for as much as that, the imaginative artist, whether his vehicle be prose or verse, must necessarily do. What is meant is that the poet does really make things for us, gives them body and standing, just as a sculptor makes a man, presents shapes so that there is no way of walking through them or considering them of non-existence. Indeed, in a high sense, the poet is the only true maker, the only lasting builder. The shades wandering vaguely through Hades, the island goddess Circe, are really made by Virgil — and Homer, made fast, that is to say,

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they are no longer religious or metaphysical ideas dependent upon the mood of the mind and vanishing when the mood has shifted into other directions ; they are ideas fixed in the mind of humanity by the making or binding power of the poet. Nay more, people that have never existed even in idea are made by this creative faculty. What were the world without Antigone, Don Quixote, or Othello ? These people truly and seriously are made, they are part of the company we keep, a strange medley of things and creatures—Hamlet's ghost, the sun that stood still in Ascalon, Wordsworth's hills and the long laboured shield of Achilles—each real with an indefinable reality ; how much more real than the business upon which we are engaged, how much more abiding !



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Is Shelley then a poet who will come under this definition ? has he added to the stock of the live things of the imagination ? is he in any strict sense a maker ? He is, and he is not. He is not a maker who has added flesh and blood creatures to our intellectual acquaintance, not a maker in the sense in which Shakespeare is one, nor indeed is he a poet who, like Wordsworth, has made a new series of ideas for our daily use. He does not make men, and he does not make a mould into which the minds of men can naturally slip. Great part of our daily thinking is done in the company of Shakespeare's people, those creations so individual that we have named classes after them ; and great part of our daily thinking is done in a groove of Wordsworth's making, a groove into which we

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slip so placidly that we are scarcely conscious of his direction. Nothing similar can be said of Shelley. If the maker is alone occupied in making things for our daily use, Shelley is not a maker. But a maker may also justly be so called when he is occupied in making a world not ours, a world outside our own. The world of Virgil is not our world—I am not speaking now of the human note that comes into Virgil's voice so often and so strongly—the world into which Virgil conducts us is a world apart. No doubt it is a world into which we can readily pass, one not so much distinct as different from ours; it is our world on a large scale, on a scale so magnified that it is not our world. There is no question of comparing Virgil's world with Shelley's, yet Virgil, a poet who

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speaks intimately to man, speaks intimately to him though and while he deals with a world of his own. Both Virgil and Shelley then are makers in this sense, they are makers of worlds not ours: Virgil the maker of a world of large actions and majestic cares; Shelley the maker of a world of light and sound and air, a world where the light is clear, where the sound is tenuous, where the air is fine.

For all that, let us not deceive ourselves about Shelley; let us not think, when we have said what is mainly true about him and "what is both true and popularly said," that we have said all. Shelley has at least something that is definite about him; he has his polemics. A more definite polemical attitude no man ever had, and this attitude is every-

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where ; we get it in "Queen Mab," in "The Revolt of Islam," in "Julian and Maddalo," even in some of the shorter poems. In "Queen Mab," his earliest considerable poem, it is apparent, and, owing partly to the force of contrast, partly to his youth, especially apparent. Everything there that has no polemical purpose, that is descriptive, that tells the tale, such as it is—everything of that kind is vague with a vagueness excessive even for Shelley, it is all cobweb ; but when he comes to denounce, when we find him taking his first exercise in didactics, the manner is quite different, we have a voice and a clear voice. Nowhere else are his denunciations quite so free of other matter. Still elsewhere and frequently his denunciations are plain enough. There is no mistake about

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his meaning. We must get rid of the notions of the old world, of its institutions, its beliefs. And if there is no mistake about his matter, equally there is no mistake about his manner. Towards views he disapproves his method in all its plainness is his own. He does not, as Byron does, raise questions that any one can see to be serious even when they are flung out by a man who has no precise idea of what they involve; nor does he, like Byron in his satirical poems, flit hither and thither, sticking in his darts of mockery, innuendo, contempt, so fast as to excite the mind of the most stupid. On the contrary, with a mind far clearer than Byron's, and much better fitted to see the bearing of argument, he never really argues. He doesn't argue, he doesn't mock, he

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doesn't puzzle. No; he turns to his society and he says, Your views on the most important matters are mistaken. Do I not make myself clear? What you say is untrue.

It is easy to dismiss this attitude of Shelley's as merely denunciatory. It is merely denunciatory, of course, and at first sight certainly it looks as if nothing could be gained by it. Even as denunciation, it is clearly not first rate. It is not full-throated, it is not red-hot, it does not break or tear: it is directed rather against views than against people, more against classes than against persons, it lacks gall and is by no means built out of personal rage. Again, it is the barest denunciation, the barest and most general, and if nothing but argument or passion were humanly

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effective, would have passed away long ago on the wings of sound. Yet the least glance at history, the least consideration of the state of our society, will convince us that these denunciations of Shelley's were not only productive of effect but were well calculated to produce effect. For myself, I must think, in addition, that they were productive of good effect. I do not think it is wholly a question of bias. Shelley has the most definite opinions not only on theology but on morals, not only on morals but on politics, and the number of people who agree with every one of his opinions must be small. On the other hand, I must think it is in some measure a question of bias somewhere; for if there be a man who feels himself hit by everything Shelley says, his praise of

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Shelley's denunciations cannot humanly be expected to be high. Anyhow, it is not essentially a question of bias. In the society to which Shelley addressed himself everything was traditional, formal, harsh. In the Church there was a priesthood whose motto was to lie still; in the State there was an aristocracy that had dreamed its dreams, and was concerned alone for the substance; in morality there was no effort: and not only was view stereotyped, those stereotyped views were alone respectable. Upon this scene Shelley appeared, a member of that very class which could serve its material interests best by keeping silence, or by breaking silence only to say, "If things are as they are, they are as they should be"; he appeared and persistently he repeated just those



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statements which his class dreaded and to the utterance of which they attached as a penalty social ostracism. A man must be very ignorant of human nature if he imagines it is possible to have on one side a society steeped in formalism, and, on the other, Shelley with his shrill "It is not so" clamouring for admittance to the ear, without some effect being produced. A man who has anything to do with literature must be singularly ignorant of literary history, even of his own literary history, if he does not know as a matter of fact that effect has been produced. Sooner or later it was certain that some of the formal people whom Shelley addressed, who for the most part had few reasons or none for their opinions, would be moved to ask, Is it so certain that what

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we repeat, and repeat we know not why, is absolutely right ? is it so certain that what is said by this man whose singleness of purpose even those whose hearts are by no means warm and whose eyes are by no means quick cannot but feel and see, is absolutely wrong ? In effect, this lonely and pure figure standing up against Society supplied the necessary antagonism, an antagonism so picturesque that even the stupid people became conscious of possibilities of dispute.

They say so,  
Shelley says the contrary.

It was an antagonism so marked that it supplied a motive for inquiry. It was an antagonism so marked that to many people it supplied the courage of inquiry.

What has openly happened needs the

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less support from instances; but indeed any one who doubts the disturbing power of Shelley's attack can see it in operation even to-day. Even to-day, when he meets views that are not his and merely formal, he sets things in tumult; the tendency of his poetry, when it comes in contact with formalists, is still to set them free; for, let a society be as informal and cosmopolitan as that of modern London, it must still contain some formalists who are old and all the host who are young. In every society, on account of the nature of society, and for every child, on account of the nature of children, education must proceed upon lines that are more or less didactic. Dicta and not theories are palatable to young people who know not the meaning of the word probable, and think at once,

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if a statement is open to argument, that it is untrue. Add to this that in every society there are series of opinions which that society considers of inestimable importance and in accordance with which it builds its life. Nothing is more difficult than to give to children the grounds on which such opinions rest, and consequently the universal tendency is to present children with a mass of matter in the form of fact, which, when they are as old as their teachers, they will discover not to be fact at all, but what is in nine cases out of ten a very different thing—the collective opinion of the fact. No doubt also, in a society as old as ours, and undergoing as rapid a process of change, there will be a further tendency to teach as fact even many opinions from which Society as a whole is already

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departing. These young formalists then, created in much the same way as the old formalists of ninety years ago, in the same way are excited by the spectacle of Shelley's antagonism. His antagonism moves them to consider, and in after years they are grateful to him for this, and have the right to be grateful.

