

AN UNORTHODOX APPROACH TO PARNASSUS

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ORPHEUS, the pattern of the inspired poet and singer, is represented by Shelley as returning from Hades filled with grief. Choosing a lonely seat of unhewn stone on a herbless plain, he gives expression to the torrent of his grief in the sweet sounds of music and the varying words of poetry. His grief is compared by Shelley to a mighty cataract which flows between two sister rocks. The water hurls itself below with a horrid roar and din, but the spray rises high, and the sun clothes it with rainbow colours. The song of Orpheus is born of discord, but in song the poet re-creates the lost paradise of his ideals. Poetry is the religion of the heart. It re-builds the lost paradise of the poet's ideals: fills his soul with wisdom, beauty and the might of the gods. In so far as the poet abandons himself to his world of emotion he lives again in a young world that is wet with the dew of creation. Poetry is the reassertion of life and light over death and darkness.

To understand a poet fully we must ask ourselves not only what his ideals are, but also what grief or want has called forth those ideals. Life can be explained not only in terms of action, of what a man seeks; but also in terms of reaction, or what a man flees from. With the gold key of idealism we unlock the treasures of truth and beauty which a poet seeks consciously. With the iron key of grief we throw open the Acheron of the sub-conscious, and there seek the fleeting shadows of what might-have-been, which are re-born in the creative joy of the poet. Sorrow and joy are not antithetical. Sorrow is like the evening star which sinks within the cradle of night; it is re-born as the morning star of joy and the harbinger of day. When the infant science of experimental psychology comes to be of age, it will give us not only a 'foot rule of the mind', but also a 'thermometer of the heart' and mark grief and joy as the freezing point and the boiling point of our emotional life.

If the song of Orpheus attracted animals and trees, 'and made even the blind worms feel the sound', it was because all Nature recognised in his grief and in his joy a community of sentiment. The poet's sorrow takes its origin from a personal grief. But as it is expressed in song it becomes the cry of pained life itself. Shelley says that the greatness of poetry lies in awakening the sympathy of man for a grief other than one's own. The poet gains our sympathy for this larger suffering by voicing forth the grief

of collective man. He gives expression to the unsolved conflicts that we feel deep within our common human nature.

“The miserable one
Turns the mind’s poison into food,—
Its medicine is tears,—its evil good.”

The poet turns evil into good because there is a saving grace in his grief which enables him to draw from the hidden sources of our collective unconscious the healing forces of life. Sorrow and joy are like the two poles of a bent magnet. The psychic life of the poet revolves like the well-wound coils of a magneto between its two poles until it liberates light and energy. In the long run the poet is not only a music maker and a dreamer of dreams, but he also becomes a revolutionary and a shaker of the world.

There are two sides to a poet’s grief—the personal and the impersonal. If it were purely personal, if it were the inevitable penalty by which sin takes its toll in sorrow, it may be of pathological interest, but it has no value as literature. The grief of Shelley is of value to us because there is an element of universality in it. We too feel deep within our nature, in common with Shelley, a nostalgia for the infinite. It is, in Shelley’s words,

“The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.”

I

The two persons who count most in a child’s life are father and mother. Round father centres the idea of obedience to authority, and round mother the child’s surrender to affection. Most normal children adjust themselves to these demands of life. But Shelley was ever a ‘difficult child’. He had developed his egoism to such an extent that he could not brook authority. Authority was for him the pole of repulsion. As he was of a brooding and meditative nature, he began to develop an impossible idea of love. There was something abnormal in it, and it brought him into greater conflict with authority as represented by the church, the state and society. They were all, as he recognised in *The Cenci*, shadows of the parental power. If he had been less egoistic, or if his love-life had been normal, he would have submitted to authority and led the life of an average citizen. If with his abnormalities he had also lacked intellectual rectitude, he might have ended his life as a criminal. It was because Shelley was a man of character, gifted with a capacity to suffer punishment without sacrificing intellectual rectitude and honesty of purpose, that he was at last able not only to overtake authority but also conquer his own psychic complexes. The *raison d’être* of authority is that it is ethical in nature.

In the mystic idea of love which Shelley developed as a result of the failure of his romantic love, he found an excellent substitute for authority. He realised that if the will to love were sublimated it can itself discharge the ethical function of life. Authority then is left functionless. It also becomes superfluous. It may be formidably armed, but it is made to look unethical in nature because of its very might. It is made to appear as though it is a purely destructive agency. When the function of authority is discharged by love, authority is left behind in the race for life. It looks as foolish and out of date as a prehistoric monster in a museum, and as useless as the armour and the instruments of torture that were employed in the days of King John.

