

The Ethical Paradox in Shelley

THE contemptuous neglect which such a poet as Shelley experienced during his life is one of those phenomena which in spite of its recurrence never fails to become a marvel to later generations. Still more surprising is the fact that his tragic death caused no immediate access of public interest, no reversal of public opinion. When Mary Shelley collected his works it is clear from her notes that she felt it necessary to roll away the stone of misunderstanding and indifference, a task that all her piety and love could not render a hopeful one. After her death Shelley's son attempted to do justice to his father's memory by turning all material over to Shelley's college friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, as biographer, but the first two volumes fell so ludicrously short of the standard of official biography that further publication was stopped and the documents withdrawn. When Walter Bagehot wrote his essay on Shelley in 1856 he took considerable satisfaction in the situation. "After the long biography of Moore," he wrote, "it is half a comfort to think of a poet as to whom our information is but scanty. The few intimates of Shelley seem inclined to go to their graves without telling in accurate detail the curious circumstances of his life. . . . We know enough to check our inferences from his writings; in some moods it is pleasant not to have them disturbed by long volumes of memories and anecdotes."

Bagehot exulted too soon. Scarcely was the ink dry on his pages when the flood of reminiscence, biography and personal comment began, and has continued to this day. To the *Memoirs of Medwin*, Trelawney, Jeafferson, Symonds, Dowden, and Clutton-Brock have been added the more minute researches of Forman, Garnett, and the Shelley Society. Even the diary of poor Williams, the husband of Jane and the companion of Shelley on his fatal voyage, has been published. Long before the pregnant secret of Wordsworth's life was revealed, every fact and circumstance of Shelley's, every scrap of his writing and every recorded impression or opinion of him by his contemporaries had been submitted to the magnifying glass; and this searching examination of behavior has now been supplemented by psychoanalysis with x-ray pictures of Shelley's mind. As a result recent criticism of Shelley, more than in the case of any other poet, has been compelled to take account of his life. The notable series of essays on Shelley, from Matthew Arnold's to Francis Thompson's and George Santayana's, with singular unanimity have

divided their attention between his performance as a poet and his conduct as a man.

One of the sources of the fascination which has compelled this interest in Shelley's life and personality is the extraordinary contradictions which they exhibit. It was the sense of paradox about him which evidently first aroused the interest of Hogg when he met him in the dining hall of University College, Oxford. "He was tall," says Hogg, "but stooped so much that he seemed low of stature." "His clothes were expensive—but they were tumbled, rumpled and unbrushed." "His complexion was delicate and almost feminine, of the finest red and white; yet he was tanned and freckled by exposure to the sun." If the contradictions in the external Shelley add piquancy to Hogg's recollections, they become doubly intriguing when Hogg's testimony is set against that of others. Hogg refers to Shelley's voice as "shrill, harsh and discordant—it excoriated the ears," while Thornton Hunt speaks of it as musical especially in the reading of poetry. Hogg remarks the awkwardness of Shelley's movements. "He would stumble in stepping across the floor of a drawing-room; he would trip himself up on a smooth-shaven grass-plot; and he would tumble in the most inconceivable manner in ascending the staircase—so as to bruise his nose or his lip on the upper steps, or to tread upon his hands." On the other hand we have Trelawney's unforgettable account of his first meeting with Shelley at Pisa when he entered the room and departed unobserved, and Jane Williams' comment: "He comes and goes like a spirit, no one knows when or where."

