Shelley and Revolution

by Ian Parks

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Scope of Topic

Matthew Arnold’s assessment of Shelley (1792-1822) as “a beautiful and ineffectual Angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” has proved to be a lasting one. Even now, over two-hundred years after his birth, this image of Shelley as a radiant, well-meaning but essentially ineffectual idealist remains the predominant view of him and, as such, has influenced subsequent approaches to his work. The purpose of this Bookmark is to question this received view of Shelley’s poetry and to set it in the revolutionary context of the times in which he lived. Shelley’s scope as a Romantic poet will be considered together with his influence on later generations of poets, thinkers, and revolutionaries.

BOOKS TO READ
Shelley: Selected Poems (Everyman) ed. Timothy Webb

NOTES
Shelley lived during a period of unprecedented change. In almost every sphere of life – social, political, religious – long-held beliefs and opinions were being questioned and, in some cases, undermined. In science too, recent advances had called into question commonly-held assumptions about the origins of the universe and the place of man in the “divine order” of things. These changes are, to some extent, reflected in the work of the other younger Romantic poets among whom Shelley is usually grouped. Byron and Keats did respond to the political situation which prevailed in Europe during the first years of the nineteenth-century, and many of these changes in society are reflected in these poems; but Shelley is the only poet of the period who engages his audience directly in such debates and who holds firmly to the belief that poetry can actually transform the social order into something new and better. But why did Shelley feel so strongly that society needed to be changed at such a fundamental level? In order to understand this we need to know something about two momentous events which occurred in the last quarter of the previous century.

The American War of Independence (1774-81) had called into question not just the right of a British sovereign to rule the overseas colonies, but also the right of that sovereign to rule at all. Profound dissatisfaction with the rule of monarchies underlies both the work of Tom Paine (The Rights of Man) and William Godwin (An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice) – radicals who espoused the cause of the American Revolutionaries and went on to become major influences in the thought that informs so much of Shelley’s poetry. More significant than the loss of the American colonies, though, were the repercussions that followed the French Revolution of 1789 – an event which was to send shock-waves throughout the whole of Europe. Britain found itself at war with Revolutionary France and then with Napoleon Bonaparte who remained unchecked until his defeat at Waterloo in 1815. The French Revolution was so significant because it demonstrated the power of the masses and the weakness of the aristocracy in the face of social upheaval. This period of revolution coincided with the increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of British society. All the injustices of a divided society which had existed before industrialisation were suddenly thrown into sharp focus and the unrepresented masses were perceived as a threat by the ruling elite. Reform was seen as a dangerous option; repression the most expedient. Although born into the ruling classes himself, Shelley was quick to relinquish his birth-right and ally himself with the ordinary people with whom he identified and whose cause he wanted to champion. It is easy
- and dangerous - to idealise Shelley's identification with the masses, and to do so would be to miss the point of his career as a poet. While he undoubtedly felt that practical measures needed to be taken in order to create a more just society, he also held to the conviction that individual beliefs had to be changed at a fundamental level before any significant transformation could begin. It is primarily at this level then, in an appeal to the dignity of the human spirit, that Shelley's poetry agitates. In this sense, it is truly revolutionary in that it seeks first to change the human heart, confident that changes in human relations will follow.

If Shelley's poetry looks forward idealistically to a time in the future when men and women will be able to live in a just society, it also concentrates on the events and issues of the time in which the poet lived. In his personal life, Shelley was an atheist, a vegetarian, and an advocate of free-love. More than with any other poet, details of Shelley's biography have been allowed to colour critical responses to his work. It seems to follow that if someone is attracted to Shelley as a personality then they are likely to be admirers of his work; conversely, those who find Shelley's lifestyle repellent are often the fiercest critics of his poetry. With this in mind, it is sometimes difficult to reach a balanced view. It is true that Shelley left behind him a trail of destruction: his personal relations were tainted by an unshakeable conviction that his views were always right, and many people who became close to him suffered as a result of that intimacy. And yet Shelley the poet was capable of expressing in memorable language ideas that were shocking at the time but which have since become part of our common beliefs about the basic right of the individual to freedom. Take, for instance, his stance on the equality of women. ‘Can man be free if woman be a slave?’ he asks in his long poem The Revolt of Islam, thereby expressing in one line the fundamental argument for equality of the sexes. Again and again in his poetry Shelley reinforces the same simple idea that all humans are equal and that forms of organised government and religion are means by which the stronger minority represses and controls the weaker masses.