While dedicating *The Revolt of Islam* to Mary, he wrote,

“ Thoughts of great deeds were mine, dear friend, when first
The clouds which wrap this world from youth did pass.
I do remember well the hour which burst
My spirit's sleep : a fresh May-dawn it was
When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,
And wept, I know not why ; until there rose
From the near school room, voices, that, alas !
Were but one echo from a world of woes—
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

And then I clasped my hand and looked around—
But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,
Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground—
So, without shame, I spake :—‘ I will be wise,
And just and free, and mild, if in me lies
Such power, for I grow weary to behold
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
Without reproach or check.’ I then controlled
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.”

It was this school-boy reaction to tyranny that sent him to Ireland. We learn from his correspondence with Hunt that he had early set his hopes on a political life and a seat in Parliament. He hoped to gain fame and peace of mind by supporting the cause of freedom in the very citadel of authority. Mary Shelley wrote, “ The eager spirit of Shelley believed that it could achieve what it projected for the benefit of mankind. In youth he had read of ‘ illuminati and eleuthererchs’ and believed that he possessed the power of operating an immediate change in the minds of men and the state of society.” The young enthusiast had his *Address to the People of Ireland* written in England so that no time may be lost in spreading the new Gospel of peace through reason. Christ found it easier to work miracles than to convert the Jews. Large-scale reforms are not wrought overnight. The hopes of Shelley were doomed to disappointment. Our young Prometheus scorched his fingers in his attempt to bring fire from heaven.

We know that the fire which Shelley brought to Ireland came from France which was then the heaven of all young enthusiasts. In France the people followed freedom as though it were a sun rising on their horizon. But it proved to be a marsh-light in a fen. The worship of reason ended with the reign of terror. Napoleon came up like a second Cromwell. The revolt against authority brought militarism to power. In Shelley's opinion the world ought to have mourned when the French Revolution failed. When 'the last hope of baffled France' expired in a military dictatorship, Shelley said that he 'gnawed the core of bitter grief', as though he had suffered a personal loss. He felt as though he were a nerve twitching with the pain of the earth. Even in the last years of his life he could not think of that period with its sweet delusion, its mingled pleasure and pain, without a pang of remorse. In a poem of 1820 entitled *Time Long Past* he wrote,

" Like a ghost of a dear friend dead
 Is time long past.
 A tone which is now for ever fled,
 A hope which is now for ever past,
 A love so sweet it could not last,
 Was time long past.

There were sweet dreams in the night
 Of time long past :
 And was it sadness or delight,
 Each day a shadow onward cast
 Which made us with it yet might last—
 That time long past.

There is regret, almost remorse,
 For time long past.
 'Tis like a child's beloved corpse
 A father watches, till at last
 Beauty is like remembrance, cast
 From time long past."

When the springs of activity are arrested, life becomes a *meditatio mortis*, a troubled day-dream. Hope lies 'coffined with despair'. In such a state of psychic sterility, the mind broods over an endless sorrow, or shrinks from icy despair, blames the world and spends days of agonising sensation in contemplating the perfidy of man to man. In the one case the mind digests its grief; in the other, it projects it and throws it out. The troubled mind does not ask itself 'How long shall I endure this?', but 'What shall I do to get out of it?'. There lay open to the young poet a veritable choice of Hercules. He might have, as Keats did later, barred off reality and lived in a world of make-believe. But Shelley rejected such an easy way of escape. The contemplation of past splendours may be an anodyne for the troubled life of the present, but is never a substitute for present life where we must find our happiness or not

at all. Shelley's golden age lay not in the past but in the future, and like the happiness of Faust, it had to be gained by hard toil. He could not therefore wander through the wreck of days departed and consider himself happy. If his own age had inherited a fragment of the glory of the past, it was also heir to 'traditions dark and old' which had 'poisoned the stream of life'. We have travelled far down the river of time. We can no more go back to the past and repeat the world's history than we can go back to our own infancy.

"We look on the past
And stare aghast
At the spectres wailing, pale and ghast,
Of hopes which thou and I beguiled
To death on life's dark river.
The stream we gazed on then rolled by,
Its waves are unreturning ;
But we yet stand
In a lone land
Like tombs to mark the memory
Of hopes and fears which fade and flee
In the light of life's dim morning."