Similar contradictions and discrepancies are reflected in his conduct to which they give the interest of an intricate problem. Shelley was untruthful—at least the truth was not always in him. Compare Hogg's simple story of Shelley's expulsion from Oxford by summary action of the Master and Fellows of his college with the lurid account which Shelley gave to Peacock of "a public assembly in which he pleaded his cause in a long oration." He was singularly undutiful as a son, calling his father "the fiery Hun," and amusing his school-fellows by the picturesque vocabulary in which he cursed at once his father and the king. He paraded his atheism in a hotel register. He was guilty of seduction, first of his sister's school-mate and again of the daughter of his intimate friend, Godwin, whose house was open to him. To accomplish the second he abandoned his wife

and children, one unborn, and carried along as a byproduct of his elopement another girl who was under Godwin's protection. Later he extracted money from his deserted wife, and invited her to join his new menage in Switzerland. Having made himself peculiarly responsible for the happiness of Mary Godwin he allowed his relations with her co-eloper, Jane Clairmont, and his interest in Emilia Viviani to cause her acute apprehension and suffering. Lying, impiety, seduction, cruelty, inconstancy—the words fall easily from the pen. And yet in spite of all this he retains a rare and essential charm, not as we might expect the charm of polished villainy, but the charm of innocence, gentleness, truth, of the very qualities to which his conduct apparently gave so often the lie. It is not necessary to rely on Mary Shelley's testimony to his generosity, honesty, purity. We know from other sources that he was utterly generous—what was his was at the call of any one who needed it. He was perfectly self-effacing in matters of friendship and ambition. There is every reason to assume Hogg's sincerity when he says: "In no individual, perhaps, was the moral sense ever more completely developed than in Shelley; in no being was the perception of right and of wrong more acute." And if we maintain that the facts are against him, we have still the uneffaceable impression of his goodness which leads Hogg to compare his features to those of pre-Raphaelite madonnas.

The truth seems to be that in Shelley conduct was divorced from character. To Matthew Arnold conduct was three-fourths of life; to Shelley it was far less than one-fourth. Of moral truth in the abstract he had, as Hogg says, a developed sense and an acute perception; of its application in detail to the affairs of men and to his own circumstances he took little heed. Add the facts of his life together and we fall far short of reaching the total sum of his character—the whole seems to be greater than its parts. Indeed, his dependence upon abstract principles which should guide humanity constantly betrayed him into concrete situations which he had not the specialized technique of propriety to carry off. Trelawney tells of his attempt, naked from his sea-bath, to circumnavigate an apartment in which some ladies were at tea, and when one of them voiced her consternation to convince her that her scruples were misplaced. Here, as so often elsewhere, he reminds us of those characters in eighteenth century fiction, in whom abstract virtue is set in antithesis against worldly propriety, as in *The Fool of Quality*—or of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*.

It is impossible to acquit Shelley of egoism, but of the baser motives of ambition, selfishness, lust

he was singularly free. Indeed it is possible that his freedom from these common forms of temptation against which men have set their ward, was one reason why his behavior was often at such variance with theirs. Take, for example, the ground of strongest animadversion against Shelley. To Milton, chastity was a great ideal, a test and a standard of life to which he who would write a true poem could not be false. The reason, it is fairly obvious, was that Milton was himself a man of strong passions, to whose sense of integrity restraint was necessary. To Shelley chastity meant little—perhaps for the contrary reason. It was to him one of those fears and scruples which stood in the way of a realization of that perfect love which casteth out fear. According to Thornton Hunt Shelley while at Oxford had fallen victim to those bordelloes which Milton makes it his boast to have abhorred. His later life shows no recurrence of such a lapse. It would be too much to say that his emotions were not involved in his elopement with Harriet Westbrook; and yet there is no doubt that he was drawn into that affair by the Westbrook family, and his letters to Hogg show that his chief thought was to save Harriet's soul. He doubts and hesitates. "It is perhaps scarcely doing her a kindness, it is perhaps inducing positive unhappiness to point out to her a road which leads to perfection, the attainment of which perhaps does not repay the difficulties of the progress." The decision was taken when he wrote: "Her father has persecuted her in a most horrible way by endeavoring to compel her to go to school." Like Milton he found his wife "unmeet for conversation." While Milton by way of rectifying his position attacked the canon law of marriage as a superstition, Shelley presumably thought it wise and just to enter upon a kind of polygamy, which institution Milton likewise approved. Again, it is too much to say that Shelley's passion was not engaged in the union with Mary Godwin, and yet it may be argued that the protest against society which he was making counted with him for more than physical desire, and her willingness to share that protest for more than her personal charm. At least that is how it seemed to him when he wrote the dedication to her of *Laon and Cythna*:

How beautiful and calm and free thou wert
In thy young wisdom, when the moral chain
Of custom thou didst burst and rend in twain.