To have said this is to have said almost all that it is needful to say about that part of Shelley's verse which is didactic, denunciatory and quite definite, about which there can be no mistake at all, and which no literary critic need stop to explain. And having said so much about its extrinsic merits one does not need specifically to dilate upon its intrinsic or poetical value. The mere spectacle of Shelley's antagonism to society is of interest to formal people

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and to the young; it is necessarily of much less interest to those to whom a poet would wish especially to appeal. To the man who possesses his soul in peace, or has got relatively near to so possessing it, who has endured the tumult, who has been here and there, a literature of bare denunciation is perhaps as uninviting a literature as is easily to be found. Let us then cheerfully put upon one side all that body of Shelley's poetry of which the motto is shortly "It is not so," let us put it on one side as having merely an occasional, a temporary or extrinsic interest, and as having no real intrinsic value. Judged as denunciation it has not salt or fire enough, the merits of Shelley's character defeat it; judged as argument it does not even make

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pretensions; judged as interesting matter it depends far too much upon a vogue of feeling running counter to institutions of its day. Poetically, there is no body in it out of which poetry can be made, it has not heat enough, and while unheated it has no rest. Let us then answer to those who assure us that Shelley's poetry is neither vague nor indefinite that undoubtedly it contains definite matter, but this definite matter is not poetry, and the poetical matter is seldom definite.

It is indeed a strange thing that one should be able to say this, and to say it truly, about Shelley's poetry. For one thing his prose is most beautiful,—it is most beautiful, and it is most definite; the argument in it—and it is often controversial—is conducted gener-

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ally with the very nicety of taste. The poet, who is content in his didactic poetry merely to make statements, in his prose illustrates what he has got to say with patient argument. Shelley's prose is a prose of sweet reason, admirable it is everywhere, but especially is it admirable when he comes to speak of his own poetry. "I had read to me those marvellous letters of Shelley," says Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff in one of the volumes of his happy diary, and Arnold permits himself to wonder whether Shelley's fame as a prose-writer will not outlive his fame as a poet. What could be better in tone and judgement than this sent in reply "to a friend who had written admonishing the poet for what he thought was a too uncompromising expression of opin-



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ion" ? He is speaking of one of his poems. "I felt that it was in many respects a genuine picture of my own mind. I felt that the sentiments were true, not assumed. And in this have I long believed that my power consists: in sympathy and that part of the imagination which relates to sentiments and contemplation. I am formed, if for anything not in common with the herd of mankind, to apprehend minute and remote distinctions of feeling, whether relative to external nature or the living beings which surround us, and to communicate the conceptions which result from considering either the moral or material universe as a whole. Of course I believe these faculties, which perhaps comprehend all that is sublime in man, to exist very imperfectly in my own mind.

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But, when you advert to my Chancery paper (a cold, forced, unimpassioned, insignificant piece of cramped and cautious argument), and to the little scrap about Mandeville (which expressed my feelings indeed, but cost scarcely two minutes' thought to express), as specimens of my powers more favourable than that which grew as it were from the 'agony and bloody sweat' of intellectual travail, surely I must feel that, in some manner, either I am mistaken in believing that I have any talent at all, or you in the selection of the specimens of it. Yet, after all, I cannot but be conscious, in much of what I write, of an absence of that tranquillity which is the attribute and accompaniment of power. This feeling alone would make your most kind and wise admonitions

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on the subject of the economy of intellectual force valuable to me. And, if I live, or if I see any trust in coming years, doubt not but that I shall do something, whatever it may be, which a serious and earnest estimate of my powers will suggest to me, and which will be in every respect accommodated to their utmost limits." Here is a voice that is clear, a voice that is at once clear and reasonable. It is the prose that is dictated by an intellect that grasps the issues. And his didactic verse is clear too. How comes it then that the real body of his poetry, the poetry on which he depends for his fame, is generally of so indefinite a character ?

Happily the answer is very obvious. Shelley, in his poetry of denunciation, could not but be clear, for there he was

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merely setting himself in antagonism to the views of Society, and the views of every society must be mostly quite definite. In his prose he is either engaged in controversial subjects, where clearness is essential, or in discussing the "mild concerns of ordinary life," in dealing with which there was no temptation to be vague. But in his poetry, in his really valuable poetry, all this is different. Shelley was as much a metaphysician as a poet. Mrs. Shelley indeed tells us that he often expressed his wonder as to whether his real power lay in poetry or metaphysics. In truth the wonder was not so wild. Shelley has always the metaphysician's interest in a view rather than the poet's interest in the presentment of it; he has the particular interests of the truth-seeker,

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the philosopher, rather than the general interests of the truth-teller, the poet. He is not contented with what contents Shakespeare, the chronicling of man. Shakespeare is content, whatever he thought of reality, to deal with appearances ; whatever views he held of death, life, love, to tell us merely what men think of them ; to present " the show " independently of what " the Master " is. Shelley, on the other hand, is perpetually occupied with what lies at the back of things rather than with the things themselves. And I think that just as there can be no doubt that the petty world of men is a world for artistic purposes extremely varied and large, so equally is there no doubt that the vast universe of being, the realm of ultimate reality, is for artistic purposes a bare

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world and one easily exhausted. The metaphysical poet *per se*, the contemplative poet, the philosophical poet, who is occupied merely in giving us his view of the abiding fact—the poet of this kind has soon said his say. Not that metaphysical or philosophical controversy will soon come to an end—far from it—but that such abstract controversy is unfitted for poetry ; it is too particular, it feeds too much upon fine distinctions. All that the philosophical poet can properly do, since poetry is representation, is to present his own view, and having presented it he is at the end of his material. In the Buddhist faith the highest act of the religious consciousness is heavenly contemplation, and the Buddha is so represented in statuary, silent, blissful, allowing the mind to

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rest in the idea of being, in the idea of the ultimate. But indeed we know for ourselves that there are ideas which can be better apprehended than expressed, ideas in one sense most real, in another sense most vague, ideas of fact. The poet then, who finds himself at home in this region, does really, as Shelley himself says, see before him always a white radiance, and the life of men with its thoughts and actions so indecently definite, really as a bubble, a bubble accidentally coloured, which comes between him and his view of eternity. This then is one reason why Shelley was bound to leave to the world a poetry which was vague, the interests of the metaphysical poet leading him to take delight in a mode of thought which directed his gaze away from life

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—the true material for poetry; this mode of thought at the same time not supplying a sufficiently extended body of material for poetic use. But there is another reason why Shelley's poetry was bound to lack colour, to lack human body and warmth, and it arises not so much from the matter of his thoughts as from the manner in which he viewed that matter, the manner he considered it proper to observe towards his thoughts of essential things, from the reverential regard in which he held them. Of his thoughts on these matters it is not easy to give an accurate account because it is not easy to have an accurate perception. Sometimes he seems to rest in the conception of a whole, of a universe, by which I mean not a mere chaos of appearances but a collection of things



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in relation. Sometimes he seems to conceive of a spirit from which everything flows and which is also everything. Sometimes, not always or very definitely, he seems to conceive of this spirit or whole as conscious of itself, even sometimes of its particular manifestations. His views vary, within a definite circle however, in accordance with his mood, as, I suppose, the views of every one who has thought deeply on the deepest matters must vary. There is a sentence which was repeated to Sir Edwin Arnold at Benares, with which Shelley would have sympathized: at least with the idea which dominates it he would have felt himself in sympathy.

He is unknown to whoso think they know,  
And known to those who know they know Him  
not.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Sir M. E. Grant Duff. Diary.

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But whatever was the precise colour of Shelley's Pantheism, to this Pantheism, or rather, to be perfectly definite, to this acceptance of the course of things—for sometimes even the Pantheism retreats—he is remarkably constant. Once or twice, no doubt, towards the close of his short life, he uses expressions that appear to be dictated almost by a definite Theism, but in the main few poets have been more true to their general conception.

This then was the matter of his thoughts; and his manner of regarding this matter, his reverence for it, has contrived to deprive his poetry of human body and warmth. We can see it especially, as Mr. Stopford Brooke says—only Mr. Stopford Brooke points it out partly for praise, and I point it out for

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blame—in his nature poetry. At first sight certainly it seems odd and paradoxical that Wordsworth, whose representation of nature comes actually in conflict with facts to which, try as we may, we cannot shut our eyes, should have left nature poetry of imperishable worth, and that Shelley, whose theory of Nature is not only not contradicted by Science but is very nearly the working theory of Science herself, if we suppose that theory to be expressed in spiritual terms, should have left nature poetry markedly inferior ; but then Poetry itself is a very odd thing. Anyhow; it happens, when one looks a little below the surface of the matter, very much as of course. Shelley is so much in love with his view of the truth that he sees everything through its medium, and the tenacity

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with which he grasps it prevents him from being led aside into adopting any of those religious ideas which give expression to a view of nature not his own, to a view of nature which is as much occupied in representing man's thoughts about nature as in representing the actual fact. In the beautiful religion of the Greeks, the sea, the mountains and the wooded hollows were peopled with spiritual beings, some propitious, some unpropitious to man, partly embodying man's thoughts about nature, partly lending form to forces which the Greeks with their good eyes saw to be there in sea or hill. Shelley, by his devotion to his view of the truth, is prevented from catching even the spirit of these ideas, and so also is he prevented from being led aside, as Words-

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worth was led aside, partly from his tender regard for the other religious ideas he held along with his natural Pantheism, chiefly from the overflowing of his feeling, into representing nature as more sympathetic than she is. Yet allowing for this distaste of Shelley's for saying what was untrue about nature, are we nearer the explanation why he consistently refrains from giving man's opinions about nature merely as man's opinions? Most certainly. A poet truly absorbed in a theory of truth cannot occupy himself with the representation of other people's fancies; in what appears to him merely fanciful he cannot maintain even a poetical interest. "It is quite possible," says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "though we cannot feel affection for Shelley's cloud or bird, that

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they are both truer to the actual fact of things than Wordsworth made his birds and clouds,"—it is so possible that it is quite certain, but what then? "Strip off the imaginative clothing from 'The Cloud,'" says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "and Science will support every word of it." Yes, but what then?

