Review Article*

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NO critical dictum except perhaps that of Goethe on Hamlet as the "frail vessel" has had such general acceptance as Matthew Arnold's characterization of Shelley as the "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain." The phrase had beauty of expression and rhythm and offered an enchantingly pathetic picture. Lovers of poetry fell under its spell, with the result that even in our less sentimental day we have thrilled most to the conception of Shelley as an "Ariel" and an "Orphan Angel."

Even before Arnold made his pronouncement, however, Shelly had come down as the general public's idea of a poet: mad, bad, but irresistible. Although for many years after his death the reviewers continued their attacks upon him as an immoral man and an atheist, his tragic end and the poignancy of his lyrics — the "ashes and sparks" of his great poetic fire — contributed to a popularity based largely on a limited apprehension of the poet whose virtues were contained in the reviled long works, "The Revolt of Islam," "Hellas" and "Prometheus Unbound." The authorized biographies and unauthorized reminiscenes that began to appear from those who thought they had "seen Shelley plain" did little to counteract the general misconception. It is safe to say that today we have at last the picture of Shelley as he was.

Much of the credit belongs to Richard Holmes whose biography of Shelley is justified not only by its scholarly exactitude and its array of new evidence, but also by its

*Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975. pp. 829. $22.50.

effort to disentangle the layers of accretion that have encrusted the Shelley legend. For forty years this task has been entrusted to scholars like Newman Ivey White, F. L. Jones and Kenneth Neill Cameron, and it is into this domain that Mr. Holmes strides with insight, sympathy and fair-mindedness exhilarating in a first book. He is twenty-nine years old, the exact age of his hero when he died ten miles off the coast of Viareggio.

We cannot be deceived by his qualifying title, *Shelley: The Pursuit,* since this is the full-scale critical biography of an intractable and still misunderstood genius. It is a fair companion to Gittings or Ward on Keats, to Marchand, Quennell or Moore on Byron. Yet despite its many virtues, Mr. Holmes' biography lacks the immense authority of Newman Ivey White's two-volume biography of Shelley published in 1940. So firm and full was White's lifelong acquaintance with Shelley's life that his narrative has a vividness of detail, a clarity of outline, that eludes Mr. Holmes. But White's fact-by-fact presentation, despite its neutrality of tone, does not separate itself from Shelley's viewpoint. Shelley behaved outrageously at certain moments of his life, and White is too immersed in the poet and too self-effacing a writer to judge his behaviour with dispassion. One of the virtues of Mr. Holmes' book is his willingness to praise and blame, to react, to grapple with the human challenge of Shelley's story, which is sometimes lost between the lines of White's fact-filled narrative. Holmes is that rare biographer who, despite years of arduous intimacy, still succeeds in keeping his subject in perspective.

Some of the most interesting parts of Mr. Holmes' book concern the esthetic uses Shelley made of his increasing understanding of his own capacity for self-projection and self-dramatization. Both in life and in art he was interested in phantasms, doppelgängers, emanations, Gothic horrors and Platonic Ideas. Beloved women, male friends, were

alter egos, idealized images of himself with whom he could blend.

The capacity for self-projection also informs his relations with the downtrodden poor of England and Ireland, with misguided Christian culture, with unresponsive Life itself. Mr. Holmes, is illuminating about the powerful and controlled use of the images of phantoms and masks in "The Triumph of Life," where Shelley envisages the dancing young before the Chariot with distorted forms of themselves peeling, as it were, from their faces, and taking on a deathly life of their own. This Mr. Holmes sees as "a final explanation of his world of ghosts and spirits"; "projections" of Shelley's own personality.

This force of self-assertion is the opposite of Keats' "negative capability." It can, and did, create great literature. But in life it is destructive, and Shelley's life was strewn, like the track of the Chariot of which he saw himself as a victim, with heaps of ruins.

The Shelley scandal was rooted in the unconventionality of his life, the difficulty of his verse, and the subversiveness of his opinions on everything from politics, religion and morals to diet (vegetarianism), opinions he expounded with missionary zeal and energy. This known outline of Shelley's existence Mr. Holmes now fills in with the substance and color of life.

Heir to a title and a large fortune, Shelley was expelled from Oxford for printing an incendiary essay on the "Necessity of Atheism." He married while still in his teens Harriet Westbrook, the daughter of a tavern keeper, following his rejection by a beautiful cousin, Harriet Grove. He fell in love with Mary Godwin after Harriet had borne him two children, and eloped with her to the Continent, accompanied by Mary's half-sister Jane, later Claire Clairmont, with whom he might have had a child (Mr. Holmes doubts it). In a free-love union, sanctified by the ideals of Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary's father, William Godwin, whose *Political Justice* had been Shelley's

bible, the two, with the ever-present Claire, lived in scorn of their contemporaries, but in the pursuit of ideals of beauty and human regeneration of which Shelley never lost sight. Some adjustment might perhaps have been made in the lives of the three persons in the strange marital tangle had not Harriet Shelley, still in love with her husband, but now convinced that he would never return to her, committed suicide.