(*Poems of 1817*)

The other alternative which lay open to Shelley at that time was to follow the lead of his elder contemporaries, Wordsworth and Southey, declare that he had grown tired of 'unchartered freedom', and accept the established order of things. Starting from a position not different from his own, Wordsworth became conservative, Byron cynical and Hazlitt an admirer of Napoleon. The immediate effect of lowering one's ideals is an apparent sense of security. Its effect on the mind is analogous to the trade boom that sets in when a country depreciates its currency. But Shelley could not change with the times, for the parental-complex stood in the way of his submission to authority. He must have felt that he was like his own Prometheus, and he must have asked the unheeding world, 'Know ye not me, he who made his agony the barrier to your else all conquering foe?'. He could but cling to the dead hopes of the past. He felt that

"Worse than despair,
Worse than the bitterness of death is hope."

A great part of Shelley's melancholy must be attributed to the fact that he could not tear himself away from these dead hopes of the past. Human nature itself must undergo a silent revolution before truth and love can become a sufficient law unto life. Without realising this the poet blamed himself and the world, and he complained, "In the sanctuary of my soul my spirit lay prostrate, and with parted lips kissed the dust of desolation". He wrote in an early fragment,

“ My head is wild with weeping for a grief
Which is the shadow of a gentle mind.”

In *The Revolt of Islam*, he said,

“ My spirit felt again like one of those
Whose fate it is to make the woes
Of human kind their prey.”

The essence of high tragedy lies in feeling the sorrows of the community as though it were a personal grief. Otherwise our little lives have nothing heroic in them. We see in Shelley how as the years rolled by his sorrow became more and more impersonal. Generalising his grief, he wrote in *A Fragment for Otho*,

“ Those whom nor power, nor lying faith, nor toil,
Nor custom, queen of many slaves, makes blind,
Have ever grieved that man should be the spoil
Of his own weakness.”

In *Prometheus Unbound* he put himself on the side of the angels, and lamented the way of the world.

“ Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
The fanes of many a worship now outworn.
They dare not devise good for man's estate,
And yet they do not know that they do not dare.
The good want power but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want : worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom :
And all best things are thus confounded to ill.”

(Act I, 621-628)

The mind of the poet acted as a condenser, and distilled fresh sources of grief. Everytime it overpowered him, he poured out in song the sorrow of his heart. The source of that grief, as he himself recognised in a fragment of 1820, may be traced by us to

“ Such hope as is the sick despair of good,
Such fear as is the certainty of ill,
Such doubt as is pale expectation's food—
Turned when she tastes to poison when the will is powerless.”

Perhaps the clearest expression of that mood of dejection is to be found in a poem of 1821 entitled *A Lament*.

“ O World ! O life ! O time !
On whose last steps I climb,
Trembling at that where I had stood before ;
When will return the glory of your prime ?
No more—oh, never more !

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight ;
Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more—oh, never more !”

II

The melancholy of Shelley may be explained as due to the fact that he missed in life both the power and the love that he sought. In attributing the melancholy of Shelley to these two factors, we do not distort the life of the poet in order to fit it into any psychological theory. In a poem of 1819 Shelley has himself attributed his melancholy to these two factors.

“ Chameleons feed on air :
Poets' food is love and fame :
If in this wide world of care
Poets could but find the same
With as little toil as they,
Would they ever change their hue
As the light chameleons do,
Suiting it to every ray
Twenty times a day ?
Poets are on this cold earth,
As the chameleons be,
Hidden from their early birth
In a cave beneath the sea :
Where light is, chameleons change :
Where love is not, poets do :
Fame is love disguised : if few
Find either, never think it strange
That poets range.”

It now remains to be seen how Shelley integrated his life into a unity, found love and fame, conquered his melancholy and triumphed over the world. The study of Shelley's melancholy will then help us to understand at what cost he gained his vision of life, and why we ought to heed it. It looked as though Nature had, to borrow the significant expression of Francis Thompson, charred his life in order to limn with it. By the very nature of the case we do not expect a sudden illumination to dawn on the mind of Shelley. We can only expect a gradual liberation from sorrow, as he drew more and more upon the hidden resources of power, vision and love that lie latent in human nature.

At times Shelley gained only a partial integration of impulses. When he gave expression to the creative impulse in him with his complexes only partially solved, he produced a satire like *Oedipus Rex*, an unfinished drama like *Charles I*, where the inner desire was clear—to cut off the head of authority—or a finished play like *The Cenci* which is a well-developed drama of father hatred. It was because they were only modes of partial escape that they gave him a sense of relief from a life of frustration and of sorrow only as long as the creative impulse was on him. In a fragment of 1821, the poet said of himself,

“ When passion’s trance is over past,
If truth and tenderness could last,
I should not weep, I should not weep.”