If restraint, of which chastity was the symbol, meant little to Shelley the other principle which Milton upheld meant everything. "Above all things, Liberty" was his war cry. It is not the place here to discuss the historical circumstances

through which liberty came to be to Shelley the supreme good. It was the result of his belief in the essential perfectibility of man, in the essential depravity of the institutions in which society has expressed itself, and in the power of man to will his entrance to paradise. Through the mouth of Cythna in the *Revolt of Islam* he utters this belief to mankind:

Ye might arise and will
That gold should lose its power and thrones their glory.

To arouse man's will was for him the supreme need, to free man from the fetters of convention and routine. He would again have agreed with Milton that of all tyrants custom is the worst. To startle men out of complacency and sloth, to make them conscious of their high destiny was Shelley's own appointed mission. Accordingly he directed his protest against the most revered objects of man's devotion. He protested against the Christian God, because he wished to denounce the world with which that conception of God was bound up. He challenged the deepest rooted institutions of society in order to shock his readers into attention. The fact that in *Laon and Cythna* the lovers were brother and sister is better known than Shelley's statement of his reason for it. He refers to it in his original preface as "one circumstance which was intended to startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life. It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. I have appealed therefore to the most universal of all feelings, and have endeavored to strengthen the moral sense by forbidding it to avoid actions which are only crimes of convention"—or as Milton might say "imaginary and scare-crow sins." Shelley was induced by his publisher to suppress this part of his gospel, which remains as *The Revolt of Islam* the complete and futile epic of revolution.

Complete, for Shelley had sought emancipation in every direction and from every bond—monarchy, government, religion, industry, morals and customs, trusting all to the free and enlightened spirit of man. Like Carlyle's *Mirabeau* he had swallowed all the formulas. Futile, for Shelley had no conception of these formulas as representing human nature and the social history of the world in which he was living. Here again his own nature contributed to his deception. He had, as Mr. Brailsford says, "no understanding of self-interest, intolerance, greed," of the motives on which men normally act. Naturally he never came to grips with these realities; his terrific blows never reached his opponent. This is to suggest Matthew Arnold's famous simile of the angel "beating in

the void his luminous wings in vain"; but Arnold's figure has been too often shot to pieces in these latter days of Shelley criticism for it to bother us. One may paraphrase George Eliot:

The greatest gift an angel leaves his race
Is to have been an angel.

As an angel Shelley must be judged by his being, not his doing, in his wholeness not in his elements. And of this wholeness Shelley's poetry is the expression. At first sight it is another aspect of the dualism which makes him the most diverse and undulating of human beings, that he should have been both philosopher and poet; but this dualism is in reality a unity. Shelley's poetry was the synthesis of his life, by virtue of which he appears to possess an integrity not less noble than Milton's. With Shelley poetry and philosophy were one—a unit, and the office of a poem was to make this unity manifest in its wholeness. A poem he declares in his *Defence of Poetry* "is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth." Now Shelley's knowledge of life was undoubtedly very deficient from the objective point of view, but as his best interpreter Robert Browning points out he is above all a subjective poet. "Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand—it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do: and he digs where he stands,—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to speak." It was in his own soul that Shelley found those "primal elements of humanity" to set against the secondary product of man's society when he wrote:

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 tyrannize.