<sup>1</sup> Surely here Mr. Stopford Brooke,

<sup>1</sup> *Selections from Shelley*, edited with an introduction by Stopford A. Brooke, a volume which no subsequent writer on Shelley can afford to neglect. Of all Mr. Stopford Brooke's critical essays the introductory essay here is perhaps the most suggestive as it is certainly the most suggestive piece of critical writing that has ever been devoted to the discussion of the nature of Shelley's poetry. In the case of the present writer the particular acknowledgements in the text need to be supplemented by this more general one, as for him to read Mr. Stopford Brooke's essay, now

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whose criticism needs no praise of mine, is in danger of confusing the value of fact scientifically considered with the value of fact as material for poetry. No one living to-day, living many years after Mr. Darwin, should require to be told the fact about such things. Perfectly am I aware that the dark clouds do not sail across the heavens because I have lost a friend. No spiry trees growing from my grave will wither at the sight of Ilium. One smiles to think of such follies. Everywhere in nature

twenty years old, was for the first time to see criticism of Shelley on the true lines. It is right to add, in case opinions may be fathered upon Mr. Stopford Brooke that do not belong to him, that perhaps as often as not, both in their particular and general conclusions, his views and those of the present writer will be found to diverge.

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there is tumult, and where there is not tumult there is impassive cold. But what interest is it to be told this? Once told it is done. The truth of the matter is apparent, and so is a very different thing, the matter's poetical truth.

Man born into a wilderness of strange sights and sounds is forever crying for a guide, a friend. A waif in the everlasting universe of things he can hardly trust his feelings till he fancies them reflected in some larger sphere: his sorrow is made the more substantial when he surveys

The long low dune, and lazy plunging sea;  
his joy when he hears the music in the  
air, or sees the light playing in the  
upper sky. And his emotions seem  
more real, not only when he fancies they  
are taken up by the world around



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him, but also when he imagines nature is mocking him with her silence, or against them directing her thunderstone. He grows in dignity before himself, as Lear grows in dignity when he cries

Rumble thy bellyful ! Spit fire, spout rain !  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters :  
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness,  
I never gave you kingdom, called you children,  
You owe me no subscription : why then let fall  
Your horrible pleasure.

And the poet has a right so to deal with nature, for in so dealing with nature, he is truthfully expressing the feelings of man, he is giving them at once an effective setting and a place that appears substantial. It is imagination but it is imaginative truth. No doubt, just in proportion as the poet

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recognizes that it is the truth of imagination and not real truth, he will fail when he speaks thus of nature. He must deceive, if only for a moment, if only for a moment he must be deceived. He must feel and convey a slight shock of surprise when he tells us—

Nothing in nature's aspect intimated  
That a great man was dead.

For if there is not this surprise, we are listening to an empty platitude. The poet of nature, indeed I grant it, will never have the same facilities that he has had. We shall never get again a whole body of nature poetry like Wordsworth's because never again will a man of Wordsworth's capacity think of nature as Wordsworth thought. Our increased knowledge of science will keep

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his achievement unique. We shall see this at once if we think for a moment of what it was that Wordsworth did. Almost everything that Wordsworth<sup>1</sup> says about nature, serene in her exterior of placid skies and springing life, majestic in mountain or storm, we now know to have hardly any relation to the fact. For all her smiles and majesty, nature is as cruel as she is indifferent,

<sup>1</sup> The first writer to point this out definitely was, as far as I know, Mr. John Morley at the close of his introduction to Macmillan's one-volume Wordsworth. The present Master of Balliol, in two essays on Rousseau and Wordsworth (*Essays on Literature and Philosophy*, 1892), makes clear the connexion between Wordsworth's ideas on this subject and those held by Rousseau; two essays indispensable to the student who wishes thoroughly to understand Wordsworth's view of nature.

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and barely conceals her law of constant struggle and remorseless suffering. From her simple and barbaric code it is the one undoubted triumph of humanity to have escaped. In so far as we have escaped from her we are men ; in so far as we have not, apes, wolves, lust, hunger, cold, disease. She is a barely defeated tyrant ; yet Wordsworth speaks of her as if she were a mother to purify and calm. And not only does he so speak of her, he so finds her. It is his particularity, his paradox, his glory. He was the first poet who, finding many unsatisfied longings in the human breast, longings for social sympathy, consolation, peace, turned to Nature and, neglecting everything there not in accord with these desires, found there but a mirror from which to reflect a purely

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human tenderness, a sweet and mortal benevolence, a heartfelt quiet—in a word all those feelings which so emphatically dissociate the first animal both from his environment and the rest. Nature, the abiding exemplar of simplicity, becomes also to Wordsworth the instructress of what is valuable in life. Indeed he uses nature as a kind of chorus to human aspirations, as a kind of canvas on which to project the large ideal to which humanity might attain; and, doing so, he at once furnished us with a new anodyne for affliction and brought in touch with our emotions a new and profoundly impressive series of ideas. And he was able to do this and to do it with the weight of a genuine sincerity for two reasons, one of which without the other would not have sufficed.

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Wordsworth's great body of nature poetry is humanly interesting because, though nominally speaking of nature, he is in reality speaking of man as interpreted by those moods of earth and sky which by a poetical figure may be said both to reflect and to magnify his better feelings: and Wordsworth's great body of nature poetry sustains itself, is real, because in a large sense he believed what he said about nature. Being essentially a Christian he wished to believe it, and in his day, science on those beliefs about nature had not clanged to her iron door. To the modern poet, however, these beliefs of Wordsworth's—and they are beautiful beliefs—are but fancies, and no poet of any weight can rest in a body of fancy, least of all can he produce a body

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of poetry based upon fancies that are opposed to the whole direction of his thought. All that the modern poet can now do is to catch the fancy as it flies, or, dealing with truth alone, all he can now do is to set against man's fever nature's coolness, against man's weakness nature's strength. It is all he can do since it is only by thus addressing nature that he can extract from her a human reference, and, without human reference, nature to human beings is a blank. Even her beauty does not completely cover her, according to the noble saying of Rückert,<sup>1</sup> until man sees it.

<sup>1</sup> The reed sighs in the wind, for beauty yearning there,

Till, kissed by human lips, its flute tones  
charm the air :

All nature sigheth deep in every bud of Spring,  
Till man with shining eyes the sweeter heart  
doth bring :

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Man adds his interpretation to the world, and with this interpretation creates the world anew. Let a poet describe nature for herself and we are uninterested, indeed we do not listen. What of the cloud? I ask Shelley, and Shelley answers, speaking in its name:

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers  
From the seas and the streams ;  
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid  
In their noonday dreams.  
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken  
The sweet buds every one,

---

The fairest landscape sighs in its own beauty  
scant,

Till one quick glance of Love doth satisfy its  
want.

Rückert's fragments, translated by W. Hastie, D.D., Professor of Divinity in the University of Glasgow, whose sudden death deprived the world of letters at once of a great scholar, and of a poet of occasional but singular felicity.



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When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,

As she dances about the sun.

I wield the flail of the lashing hail,

And whiten the green plains under ;

And then again I dissolve it in rain,

And laugh as I pass in thunder.

Or again—

I am the daughter of earth and water,

And the nursling of the sky :

I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores ;

I change, but I cannot die.

For after the rain, when with never a stain

The pavilion of heaven is bare,

And the winds and sunbeams with their convex  
gleams

Build up the blue dome of air,

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,—

And out of the caverns of rain,

Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the  
tomb,

I arise, and unbuild it again.

It informs us quite truly, as truly as  
a lecture on physics, but not of what

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we desire to be informed. How different is Wordsworth when he is speaking of Scott's last voyage and his departure from Abbotsford:

A Trouble, not of clouds, or weeping rain,  
Nor of the setting sun's pathetic light  
Engendered, hangs o'er Eildon's triple height :  
Spirits of Power, assembled there, complain  
For kindred Power departing from their sight ;  
While Tweed, best pleased in chanting a blithe  
strain,

Saddens his voice again, and yet again.

Lift up your hearts, ye mourners ! for the might  
Of the whole world's good wishes with him goes.