Mary and Shelley married, to the relief of Godwin, who had never approved of having his theories put into practice in his own family; but the world never forgave them. In Italy, where except for a few intimate friends they saw little of the English tourists, they continued their life together, reared and lost their children, read, wrote and pursued their paramount aim — Shelley to give form in poetry to his ever-living ideals, and Mary to follow, sometimes successfully, in the wake of his flight. Personal sorrows never ceased to darken their lives, as when the English courts deprived Shelley of his children by Harriet, and the Italian climate robbed them of their Clara and William.

Not all of these disasters were Shelley's fault, but some were. They sprang partly from his vision and way of life, which were those not of a beautiful and ineffectual angel, but of a brilliant child, alternately cross and charming, greedy, afraid of the effects of its own violence, narcissistic, afraid of not being loved, or not being entirely loved.

Shelley is one of those figures who, as Samuel Butler said, take on a much more vivid life after death than they could have hoped to do before it. Indeed, one of the few more depressing aspects of Mr. Holmes' study is its constant sad reminder that almost none of the poet's major work was printed in his lifetime, let alone read by his contemporaries whom he so urgently and earnestly desired to influence.

Mr. Holmes draws a captivating picture of the young Shelley at Lynmouth launching his writings on the sky and sea by balloon and bottle; and, for all the good his subsequent efforts at publication did him, he might as well have

continued lobbing bottles into the Bristol Channel all his life. Worse was to follow when he died; for his family — from motives of hatred in one generation and equally extravagant adoration in another — continued on the one hand to suppress his work, and on the other to withhold, distort or destroy much crucial biographical material and to bowdlerize the rest.

If Sir Timothy Shelley forbade the posthumous publication of his son's most important work, it was Lady Jane Shelley who furnished a shrine (complete with locks of hair and scraps of bone) to her revered father-in-law and saw to it that Victorian biographers perpetuated their legend of a much maligned, pure and gentle spirit, too ethereal to contend with the rough ways of this wicked world: a romantic myth which persists to this day in classrooms and indeed beyond them.

Thanks largely to those like Lady Jane, one approaches Shelley with a mixture of mistrust and boredom. Circumstances, part accidental, part deliberately engineered, have ensued that the general estimate of his poetry still rests on those famous sentimental lyrics, from the "Skylark" onwards, which — as Mr. Holmes makes clear — were no more than trifles to their author: "For the most part they were products of periods of depression and inactivity, haphazard acts of inattention when the main work could not be pushed forward."

This main work contained Shelley's complex intellectual and emotional response to the violent political and social upheavals which marked the end of the first stage of the industrial revolution; and if, as Bernard Shaw reported, even the comparatively early "Queen Mab" became years after Shelley's death "The Chartists' Bible," one cannot help speculating about what might have happened if the great polemical poems of his maturity had also been released at the time of writing.

Mr. Holmes' book is much better on Shelley's life and his prose than on his poetry. For Mr. Holmes, apart from

Yeats and Carl Garbo, there is "virtually no literary criticism [on Shelley] which is worth reading before 1945." Yet there is unlikely to be any literary criticism worth reading which does not seriously engage with (though not necessarily yield to) the crucial objections to Shelley's poetry expressed by Hazlitt, Bagehot, Arnold, Eliot and Leavis. What is a strength of Mr. Holmes' writing, its pace and scrupulousness of biographical detail, becomes a weakness when he pauses — or rather, does his best to pause, or seem to pause — for the necessary patient exercise of literary criticism.

Perhaps we should overlook this omission in Mr. Holmes' book, since it is not easy to gain access to Shelley's imaginative universe. One reason for this failure is the indistinctness of Shelley's poetry, its inability to crystallize into meaning, its rapidity of speed. Shelley's vertiginous imagination is different from that of Wordsworth, which is granitic, earthbound and obedient to the pull of a stern gravity; or of Keats' suspending time to prolong moments of pleasure, savoring and slowly feeding on its object. The vertigo also arises from Shelley's aerial perspectives which, like those of Turner, turn a landscape into a shimmering mirage. Just as Shelley dissolves everything into metaphors — the soul into an enchanted boat and then into a sleeping swan — so Turner made the interior of Pentworth into a grotto under the sea, its contents swimming in a sea of light, the solidity of every object triumphantly reduced to fluidity. The witch of Atlas gives us such a Turneresque vision:

> . . . she would often climb
> The steepest ladder of the crudded rack
> Up to some beaked cape of cloud sublime,
> And like Arion on the dolphin's back
> Ride singing through the shoreless air;—oft-time
> Following the serpent lightning's winding track,
> She ran upon the platform of the wind,
> And laughed to hear the fire-balls roar behind.