Apart from the difficulties which arise when Shelley the individual is confused with Shelley the poet, we should also be aware of the way in which many of his poems have been given an interpretation which neutralises their political content and presents them in entirely different terms. A good example of this is perhaps Shelley's best-known poem, Ode to the West Wind which appears in all editions of Shelley's poems and in many anthologies of English poetry. Most approaches deal with it as a poem about the powers of Nature. And, at one level, the poem is about exactly that. It deals with the way in which the forces of nature are basically restorative; that after a period of death (winter) nature reverses the order of things and brings resurrection with the spring. A closer examination, however, shows that Shelley identifies the falling leaves - 'Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red' - with 'Pestilence-stricken multitudes' and the wind itself with an animating spirit which has the power to revive and restore, to stir up to action and to agitate. Later in the poem he suggests that the wind might act through him and become 'the trumpet of a prophecy' – an activating force closely associated with his powers as a poet. Far from being a poem about nature, Ode to the West Wind appears to argue the case for a special function for the poet and poetry in a time of social repression: the poet can speak for and articulate the grievances of the masses. It is at the very darkest of times, Shelley seems to suggest, that change takes place; that, in effect, things must get worse before they can possible get better. That is why the poem ends with the conviction that 'if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

In order to see more clearly the revolutionary influences at work behind Shelley's poetry, it is useful to examine three poems which were written in direct response to specific conditions which prevailed during the time at which Shelley was writing. These poems - two sonnets and a ballad - are fairly representative of Shelley's approach, his political idealism, and the level of invective he directed towards the ruling classes in the British society of the early nineteenth-century. In the first, England in 1819, Shelley begins with a memorable line which immediately calls into question the right of a monarch, George III, to rule. Describing him as 'An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King' he goes on to indict his heirs as

'Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn.'
By doing so, Shelley directs his attack at the heart of what he sees to be a sick and corrupt society and, by implication, suggests that any hope of improvement must rest on the removal of the monarch and his heirs. He sees this corruption filtering down into the system which supports the monarchy – the aristocratic politicians and clergymen

‘who neither see nor feel nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling.’

For Shelley, then, the ruling classes are not merely incapable of ruling, they are also using their privileges in order to live off the very society whose interests they are supposed to be protecting. The ‘people’ however, are depicted as being essentially helpless; unable to break the grip of this repressive regime. Shelley thinks of them in terms of an ‘army’; that is, he agrees that the masses retain a certain potential in that by sheer force of numbers they might be able to overcome their oppressors; but he also perceives them to be leaderless and without the necessary spirit to bring about significant change. By the end of the poem Shelley has introduced the figure of a ‘phantom’ who might ‘burst’ upon the scene; a sort of messianic figure who will lead the masses to equality and liberty.

Found in most popular anthologies of British poetry, Shelley's technically innovative sonnet, Ozymandias also deals with the subject of tyrants and their fall. It begins with the famous line 'I met a traveller from an antique land' and goes on to relate how this speaker discovers the shattered remains of the statue of the great Egyptian pharaoh Ozymandias. It is significant to note that Napoleon Bonaparte had conducted an unsuccessful campaign in Egypt and Shelley may have this in mind as he explores the emptiness and vanity which lies behind autocratic rule. The statue of the pharaoh may have been destroyed and its parts dispersed throughout the desert but the plinth on which it stood remains. Shelley draws our attention to the inscription on the massive statue's base:

‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.’

The irony is obvious: while Ozymandias intends the mighty to observe the great city built around his statue, it is clear that all that remains is sand and broken stone. With this in mind, it is possible to interpret the despair of tyrants at the inevitability of their downfall. Once again, Shelley takes a traditional form and invests it with a unique vision. The language is vivid, precise, and evocative; the narrative tendency is very strong and conveys Shelley's ideas in a manner which appears immediate and accessible. Shelley is often – with some justification – criticised for being too abstract. This poem is a singular instance of the poet using concrete imagery and situations to convey his revolutionary message.

Shelley's response to specific political events during his own lifetime is nowhere more evident than in his poem, The Mask of Anarchy. In 1819 the tensions in England had reached a crisis point. At a mass demonstration by working men and women in Manchester, troops were deployed to break up the crowd, many of whom were killed and injured. The events of that day have gone down in British history as the Peterloo Massacre. Shelley heard of the atrocity while in exile in Italy and immediately responded to it in verse. While he deliberately adopts a style and tone that would appear familiar and accessible to the working class audience he is aiming at, the poem progresses with the logic of a nightmare. Shelley frames the poem as a dream or vision, one in which he meets a succession of the major politicians of the day which he held culpable for the massacre. He indicted the ruling order of kings, and priests and lawyers and suggests that the only way in which the masses can earn their freedom is by their own efforts. It is important to notice that Shelly does not at this point put forward any sort of armed uprising; rather, he encourages the downtrodden workers to 'Stand ye calm and resolute / Like a forest close and mute'. This appeal to passive resistance is typical of Shelley. He understands that violence is not the answer as it will only elicit a violent response. By withholding their labour, the workers will render impossible the system by which they are held as prisoners. He sees the masses rising 'like lions after slumber' and taking responsibility for their own destiny. 'Ye are many', he concludes, while 'they are few'. For readers of Shelley who think this advice impractical, the success of large-scale peace movements in the twentieth-century, particularly that instigated by Ghandhi (himself an avid reader of Shelley)
against the British Empire in India, give pause for thought. As we have seen with the previous poems, Shelley's work can be read and understood at several levels, and *The Mask of Anarchy* is no exception. On the surface, it is a fantastical story, filled with mythological figures; on another, it offers a critique of the political scene as Shelley saw it at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.