### And Coleridge :

Ye clouds ! that far above me float and pause,  
Whose pathless march no mortal may control !  
Ye ocean-waves ! that, wheresoe'er ye roll,  
Yield homage only to eternal laws !  
Ye woods ! that listen to the night-bird's singing,  
Midway the smooth and perilous slope reclined,

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Save when your own imperious branches swinging,  
Have made a solemn music of the wind !  
Where, like a man beloved of God,  
Through glooms, which never woodman trod,  
How oft, pursuing fancies holy,  
My moonlight way o'er flowering weeds I wound,  
Inspired, beyond the guess of folly,  
By each rude shape and wild unconquerable sound !  
O ye loud Waves ! and O ye Forests high !  
And O ye Clouds that far above me soared !  
Thou rising Sun ! thou blue rejoicing Sky !  
Yea, everything that is and will be free !  
Bear witness for me, wheresoe'er ye be,  
With what deep worship I have still adored  
The spirit of divinest Liberty.

This is the matter which we wish certainly, but its teaching is not true. Mr. Ruskin, in a famous passage, has told us how untrue it is. The clouds, the waves, the sun are by no means free. The clouds shape themselves in subservience to the winds or the damp, the

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winds blow in obedience to processes which we can and do observe, the sun burns unintermittently. It is as untrue to say that nature teaches liberty as it is to say that a river saddens itself or that the powers of nature meet in fairy conclave on the top of a Border hill. To say these things is to say what is untrue, but it is to say what appears true to us when the mood of the mind is set in particular directions. To us, fettered with regulations, customs, forms, there do come moments in which, by contrast to our state, the clouds seem but creatures of chance desires wisping themselves about the sky, the winds the type of irresponsible motion, and the sun as he mounts to his day's business the lord of all that is. It is the distinction between a poetical truth,

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which may or may not be true, and truth itself. All truth is not of equal value to a poet, and Shelley's interest in the bare truth and his love of it lead him to speak often of a blank inhuman world in which interest has no part. In speaking of it he speaks vaguely, or he speaks in a way that must seem vague to us. Shelley sees things so clearly that he does not see them clear.

There is still a last reason why Shelley's poetry lacks human body and warmth, lacks interest, and that reason is himself. Every great poet is an individual, he is a man distinguished from "the common herd of mankind," and because he is so what he says about himself is interesting. We are interested in the exhibition of a personality, not of every personality of course, not of one which

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is wholly commonplace nor of one which is wholly distinct. I do not mean that Shelley was not human; on the contrary the great charm of his character, taken as a whole, is that so often one sees oneself in it, one's aspirations, oneself on the side that is most childlike and best. Shelley is no gnome. Men have not the same ardour against what is false, the same devotion to what is true, but they respond to those ardours. Men are by no means innocent of hypocrisy and pride, but there are moments when they feel how poor a thing pride is, and how self-contemning hypocrisy. Men share his anger too, his anger and his longings. Shelley had a great personality, and he had a human though a rare personality. However, it fell out that just on that side of him with

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which he was mainly concerned when he spoke about himself, the side of personal affection, he was quite distinct. "Shelley," says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "was fickle." Yes, he was fickle, he could not continue long in the same adoration, and, since he could not, the very peculiar poetry in which he pours out his love-longings lacks the substance essential to its human interest, the substance constancy alone could give. No doubt, had this poetry been of another character, of a character more heated, had it been a poetry of sexual passion, this fickleness of his would not sensibly have interfered with its excellence, and certainly it would not have dehumanized it. Shakespeare very probably was fickle, Burns assuredly was fickle, and yet the passionate poetry of

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these two men is of all things human. But Shelley's love poetry is not of this character, it is not a poetry of passion which, however its subjects may change, fulfils itself at any moment—as a flame does its office to one piece of fuel after another—by the concentration of its consuming heat; it is a poetry addressed to an ideal love; not to a beloved object, but to the beloved, not to a female, but to the female soul, and against a poetry of this kind the objection of fickleness is fatal. We do not indeed demand of a poet that he should find his ideal, but if he tells us constantly that he has found it we expect him to be constant. By his constancy alone can he convince us that the ideal is his. In his ideal, at least while it is his and even if afterwards it is to fade, his ardours must



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find their rest. But while we read Shelley's ideal outpourings we know that his ideal is leaving him, or that he is leaving it. He brings to a business that is seraphic a weakness more than mortal, and, unlike the typical pilgrim, at the last stage of his progress carries still the burden of the world. Perhaps it could not be altogether otherwise, perhaps no such poetry can appear perfect by the standard it sets itself. For all that, it will appear perfect, it will appear real, precisely in the degree in which it appears constant. Shelley's poetry of this kind—and it is in poetry of this kind that he pours out his soul—inhabits an atmosphere of fickleness, and consequently there attaches to an idealism of necessity vague, a vagueness, and in consequence, over and above what

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is necessary, there attaches to it a character of lightness. Shelley's affection is not human affection, nor has it the constancy and solemnity of an affection which is divine. We feel this everywhere, even in the otherwise perfect *Epipsychidion*, and it is only when Shelley puts aside his ideal conceptions and turns to express a regard soft, warm and human, that we get the ring of reality. Take this poem, for instance, written to a child of air:

I arise from dreams of thee  
In the first sweet sleep of night,  
When the winds are breathing low,  
And the stars are shining bright:  
I arise from dreams of thee,  
And a spirit in my feet  
Hath led me—who knows how?  
To thy chamber-window, sweet!

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The wandering airs they faint  
On the dark, the silent stream—  
The champak odours fail  
Like sweet thoughts in a dream ;  
The nightingale's complaint,  
It dies upon her heart,  
As I must die on thine,  
O ! beloved as thou art !

O lift me from the grass !  
I die, I faint, I fail !  
Let thy love in kisses rain  
On my lips and eyelids pale.  
My cheek is cold and white, alas !  
My heart beats loud and fast :  
O press it close to thine again,  
Where it will break at last.

How beautiful it is ! how beautiful and how light ! Compare these unsubstantial verses with the lines Shelley writes when he is touched with human emotion :

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The keen stars were twinkling,  
And the fair moon was rising among them,

Dear Jane :

The guitar was tinkling,  
But the notes were not sweet till you sung them  
Again.

As the moon's soft splendour  
O'er the faint cold starlight of heaven

Is thrown,

So your voice most tender  
To the strings without soul had then given  
Its own.

The stars will awaken,  
Though the moon sleep a full hour later,  
To-night ;

No leaf will be shaken  
Whilst the dews of your melody scatter  
Delight.

Though the sound overpowers,  
Sing again, with your dear voice revealing  
A tone

Of some world far from ours  
Where music and moonlight and feeling  
Are one.

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It is not any remoteness in the feeling here, but only a strange unearthly quality in the beauty that reminds us we are listening to one unlike ourselves.

Shelley's poetry is vague ; it is vague because Shelley was a metaphysician, it is vague because Shelley clings continually to his view of the abstract truth, it is vague in Shelley's own outpourings on account of this constitution of Shelley's. Do not let us think, therefore, for all that is nowadays said, that it is not a vague world into which Shelley leads us. It is a vague world, but it is a beautiful world, a world where music and moonlight and feeling are one, a world, moreover, where Shelley reigns absolutely master. There are exceptions to this prevailing vagueness of course ; the conception of Pro-

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metheus is not vague, it is not Shelley's by the way, nor is the tragedy of the Cenci vague. But the general characteristic of this world of his is vagueness, a vagueness that is almost everywhere. The Prometheus idea, for example, is treated much less concretely than Aeschylus treats it, indeed it would be impossible for any poet keeping to the large idea of the myth to treat it more abstractly than Shelley does; and Count Cenci himself is vague if it is vague to be impossible.

But not to press a definition pedantically, Shelley's world is an unsubstantial world, a world of which he is master. And because it is so, it is both our necessity and our duty, if we wish to understand this poetry, to take it in large doses, to absorb it at all pores.

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To take down from the shelf a single work like "Adonais" and to read it is a fruitless task: we have not the language. To take up "Alastor" is to give oneself the impression that words may after all mean nothing. And so it is generally with Shelley's poetry; he deals with a world so different from ours that we cannot profitably take short excursions into it. We must lose ourselves in it, and if we do this we shall find sooner or later that the creatures of his fancy are taking colour, that his words are acquiring weight, that we can distinguish among them. Indeed in this world of Shelley's there is a whole series of ideas among which, once we have got the pitch, we can distinguish quite readily. Allowing for the difference of this world from worlds in which we generally take

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interest the apprehension of the separate ideas is wonderfully distinct.

In his first poem that is purely poetical and of distinct poetical merit—"Alastor"—we are presented with a singularly simple idea, an idea so simple that it cannot help being lucid. A young poet is represented as wandering amidst nature, and we are told of the scenes through which he passes in search of his ideal love. When one reads the poem first, one is not interested, for it is in many ways very peculiar, and just the opposite of what one would expect. Though the hero is a man, though strictly speaking the poem is about a man, the man comes to be to us a mere accident, not that upon which our thoughts come to rest. Shelley cannot continue to write of a single human being amid



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natural objects as of an important thing, for he knows that long after the earth has become to man uninhabitable this "solidity and compound mass" will still spin. Byron turns from nature to look at man, Wordsworth looks through nature at man, Shelley loses sight of man in nature, as day puts out a rushlight.