Shelley's nature is also an image of transformation. Keats' autumn is valued for its poise and satiety: its desperation to focus on an instant of time makes it pictorial. Such a

picture embalms a moment, lifts it out of the realm of time into the safety of space. On the other hand, Shelley's autumnal west wind is a force which triumphs in time, exciting nature into a maenadic dance, unsettling the sentences through which it rushes, compelling change everywhere. Each stanza is a movement in the musical sense, transmitting an energy of change and disturbance from one image to the other across intervals with electrical swiftness. The year is dying and night is in its sepulchral dome, but the image which is projected is not spelt out but released to create explosions and transformations of its own. The image bursts into another image and the dome is:

> Vaulted with all thy congregated might
> Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
> Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!

Shelley's poetry has the rationality not of philosophical discourse but of music, weaving together words and images with an orderliness which eludes explanation or paraphrase. No critic has fully examined the musical qualities in Shelley's work, qualities which make his greatest moments unrivalled, and which constitute the real grandeur and elevation of Shelleyness, F. R. Leavis, subjecting Shelley's poetry to his own mode of analysis, finds that his work is typified by emotionalism, incoherence and verbal confusion. But this is an impossible view for anyone who has heard the musical notes of Shelley and listens for them in reading:

> Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,
> But grief returns with the revolving year. . . .

We hear the note in stanza 18 of "Adonais," and it recurs near the end:

> Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my heart?
> Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here
> They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!
> A light is passed from the revolving year. . . .

Because the medium of words was for Shelley as fluent and interchangeable as thought, his translations are admirable. Claire Clairmont, who often showed flashes of insight into Shelley's poetry, thought that his best works were the

versions from Dante and from the Greek of Moschus. He was equally at ease in Greek and Italian, German and Spanish (he much admired Calderon) and his poetry eludes English style because of this international fluency. Emphasis on the verb rather than the noun, as in ancient Greek, gives the impression of rapid movement; but English syntax is easily left behind, and the speed can be bewildering and monotonous as well as liberating. Keats' advice to "load every rift with ore" suits English but not Shelleyan English. He can sound uncannily like a very good translation: in the Pisan fragments ("There is no dew on the dry grass tonight") the words seem exactly right yet without becoming stylistically alive, a phenomenon frequent in a good translation, but which Shelley is the only English poet to display in an original poem. Much of "The Triumph of Life" rings clear and effortless as the Petrarch and the *Commedia* from which it was imitated. Music, too, is an intellectual language, and it is fitting that Shelley's vision of mankind should be in accord with his rendering of how it might hear and speak in some world other than the sublunary.

What emerges from Mr. Holmes' book is that Shelley hungered for calm but found restlessness. One of the best lines he ever wrote was "It is the unpastured sea hungering for calm." The hungry paradox here is calmly put, unlike the more forced romanticism of, for example, Wallace Stevens: "O blessed rage for order." How mysterious and yet unterrifying it is (free from the Gothic terrors which Shelley used to inflict on himself and other people), to imagine the sounding sea as a great animal — "Peace monster" — and yet as one that crops a pasture. Nature is sea-green incorruptible, not red in tooth and claw. Here Shelley digests into art what was usually a mere fad; his vegetarianism.

His life was recued from the sea once because he was able to be calm. It was one of the several occasions when drowning threatened him. His friend said:

> I caught hold of Shelley, and told him to be calm and quiet, and I would take him on shore. His answer was: "All right, never more comfortable in my life; do what you will with me."

His politics, despite their voluble excitement, came more and more to prize calmness: "The people appear calm, and steady even under situations of great excitement; and reform may come without revolution." His most acute critics like Lockhart saw that calm was the surprising achievement of his poetry: "Around his lovers, moreover, in the midst of all their fervours, he had shed an air of calm gracefulness." And when Shelley was truly self-critical, his sharpest understanding came when he acknowledged that there was in his poetry an absence of that tranquility which is the attribute and accompaniment of power.

Another arch-romantic, Lermontov, who died in a duel at the age of twenty-seven, summed up his plight at the end of a short poem, "The Sail":

> But it, rebellious, asks for storms,
> As if in storms alone come calm.

Like Lermontov and other Romantic poets of the time (Byron in "Childe Harold", and Heine), Shelley often embodied his feelings in a metaphor selected from nature. One of the best of these poems is "To Jane: The Recollection", in which the pines in a forest near Pisa are seen in a still pool, and their reflection compared to a momentary calm in "our mortal nature's strife." The whole poem — it is one of Shelley's best — is pervaded by a kind of impending distraction, quite unlike the magisterial calm of Lermontov and Heine, and this — like the premonition in Giorgione's "Tempesta" — threatens the calm without destroying it. It makes us feel admiration and even reverence for the poet, in all the shifts, the bewilderment and terror of his nature, because we can accept the truth of its concluding lines:

> Less oft is peace in Shelley's mind
> Than calm in waters, seen.