Shelley extends this criticism of tyranny in his powerful verse-drama *The Cenci* which was written in 1819 (though not performed until the 1880's) and based on real events which had taken place in sixteenth-century Italy. The Cenci of the title is a corrupt nobleman who systematically terrorises his own family, murdering his two sons and heirs, and raping his daughter Beatrice who is the heroine of the tragedy. Shelley shows the corrupting effects of absolute power, exposing as he does the connection between domestic and political oppression. He also explores the conflict which lies at the heart of his revolutionary politics. If violence is always wrong is it ever permissible for it to be used for good, as in the removal of a tyrant? Shelley seems to think so. The drama is, in some ways, Shelley's enquiry into the nature of evil: the Cenci, after all, appears to have no clear motive with which to justify his actions. The conventional motivation behind such acts as he is seen to perpetrate are usually connected to the acquisition of power and wealth – both of which the Cenci possesses already. His only purpose appears to be the pursuit of evil for its own sake. In structuring his play, Shelley is obviously indebted to both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy – and to the Jacobean revenge tradition as exemplified by Webster, Middleton, and Ford – yet manages to retain his own distinctive voice throughout. This is mainly achieved through the speeches of Beatrice (with whom he sympathises) as she justifies the case for taking the life of her father. The fact that her plot to kill him is discovered and the conspirators put to death matters less to Shelley than the right of the individual to take direct action in the removal of a tyrant. *The Cenci* was written shortly after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and some critics see in it Shelley's disillusionment following the failure of Revolutionary France. Whether this is the case or not, *The Cenci* constitutes Shelley's sustained attempt to articulate his revolutionary ideology into a popular form.

The figure of the Cenci as an evil and powerful individual connects Shelley's play to the wider Gothic genre which proliferated during his life. Gothic literature developed out of the Romantic notion of the Sublime; and as such appeared subversive to the audience for which it was intended, mainly because it concentrated on the irrational, the supernatural, and the subversive. Shelley himself had made two attempts at writing Gothic fiction with *Zastrozzi* (1810) and *St. Irvyne* (1811) – novels which contained all the trappings of the genre: ruined buildings, corrupt clerics, and maidens in distress. His influence can detected throughout *Frankenstein*, written by his wife. It reflects Shelley's interest in the supernatural and in the relationship between man and a flawed creator. Many of Shelley's poems make reference to the classic Gothic landscape and to the stock-in-trade of hauntings and inexplicable happenings. In Shelley's hands, however, these conventions are elevated into a means by which he can explore the irrational impulses he, and the other Romantics, saw as underlying human activity. Comparisons can be made to the novels of Walpole and Mrs Radcliffe (particularly *The Mysteries of Udolpho*) where psychological conditions are explored through reference to disturbing external phenomenon. The Gothic genre was very popular during Shelley's career and he seems to have understood and capitalised on this popularity in order to communicate his message of revolutionary reform. After all, the Gothic perspective was by its very nature revolutionary, as it sought to question the received ideas about order and reality on which society is based.

As with any great poet, there are many approaches to Shelley's work – and attempting to set it in the revolutionary context in which it was written is only one of them. It highlights how Shelley must have appeared to his contemporaries (although only a small percentage of his work was published during his lifetime) and goes some way towards repudiating the claim that he is merely an idealist and a dreamer, more interested in far-off utopias than in the problems of the present. In his prose work, *The Defence of Poetry* – written in 1821 but not published until almost twenty years later – Shelley makes significant (some would say exaggerated) claims for poetry, claiming that poets are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'. This is important to Shelley as it shows poetry as having a function to perform in
society. Had he lived longer than his thirty years (Shelley was drowned in a boating accident in 1822) he would have witnessed the sort of political unrest he had envisaged in his poems. He would also have enjoyed the popularity he had sought during his lifetime when the working men and women of the British Isles lauded him as their primary spokesman during their long and difficult struggle for equality and enfranchisement. Many of the ideas embodied in Shelley's poetry went on to inform the thinking behind the Chartist Movement, and ultimately the foundation of modern socialism. Far from the detached, ethereal figure he is often presented as being, Shelley the poet is always engaged in the problems of the present and the practical solutions available by which they might be solved.

FURTHER READING

Richard Holmes: *Shelley: The Pursuit*

Neville Rogers: *Shelley at Work*

E.P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class*

Timothy Webb: *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*

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