"My path," says Obermann, quoted by Arnold, "my path lay beside the green waters of the Thiele. Feeling inclined to muse, and finding the night so warm that there was no hardship in being all night out of doors, I took the road to Saint Blaise. I descended a steep bank, and got upon the shore of the lake where its ripple came up and expired. The air was calm; every one was at rest; I remained there for hours. Towards morning the moon shed over the earth

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and waters the ineffable melancholy of her last gleams. Nature seems unspeakably grand, when, plunged in a long reverie, one hears the rippling of the waters upon a solitary strand, in the calm of a night still enkindled and luminous with the setting moon.

“Sensibility beyond utterance, charm and torment of our vain years ; vast consciousness of a nature everywhere greater than we are, and everywhere impenetrable.” And so Shelley thinks, and therefore to him man appears temporary, trivial. It is in the strictest unison with this thought that he should represent the hero of his poem as dead before he is represented as alive, as merely a being that has lived.

Also we have to notice the unity of feeling pervading the whole. Shelley's

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thoughts, permeated with the vastness and stillness of nature, turn to ideas vast or still, "the thrilling secrets of the birth of time," and the mighty Shadow <sup>Death</sup> that loves "the slimy caverns of the populous deep." Everything is subdued to the tone, and the poet, when he dreams of human affection, hears a music low and faint.

Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought.

In the whole, though there is a consistent attempt to image forth a solitary nature as in consonance with the solitary poet, and perhaps especially and naturally because of this, nature is presented in her solitude. She has an effect as if she stood apart, for man here is the spectator of nature, not the being to whom and for whom nature speaks.

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What is reflected, when anything is reflected, and that is not often, has no colour.

As the human heart,  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there.

The presentment of nature is in her nakedness. We have not, as usual in nature poetry, man, nature, and the result, but nature which no human eye has clothed with human warmth.

The cold white light of morning, the blue moon  
Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,  
The distinct valley and the vacant woods,—  
the woods that to Wordsworth breathed impulses. Nature is presented “in naked and severe simplicity.”

Calm he still pursued  
The stream, that with a larger volume now  
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell, and there  
Fretted a path through its descending curves

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With its wintry speed. On every side now rose  
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,  
Lifted their black and barren pinnacles  
In the light of evening ; and its precipice  
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above  
Mid toppling stones, black gulfs and yawning caves  
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues  
To the loud stream. Lo ! where the pass expands  
Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,  
And seems, with its accumulated crags,  
To overhang the world : for wide expand,  
Beneath the wan stars and descending moon,  
Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,  
Dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom  
Of leaden coloured even, and fiery hills  
Mingling their flames with twilight on the verge  
Of the remote horizon. The near scene,  
In naked and severe simplicity,  
Made contrast with the universe. A pine,  
Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy  
Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast  
Yielding one only response, at each pause,  
In most familiar cadence, with the howl,  
The thunder, and the hiss, of homeless streams

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Mingling its solemn song ; whilst the broad river,  
Foaming and hurrying o'er its rugged path,  
Fell into that immeasurable void,  
Scattering its waters to the passing winds.

And we know as we read that the homeless streams will hiss and thunder when the poet has been centuries dead. We have lost sight of the poet ; the vague figure is not even threatened by the gloomy nature round him, in it he is swallowed up. "Alastor"—in English, the Baneful Spirit—"Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude," is Shelley's title, and it is this banefulness to man, this coldness and hard solitariness of nature, that is apprehended in the poem. Consider then what a vividness of idea Shelley brings to this conception, how he emphasizes it : we hear the silence. It is a vague poem, but in this vague

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there is definiteness. Vagueness, silence, solitude are apprehended with a surprising niceness.

“Adonais” is another vague poem. Why was Keats called Adonais, a word coined from Adonis, and, when coined, without meaning? what had Keats done while he was a living man, what were his interests and those of the world he left, to what reflections affecting life did his death give rise? These are the questions which an ordinary elegiac poet would have set himself to answer. In *Lycidas*, the distant model of Adonais, Milton refers back to the life of King, and his fancy allows him to speak of himself and the drowned man as having shepherded their flocks together.

We drove afield and both together heard  
What time the gray-fly winds his sultry horn.

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And it is with a shock that he turns from this thought of life to the sudden termination of companionship, to the idea of death.

But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,  
Now thou art gone and never must return.

Shelley's meetings, however, take place in the death chamber, and of his acquaintance with Keats, such as it was, of the interests of life, we hear nothing. Lycidas is a living man who has died, Adonais is a dead man who has lived. All this makes the poem vague. But then, let us consider Shelley's ideas a little more closely. We have to consider with what quickness and aptness of apprehension his mind flies to the truth. It is death the reality, and not life the appearance that is essential, though to us it seems so much otherwise,



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that the quiet is looked upon as an interruption of life rather than life as the interruption of the quiet. The thoughts of the ordinary man are follies, and it never occurs to him that living itself is but a process of dying, and the object of the human body to consume itself into the grave. It is of men that the Jewish poet informs us, "They are as a sleep," and the poet who is always fumbling at the heart of things can say little else. To a Shelley, to a thinker of that disposition, life is a moment and the one thing permanent, to have done. And so when he has two ideas to choose from, the idea of life, warm and apparently solid, and the idea of death, cold and apparently distant, he has no hesitation, he turns to the idea of what is lasting.

We must think in this way to get

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any understanding of "Adonais," for "Adonais," unlike other elegies, is not a poem of a life that is ended, but a dithyrambic celebration of death which is unending. And grasping this, here again we may see with what singleness of apprehension Shelley appreciates his atmosphere. The note is struck the first moment,—

I weep for Adonais, he is dead.

Compare Milton, who will not face the cold idea till he has filled our minds with beauty.

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.  
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,  
Compels me to disturb your season due :

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For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,  
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer :  
Who would not sing for Lycidas ? He knew  
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.

How quickly he leaves it, like a man who leaps back into the sun ! It is a consequence of Shelley's character, that he should have another method, another intention. Throughout the poem the words death and died hoot their continual lament. Kingly Death dwells in his high capital. What fed Adonais alive were quick dreams, and, as he lies there, there come to him winds and shapes from the world of momentary thought, veiled destinies and twilight phantasies, morning, echo, grief, things of vanity and doubtful light ; the ghosts of ideas, and, last and least real, living men, themselves paler than these ghosts. A strange

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vivid conception this of the unsubstantiality of life and of the host of unsubstantial things bidding farewell to a being who has outsoared the shadows in which they flit. Keats is dead. Yes, he was alive, and was unstable, and he has become what is stable, what is real. At the close of the poem Shelley attempts again and again to define this stability, this reality, attempts and knows that he, speaking from the world of living men, a world to which he refers in *Adonais* as to a thing faint and transient, can only attempt. Keats is dead, he has become "a portion of the Eternal," he wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead." "He is made one with nature."

He is a presence to be felt and known  
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone  
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move  
Which has withdrawn his being to its own.

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But why do we vex ourselves ?

'Tis we decay

Like corpses in a charnel ; fear and grief  
Convulse us and consume us day by day.

Whatever it is to have done with instability, to cease our gay music, it is silence that is continual ; it is only when we end our motion that we are real.

In the poems of "Alastor" and "Adonais" then, Shelley makes indefiniteness definite ; as far as possible, he makes them definite. But it is not always, even in his airy world, that he has to deal with indefinite ideas. Shelley was not only an observer of things not easily seen, he was also a prophet of things not easily realisable.

The outlines of the position in which he stood are clear. Intellectually he was in sympathy with modern Agnostic

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thought, politically he was a republican, morally he was an individualist. But also and chiefly, behind and beneath this, his whole nature swayed in essential unison with the sympathetic feelings, the feelings of the humanist, the feelings which taken together form the body of idea which is known as Christianity. In truth, if one pursues Shelley's feeling to its root, one will find it often akin to the spirit of Christianity itself, which, while social, passes behind social ordinances, and rests in a change of heart, in the belief that the final test of good is in the attitude, the manner, in which the soul addresses itself to life. What is curious is that while there can be no doubt as to his basic feeling, he is also and greatly interested in political and particular change. The New Testament

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is not a political document ; trusting to an idea as general as the air, it places no trust in changes of form of institutions. One sees, if one sees nothing else clear in Christianity, that the matter is not one of formulae but of the direction of the mind. To read Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, the book from which the effluence of modern Christianity comes most, is to discover it again ; for while to bring the kingdom of Heaven upon earth is indeed hard, and everywhere the man in whom the new man has been born suffers defeat, nothing of this is vital or infinitely matters ; the spirit that is life continues in the man, and one out of many millions has found himself and is saved. The idea is greater than its manifestations, and it is it and not they that secretes its balm. A thinker as