At times Shelley sought to escape from the haunting sense of grief by playing with children by the hour on the floor, or in listening to music which obliterated for him past and present, and made him feel as though he were floating free on the billows of sound. Music was for him ‘ the silver key to the fountain of tears.’ It was not only the food of love, but love itself. He thus sought both in his personal life and in artistic catharsis an escape from sorrow.

The true liberation of Shelley came to him when he sought a complete harmony of impulses in ‘ tenderness and truth’. He who was stretched on the rack like Prometheus (whatever be his sins) came to realise that there is no higher law than love. It dawned on him not merely as an emotional conviction, but also as an intellectual one. This truth was revealed to him in the works of the great masters who were his constant companions through all these years of spiritual agony. The mind in grief absorbs the thoughts of others just as the parched earth sucks up the summer showers that descend on it. It was the moral and intellectual integrity of Shelley that saved him from a life of conflict and chaos. There is a curious passage in *Prometheus Unbound* where Prometheus speaks as though he were a mortal longing for death.

“ I would fain
Be what it is my destiny to be,
The saviour and the strength of suffering man,
Or sink into the original gulf of things :
There is no agony, no solace left :
Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.”

(Act I, 815-20)

It is only when a man stands at the brink of life, and feels that everything has been lost that he stands before the immense possibilities of life. It is only then that his psychic regeneration takes place. The fact is that in such a situation there is an element of death as well as of birth. What dies is a sense of separate personality, using the term ‘personality’ as derived from ‘persona’ or mask. When this sense of separateness which keeps the individual warring against the race is got rid of, the individual becomes a vehicle of the life-force itself. Shelley the individual became Prometheus or collective man. He became the embodiment of an idea. This sense of birth and death in Shelley was beautifully brought out in a fragment of 1821.

“ I faint, I perish with my love ! I grow
Frail as a cloud whose splendours pale
Under the evening's ever changing glow :
I die like mist upon the gale,
And like a wave under the calm I fail.”

The first step in a process of regeneration is the acceptance of oneself as a fragment of the life-force. The next is the recognition of that life-force in others also. Love thus completes itself.

It was not any external influence that brought about the rebirth of Shelley. It did not descend on him like a God from a machine, but rose from within, from his own sub-conscious nature. It was as though in the beginning, gold and dross were mingled together. All that sorrow did was to wash away the dross. It left behind only the pure gold of love. This process of internal purification, sublimation and adjustment to the world is clearly revealed to us by the incidents in his life. When the Lord Chancellor deprived him of the care of his children, he cursed him though he did not hate him. Here we have the young Shelley. He was full of defiance. Gradually he became more tolerant. When a critic found fault with his poems, he wrote,

“ Honey from silkworms who can gather,
Or silk from the yellow bee ?
The grass may grow in winter weather
As soon as hate in me.

A passion like the one I prove
Cannot divided be :
I hate thy want of truth and love—
How shall I then hate thee ?”

To the extent that Shelley could forgive an enemy he was becoming a fragment of the life-force itself. The recantation of Prometheus,

“ It doth repent me : words are quick and vain ;
Grief for a while is blind, and so was mine.
I wish no living thing to suffer pain,”

may be regarded by us as the recantation of Shelley himself. That is why we feel that though the man Shelley died, the immortal poet is ever with us. If the bards of passion and of mirth have a twofold immortality it is because they are ‘ twice born ’. They are reborn out of the psychic conflicts under which ordinary mortals go down. If at times we speak of the poet Shelley in the present tense, it is because the poet's nature participates of what is eternal in life. All things become slaves to the holy and heroic. They who conquer that portion of their own lives which lies between the cradle and the grave should be crowned as victors over both life and death. In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley liberated himself from his psychic complexes. It was because

his psychic life was thus completed that we find the introvert turning extravert, and taking interest once again in politics and economics. The advice given by the poet is that justice shall triumph when love is the law of life. But the old hurry to act and to achieve results was no longer there. In a letter to Horace Smith, the poet said that his good genius asked him to refrain from acting in the immediate present lest the contest should be one of blood and money. The poet was satisfied if he could be the trumpet that called men to battle with evil. He was content with awakening the imagination and the enthusiasm of men for a good cause. Having gained his vision of life at immense cost, he bequeathed it to us. It is up to us to make that vision our own, by realising in action what yet remains only a possibility of life.