And it was from the same source that he drew that supreme stanza of *Prometheus Unbound* which prefigures the saint of the revolution.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be,
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson

GOD help the man who shatters the cherished illusions of the people with cold-storage minds, the people to whom ideas that have had their birth subsequently to the days of their grandfathers are anathema. Such a man will most assuredly call down upon his reckless head the imprecations of that by no means inconsiderable host of persons who, like the Bourbons, learn nothing and forget nothing. This most sacrilegious deed has Vilhjalmur Stefansson done.

Until this iconoclastic scion of a race of vikings sailed into port with his cargo of heresies the popular conception of conditions in the polar regions was as fixed as the planets in their courses. The divine inspiration of the Bible might be questioned; that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare's plays be denied; and the age-old belief that a straight line was the shortest distance between two points be shaken to its foundations, but all argument ceased when the Arctic regions were mentioned—on this point there was practical unanimity. Everyone knew that the polar regions were one vast field of snow and ice—and cold! Well, no one who had not actually experienced Arctic temperatures could adequately describe how cold it really was. It was just like trying to explain how much was a trillion—it was something beyond the grasp of the finite mind. Then there were the long nights—six months at a stretch when it was pitch dark. But all these things, terrible as they were, constituted only part of the picture—it was the awful silence, the eternal silence, the haunting, mocking, palpitating silence of the Arctic wastes that finally drove strong men mad and elevated to the ranks of full-fledged heroes those wonderful mortals who occasionally succeeded in braving these manifold and manifest terrors and privations and returned to tell the tale. And tell it they generally did!

Stefansson's first experience in the Arctic was in the winter of 1906-7 which he spent in an Eskimo village, in an Eskimo igloo, learning the language and observing and studying the customs, habits and beliefs of the people. He admits that he arrived on the shores of the Arctic with the usual assortment of popular preconceptions.

That first winter's work led to the organization of a second expedition. By this time he had thrown off many of his previous beliefs and prejudices and had begun to see that it was not such an implacably hostile land as he had been given to understand. He saw around him human beings no more immune than he from the laws of nature that governed him: nature had not equipped them with

any greater powers of resistance to cold than he; babies were born to these people and thrived; the aged and the infirm seemed somehow to withstand the awful rigors of the Arctic climate.

It was generally supposed that they were endowed with some sort of instinct which enabled them to find food where a civilized man could not—and anyway, they could eat food upon which the aforesaid civilized man could not subsist. But Stefansson found that to be not the case. He could live on the fare of the Eskimo and he grew to like it. Moreover, he found it possible, with his trained intelligence and his modern weapons, to kill more game than the Eskimo with his Stone Age weapons and his Stone Age "instinct." Of course he knew that previous explorers, notably Dr. John Rae, the famous Hudson's Bay Company explorer of the early years of the nineteenth century, and others of a later date, had lived for a time on the resources of the country in the same manner as the Eskimo, but the general impression, even among Arctic explorers, was that it was not safe to get too far from a base of supplies consisting of staple groceries. This, too, on the mainland where it was possible to secure caribou, or on the coast where seals could be obtained along the edges of the ice floes.

But the conviction was practically universal among whalers, explorers, scientists, and even the Eskimos, that sea-life ceased at no great distance from land; and therefore exploration work undertaken over the ice at considerable distances from shore must be conducted with due regard to the maintenance of a line of communication between the exploring party and a supply depot. Stefansson was disposed to dispute this. He argued that seals would be found under the ice or along the leads between the floes in practically any part of the Arctic seas—certainly the proximity of land need have no bearing upon the supply.

One of the objects which he had in mind when he organized his third polar expedition—the one that sailed for the North during the latter part of 1913, and which was known as the Canadian Arctic Expedition by reason of its having been financed by the Dominion government—was the demonstration of the soundness of this theory, in spite of the fact that such an eminent Arctic authority as Peary was doubtful as to the outcome of any such attempt.

The Canadian Arctic Expedition sailed from Nome, Alaska, in two sections: one branch, under the personal command of Stefansson, who was commander-in-chief of the whole expedition, was