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essentially religious as Tolstoy feels this at once, and to pass from his work to Shelley's is like passing to the work of a boy ; for Shelley has not a mind essentially religious, he is always approaching religion through politics and never wholly realizes the sufficiency of religion for itself. Indeed for all his fancied cosmopolitanism there is about Shelley what to us is truly charming, " a brave boyishness," a brave Englishism. This impracticable dreamer is so practical he cannot rest for long in a pure idea, he must soon be thinking of a change in practice, and when sick at heart with men is not more ready to fly to general than to particular medicines. At one moment it is the gospel of love, at the next a political programme. The elements of the prophet and the politician are so



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mixed in him that he is a puzzling poetical figure ; the most practical of devotees, to devotees he is unsatisfying ; a mixture of idealism and practicality, ↓ he is not easily understood either by the man of faith or by the man of the world. The truth is he was born in what was then the political centre of England, among the rich gentlefolk upon the land, and it was a consequence of his upbringing that he saw regeneration upon political lines. It did not matter that the society into which Shelley was born was anti-Shelleyan at heart : it was built upon institutions, and by a change in institutions might be changed. The society into which he was born was in fact partly theocratic and very largely autocratic and aristocratic : a society which felt to a large degree the power of

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the priest, and to a very large degree the power of the privileged classes at the head of which was the king. In its place Shelley wished a society as little theocratic as modern France, as individualistic as ancient Greece, more democratic than modern England. To these political ideas it must not be supposed that his more general ideas are simply added ; the two series are not in separate compartments, but, on the contrary, intertwined : it is from his general ideas that his political ideas are derived, and it is to them that, through his political ideas, and strictly by the way of practice, he returns. The whole process is a circle. Shelley entertained in principle many ideas of what was desirable for man ; to give these views effect many changes were necessary, but great changes

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are undertaken in obedience to principles, and therefore to get them made there must also be a change in principles. By the way of politics Shelley arrives at the emphasis of his religion, a religion of Freedom and Love, and with this emphasis his religion does come for a time appreciably near to satisfying him : it is true, not for ever, for it is a distinguishing feature of Shelley's mind that in a purely religious attitude, an attitude wholly without reference to politics, he can find no final rest. Yet if he ever came near finding it, it was in the fulness of those twin ideas. Freedom, says the good sense of the world, is valuable even if by Freedom we become slaves to our own caprice. Crimes may be committed in the name of Freedom, but Freedom shows us all that is

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of value in our seeing; and Shelley adds, with the true inward sweetness of the Anarchic creed, with perfect Freedom all danger will have vanished,<sup>1</sup> and with the abolition of rule its necessity. It is a beautiful idea, as full of optimism as it is of light, and with this idea of Freedom and its resistless perfectionizing power, he has still the other—he could not believe in either so strongly if he did not believe in both—that men must learn to love, to cherish, and to comfort, and that sometime—what a world away is sometime!—they will learn.

To the tune of these two ideas almost all his poetry that is not directly meta-

<sup>1</sup> See *News from Nowhere*, by William Morris, where this idea is in some detail most prettily if fancifully set out.

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physical or the mere outpouring of his sensitive thought is set. To both full expression is given in "Prometheus." There is also the famous opening allegory in the "Revolt of Islam," which particularly illustrates the idea of Freedom, illustrates both the idea and the difficulties in the way of its acceptance. Before the end of the canto he is off to his impossible story; but once get the idea, and the allegory alone is one of extraordinary definition. Set, as Mr. Stopford Brooke sets it, by itself, and shorn of its over detailed explanation, it is indeed majestically vivid. The contest Shelley sees as continually before him, a thing actual and present, for he does not think worlds are to be won in a day or that men will perfect themselves to-morrow. No, the spirit of good will

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wage war with the spirit of evil for countless ages and will rise to wage war again. Those who see only natural perversity in Shelley's selection of the snake as emblematic of the spirit of good have not taken the trouble to understand the direction of his mind. No doubt in another poet it would be perverse, and, as it is, it is so far poetically harmful that we have to wait for the second reading of the allegory to get our sympathies properly adjusted; but if this is Shelley's defect, it is also his habit. You have to read him once to find what he is after, and again to discover how clearly he is after that. In this passage, as in others, given Shelley's way of thinking, the representation is consistent. The spirit of good is typified by the snake, emblem-

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atic naturally enough of the spirit of inquiry, the snake that bade "Eat"; and the Spirit of Evil is typified by the Eagle, emblematic naturally enough of the priestly power that says "Accept," the power that makes against liberty, Jove's bird that swoops down upon the questioner and will neither hear nor reason.

The meeting of the snake and eagle was in truth, out of many issues, the one issue to Shelley, and it is this meeting, this contest of the upper air, that is typified in "Prometheus," a poem of the conflict of forces and of the ultimate triumph of the one with which Shelley sympathizes, a poem of conflict ending in a long optimistic song.

The central idea of the poem, at once Shelley's greatest and that which en-

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shrines best his leading ideas, is in itself a very old one. Common to almost all theologies in their early form, to a modern mind it is difficult, for it takes its birth in a condition of thought when things that are properly subjective are viewed objectively. Or to express that fully and at length, the governing idea of the Prometheus myth is the idea of man's conflict with the supreme Power; or rather, since in the religion of the Greeks Zeus or Jupiter was not the Supreme Power, with the supreme power with which he believes he has to do. Behind Jupiter and above him was the Fate, a power sometimes thought of as blind, sometimes thought of as having a vague, but in any case a resistless tendency. Still Jupiter was the supreme Power with which the Greek



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had concern. The root idea of the Prometheus story then is the idea of man's conflict with the Supreme Power. A man acts against the gods, just as the root idea of blasphemy is that a man speaks against the gods. Psychologically and temporarily I suppose both states of mind are within the margin of the possible; but speaking generally and of human beings as they are ordinarily constituted, neither does in fact exist. Men do not speak against their own conceptions of what is supreme, no more do they contend with them. What may happen and what does happen is that men speak against other people's conceptions of what is supreme, and against that set themselves deliberately. Nothing else, as a general movement of the mind, can happen. A

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man may believe that the forces responsible for the perpetual wonder of activity, the one miracle of life, are themselves blind forces; he may believe that the ultimate potency in the universe is heedless or unconscious of man; or he may believe otherwise; but he cannot believe that the Supreme Power is actively and consciously opposed to his own conceptions of what is right, since it is from these very conceptions that he has formed his idea of the nature of the Power that is supreme. This at least is true, and the statement excludes the side slips of the mind: no man ever persistently contended with his own idea of what was supreme, with his own idea of what was highest.

What has happened, however, is that others have so thought of him, indeed

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it has happened very commonly. In the first place early peoples believe their own views of fact, and this with a surprising absence of dubiety, to be the fact itself, and can only think of others who entertain other views of fact as to the fact itself opposed. In the second place early peoples find no conception harder than the conception of a view, an idea, an effort to represent the fact. With them every idea, every view, has its visible counterpart in the world of reality. So much is this so that even long after the opening of the Christian era it was the common popular belief that the old gods had once actually existed; nay more, it was the popular belief that they did still exist, not as gods certainly, but as demons who attempted to lure the believer from the

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Faith.<sup>1</sup> A thousand years ago Venus was still supposed to hold her court under some hidden hill and to compete, sometimes successfully, with official Christianity.

If therefore a man arose in early Greece and denounced the theological views of his contemporaries, he could not be seen by them as merely doing that, but on the contrary as one perversely impious and deliberately contending with the gods. Nor was this all, and here we come to the Promethean paradox: when his society had been succeeded by another which conceived the man was right, he was still not

<sup>1</sup> See for the further discussion of this subject and its bearing on the Faust legend, Dr. Ward's introduction to Marlowe's *Faustus*, and Greene's *Friar Bacon*, in the Clarendon Press series.

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thought merely to have protested against wrong views, but rather, greatly daring, to have overthrown the wrong gods or to have changed the nature of the gods. Substitute for the man a Titan, one who though inferior to the gods was yet a god, one in effect who might be conceived of as having dared so greatly, and you have the genesis of the Prometheus myth. As perhaps the greatest of world-myths, like other world-myths it does no more than put into objective form what is subjectively true. Man's ideas on theology do change, one idea succeeds another. Suppose each change in idea to be accompanied by a change in fact, and at once one believes that the heavens themselves suffer alteration. The myth of the war between the under god Prometheus, the benefactor of man-

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kind, and the god above, Jupiter, who is envious of mankind, is therefore a real myth, and every part of it takes shape in fact. Prometheus is punished with punishments we can appreciate; he is chained to a rock, his flesh is torn by vultures, the furies lacerate him hour by hour; and his punishment continues till some sort of bargain is made between him and the power he defied, till the power he defied is in some sense modified by the ideas of Prometheus, till there comes about a reconciliation; till, in a word, the old theology is replaced by the new.

What constitutes the peculiar difficulty in the representation of this contest is that it is a contest of the old theology which was displaced, rather than of the new theology in its essence hostile to

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any other idea of the supreme power than that which had come to be its own. To represent such a myth properly, to give it crude objective form, is, as soon as the new theology has arrived, most difficult, and yet till this happens the myth is incomplete. How far Aeschylus felt the difficulty, if he felt it at all, it is impossible now precisely to ascertain, because in the fragment which remains to us of his writings on the subject he has to deal only with Prometheus bound, and it is not with the binding but with the unbinding of Prometheus that the real difficulty arises. To say that Prometheus was bound is to say what might have happened, but to say that he was unbound is practically to say that he was never bound at all. It is the ultimate reconciliation that disproves the

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quarrel, and the end of the myth that falsifies the myth. Most probably Aeschylus did not trouble himself with the truth of the story as a whole, but believed, and with a safe dramatic instinct, in the separate truth of its separate stages. At any rate his play is a fragment torn from the old theology it represents, and such vividness as it possesses is the vividness of an appreciated fact. Shelley, who goes to work in an entirely different manner, must necessarily suffer in mere vividness of outline when compared with Aeschylus, for Shelley is concerned infinitely more with the new theology in which the contest with Prometheus was not present, than with the old theology in which it was. Shelley indeed sees the Prometheus myth as a whole, and he sees the truth



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behind it and the vital part of it so clearly that he cannot make it quite clear. Shelley does not hunt for separate truths, for temporary truths, but for the truth. Besides this, to him this old story of a change of thought stands for too much. He sees too much in it. He sees that it does not stand merely for the change from old to new Greek theology, nor even merely for a change in man's thought about the constitution of things; but also, and very easily, for the protest of all that is new against all that was. In Shelley's hands it becomes the song of emancipation, and the one song, the song of man's emancipation from himself. Prometheus is to be unbound and the day to dawn. Men are to rest as harmonious parts of the great whole of things. Discord,

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despair, passion, are to perish from the earth. The spirit of love is to be everywhere, everywhere is to be the spirit of liberty and the spirit of peace.

It is a wide body of idea, and the mind in resting upon it is apt to lose sight of the central figure from the consideration of whose position all this body of idea springs. For this reason Shelley's treatment of the Prometheus myth lacks the sharp poetical outline which we find for example in another poet's treatment of a legend of similar, though on account of Faustus' final defeat of much more homogeneous, character, Marlowe's treatment of the Faust legend, the legend of the forbidden fruit. Then also Shelley sees the truth behind the myth so clearly that the myth loses its poetical reality. He sees that it merely represents a

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change in men's ideas, he knows that Prometheus was not torn by the eagle and that the old envious Jupiter was either never in heaven or remains there as envious as ever to this day. Shelley knows perfectly that he is dealing with a world of idea, and consistently he peoples it with abstractions, with ideas, which only poetical necessity personifies. Earth, the great mother, speaks, Asia, the home of blissful contemplation, becomes the bride of the deliverer, the casting down of Shelley's Jupiter is accomplished as easily as a man shreds off beliefs he has outgrown. Even the god's adherents are against the god. His herald, Mercury, conscious of his cruelty, sympathizes with his victim and his phantom arises to repeat the curse pronounced against him by Pro-

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metheus, nor either unnaturally, for, if Mercury is so pictured and the phantom of Jupiter so employed, it is because a dying theology is conscious of its weakness and withers of itself.

Yet here evidently we may see that Shelley, in keeping so tight hold of the idea of the myth is passing his hand through the myth to get hold of the idea. It is as plain in the passages that recount the tortures. The old story knows nothing of the despair that afflicts Prometheus when, the veil which wraps the future being parted, there passes before him the civilization which succeeded upon those of Greece and Rome. To Shelley's Deliverer the near history of men is disappointing: he looks before him and he sees only Jesus' doctrine of goodwill no longer potent even where

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men sing its praises and the Church, in the high tide of her authority, for all the stray buds that blossomed into saintship, everywhere intolerant of inquiry, everywhere hostile to knowledge. In Shelley's hands the facts of the myth dissolve.

It is because what interests Shelley is the issue; not the struggle, but the peace after the struggle, the joy of conquest—the vital part, since an issueless struggle is unmeaning, of every struggle. The vital part of all man's going is to get somewhere, and being there, the toils of the journey do not count. In heaven is the choir that sings of the victorious good and not of the defeated evil. Such thoughts to Shelley are first nature, and the old Titanic battle soon passes from his view. Very soon the myth

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begins to fade, and from the latter half of his poem it has almost altogether faded. Barely two acts of Shelley's "Prometheus" have direct reference to the Prometheus myth. All the remainder is a choric song.

In fact, in Shelley's treatment of the myth we get noticeably nearer to the truth of things, but without making equal progress in poetical or human interest. As we advance in one direction, in the other we retreat. With a choric song of joy and harmony the world in which we live is so little in touch that so far from the words having interest to human beings, they have scarcely even meaning. What humanity does take interest in are the songs of tumult and of sadness, and the exhibitions it loves chiefly, those of struggle,

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passion, broken law, A poetry that does not constantly reflect upon a world of effort and defeated cares is an inhuman poetry, a poetry in which for men there is no rest. At the close of a poem of inexpressible charm, that speaks of one of those rare moments when such teaching is forgotten, Wordsworth has to tell us how--

The echo of the voice enwrought  
A human sweetness with the thought  
Of travelling through the world that lay  
Before me in my endless way.

Yes, Wordsworth knows the way is endless, as Shakespeare knows the way is stormy. No doubt it is extraordinary; it is extraordinary that we should take pleasure, and take pleasure alone, in a poetry of sorrow or of storm. But

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then everything is extraordinary in this  
“clanjamfry” of a world.

The moon speaks to the earth:

Thou art folded, thou art lying,  
In the light which is undying  
Of thine own joy, and heaven's smile divine ;  
All suns and constellations shower  
On thee a light, a life, a power,  
Which doth array thy sphere ; thou pourest thine  
On mine, on mine !

And the earth replies:

I spin beneath my pyramid of night,  
Which points into the heavens,—dreaming delight,  
Murmuring victorious joy in my enchanted sleep ;  
As a youth lulled in love-dreams faintly sighing,  
Under the shadow of his beauty lying,  
Which round his rest a watch of light and warmth  
doth keep.

It is a poetry in which till all men  
are happy it is not possible that men  
can take delight.



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The objection most commonly urged against "Prometheus Unbound" is that it is a vague poem, and the objection is real. In a story of the kind a man of Shelley's nature was bound to see too much, and he was bound to be more intimately interested in the vital part of it, the arrival of the new, than in the essentially poetical part of it, the struggle between new and old. Treated as a man of Shelley's nature was bound to treat it, the poem as a whole could not be very definite or poetically satisfying.

Let us make no bones about acknowledging this; for one thing, because nothing can be more plain; and for another, because this indefiniteness arises chiefly from the clearness and precision of Shelley's mind. Shelley is right in thinking that a change in man's theolo-

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gical notions is never merely a change in theological notions, but also a change in man's spirit. The song of the coming of new beliefs is truly the song of the renewal of everything, for man's religious ideas represent so much that is in man and reflect upon so much that is in him. So also it is a right instinct for what is abiding that impels Shelley to slip away from the struggle and to rest in the succeeding satisfaction, the succeeding joy.

We can only praise Shelley justly, when we praise the characteristic Shelley, and the world of Prometheus is very much like the world of Shelley's other poems. It is a vague world, but in this vague world each idea is seized definitely. Once more we have only to find out what Shelley is thinking and we can see how clear his thinking

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is. The idea of joy is seized beautifully, the verse in which he speaks of it now falls "like footsteps of weak melody," now passes away in a chaos of sweet sound; no less beautifully is the idea of the myth, itself apprehended, or the fact that man's whole spiritual condition is to be changed, apprehended with the delicacy which alone was proper. The love of man to-day leads, we know it well, often to the disaster and death of the lovers, yet it will not always be so. It will not always be so, but at present it inflicts a wound on the heart it touches, it is an emotion, like all our best emotions, that is touched with the pain of coming defeat.

Ah sister! Desolation is a delicate thing :  
It walks not on the earth, it floats not on the  
air,

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But treads with killing footstep, and fans with  
silent wing,  
The tender hopes which in their hearts the best  
and gentlest bear ;  
Who, soothed to false repose by the fanning plumes  
above,  
And the music-stirring motion of its soft and  
busy feet,  
Dream visions of aerial joy, and call the monster  
Love,  
And wake, and find the shadow Pain, as he whom  
now we greet.

We are in a world of idea, but in a world  
where the ideas as they fly are caught.

It is of particular interest, in view of  
his late dramatic activity, to remark in  
addition that the mere legend itself, as  
long as Shelley is content to deal with  
it, is presented with extraordinary vivid-  
ness. Prometheus, chained by the un-  
subdued, and unsubduable is not pre-

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sented so clearly by Aeschylus. Shelley sees him with a clearness that is indeed extraordinary, sees him as he figures "in the mind's eye, Horatio," "nailed to his wall of eagle-baffling mountain." Indeed, I sometimes think that few greater calamities have happened to the world than the early death of Shelley. His faults were a boy's faults, and what he lacked in proportion, steady balance, tranquillity, there were the years to bring. As it was, there is no poet who has as unique a faculty for truth; and though he dwells in a vague world, there is one side of him—his dramatic side—which is not vague. It is the side that comes into prominence when he draws the figure of Prometheus,<sup>1</sup> when

<sup>1</sup> Monarch of Gods and Dæmons, and all Spirits—  
But One—who throng those bright and rolling worlds

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he sketches his Charles the First, when he writes the Cenci. It was the side of

Which thou and I alone of living things  
Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this earth  
Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou  
Requitest for knee-worship, prayer, and praise,  
And toil, and hecatombs of broken hearts,  
With fear and self-contempt and barren hope :  
Whilst me who am thy foe, eyeless in hate  
Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,  
O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.  
Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours,  
And moments aye divided by keen pangs  
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,  
Scorn and despair—these are mine empire :—  
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest  
From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!  
Almighty, had I deigned to share the shame  
Of thine ill-tyranny, and hung not here  
Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain,  
Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,  
Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life.  
Ah me! alas! pain, pain, ever, for ever!

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him to which, when his thread snapped, he was leaning most.

No doubt the note most characteristic of the other side of Shelley is not absent even in the Cenci. His love of what it is difficult to define is what leads him to write a drama over which an unnamed horror broods, and his love of the fact what makes him accept as dramatic material the sheer facts of the history. Shelley, not the Shelley who was about to be born when he was drowned, but the Shelley with whom we have to deal, was

No change, no pause, no hope ! Yet I endure.  
I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt ?  
I ask yon Heaven, the all-beholding Sun,  
Has it not seen ? The Sea, in storm or calm,  
Heaven's ever-changing shadow spread below,  
Have its deaf waves not heard my agony ?  
Ah me ! alas ! pain, pain, ever, for ever !

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never quite human enough to write a drama entirely great. There was never about him enough of human succulence, enough of the play of the machine. The drama, while subject to its own inner rules, is not a form easily ruled by one with an attitude. Nor was it easy for the Shelley that was, when engaged on a dramatic work, altogether to abdicate. Any drama the least greatly conceived is absorbent, its tendency is to display a nature, to draw out from its maker, in some of its many opportunities, whatever there is in him; and if he happens to be on any side either imperfectly or over insistently developed, that too will figure in the result. Yet a great drama is the product of a nature developed evenly and fully, and it approaches to being the



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greatest drama just in proportion as it approaches to being the product of a nature who is the world in one. It is the perfect drama that is not merely intellectual but sentimental, not merely sentimental but spiritual, not merely spiritual but animal, that speaks for the head, the heart, the loins, no more for the hands than for the feet ; that is as vicious as it is virtuous, and as high as it is low, no worse than humanity and no better, the complete expression, and, by virtue of its intensity, the complete interpretation of ourselves. Such a drama will never get written ; it takes Shakespeare six plays to write it ; but least of all will it get written by an idealist, a poet curiously individual, whose purely distinguishing qualities will be a hindrance to him rather than

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a help. Shelley's selection of his repellent situation and his insistence on its analysis is an act of pure Shelleyism; it is the kind of thing from which Shakespeare, with his eye for his audience, would have been saved by quite mean qualities; it is the kind of thing of which no nature not isolatedly individual and nobly indifferent to applause could have been ever capable, but at the same time it is a fault in saving sense, a vital dramatic defect. Just those parts of the Cenci then which are most Shelley's are not great drama. I do not mean there is not great dramatic writing in them, but they are not great drama. The great drama begins when Cenci has retired to his rest, when Shelley is dealing with what other great poets have dealt with, assassination and

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its punishment, fear, and changeless misery. And in dealing with this he is so surprisingly great, so actual, so penetrating, that one knows not easily with what to compare him. The note is colder and more weighty, it gets closer to the disappointingness of life than in any other play written by youth. A flash of poetical passion here and there, a line like

“Guilty! who dare talk of guilt, my lord?”  
coming from an illuminating turn of the mind not unlike Shakespeare’s when he makes Constance cry, “He speaks to me who never had a son”—such occasional flashes may indeed remind us of occasional flashes in Shakespeare’s early plays, of the rare concentrated early manner of Shakespeare; but, taken as a whole, the manner of the Cenci

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is wholly unlike Shakespeare's usual manner in his youth. It is much less given to poetical excursions and much harder. Shelley has a cooler grasp of the tragic issue ; he is more, and more immediately, absorbed in the meaning of his tragedy than the young Shakespeare ever was. And yet it cannot be said that Shelley's manner in the *Cenci* is like Shakespeare's later manner either. *Lear* and *Othello* are not remarkable merely as tragedies apprehended in their meaning, they are remarkable also for their note of range. Shakespeare at his grandest, and though he is dealing with the most concentrated poetical form possible, the purely tragic, has a note that is indeed superhuman in its largeness, the note that you cannot catch him. You feel, whenever he is

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saying anything, even, "It is a sword of Spain, the icebrook's temper," that the voice is full and varied, that his sight is cast beyond the single disaster, that out of his ripeness he could say much else. No such claim can be made for Shelley, no such performance could come from a nature so intense. The Cenci is a tragedy in line, of one attitude, one thing, it is the story of the Cenci, not the story of man as momentarily illustrated by the Cenci. When we read it we feel as if Shelley's voice were exhausted in that note, the note which we hear, and thus the whole play has a naked effect, as if there were not clothes remaining over. It is not dropped by opulence but calls upon the last coin of its maker. This is because Shelley attempts in youth what Shake-

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speare did not attempt till mature. But allowing for this—the sense of strain in the Cenci—there are passages in Shelley's dramatic writings, and this where the fineness or peculiarity of the feeling is pre-eminently his own, where Shelley does seem to touch Shakespeare. Some will find them in the occasional lyrics set with true dramatic propriety, when we hear Beatrice singing the song whose words were sadder than she thought they were, or in such a song as Archy's in "Charles the First":

Heigho! the lark and the owl!

One flies the morning, and one lulls the night:—

Only the nightingale, poor fond soul,

Sings like the fool through darkness and light.

A widow bird sate mourning for her love

Upon a wintry bough:

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The frozen stream crept on above,  
The freezing stream below.

There was no leaf upon the forest bare,  
No flower upon the ground,  
And little motion in the air  
Except the mill wheel's sound.

And it is true there is a delightful indefiniteness of poetical reference in this, both to the character of the poor fool who sings it, and to the tone of the piece which was to end with such sad fortune, that is both poetic and dramatic. But for myself I prefer to look for these passages in those wonderful last scenes of the Cenci in which Shelley's whole attitude to life comes out and in which the action hesitates on the brink of the grave. To tear a passage from its context, and from such a context,

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is to risk mangling what one would illustrate. But there is one passage in which the sentiment is wide and the reflection on the action of the play so little particular that it may be quoted. It is that which contains the exclamation of Beatrice when she learns that her sentence is irrevocable. Built obviously on Claudio's speech in *Measure for Measure*, it quickly dissociates itself from that apostrophe, and indeed, at the end, with its sudden sweep into the blank that faces us, even from the feeling of the young girl who is its speaker.

It is sufficiently dramatic; but just as Shakespeare, in his "To be or not to be," strays off to the consideration of his own peculiar wrongs, so Shelley here slides into what is perhaps the plainest utterance of his despair.



## SHELLEY

Cardinal Camillo has been unsuccessful  
in his errand of mercy and reluctantly  
he brings back the news:

May God in heaven be less inexorable  
To the Pope's prayers than he has been to mine!  
Here is the sentence and the warrant.

To which Beatrice: -

O

My God! can it be possible I have  
To die so suddenly? So young to go  
Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground?  
To be nailed down into a narrow place;  
To see no more sweet sunshine; hear no more  
Blithe voice of living thing; muse not again  
Upon familiar thoughts,—sad, yet thus lost  
How fearful! To be nothing! or to be—

What? Oh where am I? Let me not go mad!  
Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If there  
should be

No God, no heaven, no earth, in the void world;  
The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!  
If all things then should be . . . . .

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The unwrapping of the veil of life, as strong hands may rip a sheet of linen down, the sudden loneliness of a spirit face to face with the great gulf of things, the hollow calling death, were never more vividly brought before the mind. It is a great poet who can speak thus ; it is a great poet who speaks to us in Shelley's poetry ; but a great poet who, for the most part, was content to inhabit a world of light, and sound, and air, a world where the light is clear, where the sound is tenuous, where the air is fine, but where, if we have ears for those distant and distinct tones, we may hear a voice that is ours, and where, if we have eyes for that brightness, we may see, not the interests of life certainly, but the distinctions, the thoughts, the truths that, lying at the back of

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life, shape life. Shelley is like ourselves, but he is unlike ourselves in this, that the secret of things is what has charm for him, not the things themselves.







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