

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 1792-1822
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SHELLEY, PERCY BYSSHE (1792-1822) was born on 4 August 1792 at his family's estate, Field Place, near Horsham in Sussex. He was the eldest son of Elizabeth Shelley and Sir Timothy Shelley, a country gentleman and Whig Member of Parliament. Shelley was educated as was appropriate for an heir to a baronetcy, and was first taught at home by a private tutor, in the company of his younger sisters and his mother. In 1802 he was sent to Syon House Academy in Isleworth (London), and in 1804 to Eton. Finally, he went to University College, Oxford, the same college his father had attended. Shelley was brought up to be a politician, and a conservative one at that, and his later development into a radical, republican and atheist poet was in severe contrast both to his education and his family's wishes.

The recollections and anecdotes of Shelley's family and friends reveal that in his childhood he was an avid scientist, regularly making chemical preparations; after his formal studies of chemistry had begun at Syon House, Shelley at one stage attempted to treat his sisters' chilblains with electric shocks. The lectures Adam Walker gave at Shelley's school encouraged his interest, and introduced Shelley to new scientific pursuits. At Eton Shelley was taught by Walker again and by Dr James Lind. These two men initially directed his reading, which included writers which the young Victor Frankenstein would read in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the ancient alchemists Theophrastus Paracelsus and Albert Magnus. His friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg described Shelley's Oxford rooms as filled with scientific equipment, 'an electrical machine, an air-pump, the galvanic trough, a solar microscope, and large glass jars and receivers'.

Shelley seems to have been unhappy at both Syon House and Eton. His cousin Thomas Medwin and fellow student later recalled his loneliness. Shelley has been represented by biographers such as Medwin as not fitting into the rough society of these schools, but when confronted by bullying and rituals of subjection to older boys, he defiantly refused to submit. His rebellious nature revealed itself early on, as did his refusal to conform to societal expectations. He did well at his studies and left Eton with a good grasp of both Greek and Latin.

Shelley was by now a self-confessed 'votary of romance'. His favourite books were Gothic novels. He published his own attempt in this genre when he was only seventeen years old, *Zastrozzi*. With his sister Elizabeth, he wrote and published a collection of poems entitled *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*, which also appeared in 1810. It seems that Timothy Shelley encouraged his

son's publishing attempts and instructed publishers at Oxford to humour his son. At Oxford Shelley and Hogg published *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, a collection purporting to be written by a woman who had tried to stab George III with a pair of scissors. The money raised by this volume went to help Peter Finnerty, an Irish journalist imprisoned because he had criticised the government. Shelley published another Gothic novel, *St Irvyne*, in December of the same year.

Trouble really began when Shelley and Hogg published their pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*. Determined that their pamphlet should not go ignored, they sent it to such people as were bound to be offended. *The Necessity of Atheism* was the culmination of much thought, reading and debate. Over the Christmas holidays, the exchange of letters between Shelley and Hogg had dwelt on the possibility of a creative first cause for life and the universe. Necessity was a dogmatic materialist doctrine, based on the idea that that 'no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason'.

When Shelley and Hogg refused to admit authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism* in March 1811, they were expelled from Oxford. Any possible reconciliation between Shelley and his family after this was thwarted by Shelley's elopement with Harriet Westbrook, whom he had met in January. They left London in the summer accompanied by her sister Eliza, and, despite Shelley's deeply held opposition to marriage, married on 29 August in Edinburgh.

For the remainder of 1811 Shelley and Harriet moved to the Lake District and there met the formerly radical poet Robert Southey, who urged the young and idealistic Shelley to give up his extreme political opinions. In 1812 Shelley and Harriet travelled to Dublin, where, in the midst of appeals for Catholic Emancipation, Shelley attended meetings and argued for the formation of an association for reform. He published his manifesto as *An Address to the Irish People*, and dropped this pamphlet into the coaches of the Irish middle classes and the hoods of people as they walked past.

Leaving Dublin, Shelley, Harriet and her sister went to Tremadoc in North Wales. Their stay there was unsettled; Shelley's servant Daniel Healy was imprisoned for posting political broadsheets Shelley had written. Here, Shelley began his first major poem *Queen Mab*, which contained his political ideas to date. It is a materialist poem with long scientific and political notes. The poem came to haunt Shelley in later life, and was used to prove his atheism in the case for custody of his children by Harriet, which he lost. It continued to be published throughout (and beyond) his lifetime; the working classes came to see it as a call for reform and George Bernard Shaw referred to it many years after its publication as 'the Chartists' Bible'. The breadth of Shelley's reading is demonstrated by his extensive notes, which make reference to contemporary and ancient science, politics, philosophy and literature.

During 1812 Shelley met the man who was to be his life-long friend Thomas Love Peacock and finally, after a brief period of epistolary debate, his hero William Godwin . In 1813, convinced that he was being persecuted, Shelley left Tremadoc and returned to London. *Queen Mab* was published in May of this year and Shelley published the note from this poem on vegetarianism in a separate pamphlet, *A Vindication of a Natural Diet*. Harriet's first child was born in June 1813, Ianthe, but already there were problems with their marriage. Shelley spent increasing amounts of time with Godwin and his family, in particular his daughter by Mary Wollstonecraft, also called Mary. In July 1814 Mary and Shelley eloped, travelling to Switzerland with her stepsister, Clare Clairmont. Godwin was furious, but continued to ask Shelley for money to pay off his debts. They returned to London in September. By this time, Mary was pregnant with Shelley's child. In February 1815, the baby was born but died a few days later. This was the first of a series of tragic deaths and miscarriages which dogged their life together.

In the autumn of 1815 Shelley began '*Alastor*'. '*Alastor*' explores its poet subject's solitary and narcissistic inability to be satisfied with human relationships. The poem romanticises the introverted poet whose 'self-centred seclusion', as Shelley calls it in his Preface to the poem, leads him to pursue an unreal apparition with which he imagines he can experience a common sympathy. The Preface criticises, whilst sympathising with, the poet's fruitless endeavour. The poet has been identified with Wordsworth. Shelley's criticism is clear: the self-obsessed poet is denying the social and political responsibilities of his poetry. These poets are 'neither friends, nor lovers, nor citizens of the world'. The poet has also been identified with Shelley himself and there are clear autobiographical elements, not least in the poem's refusal to condemn wholeheartedly, and instead to sympathise with, the poet. The layering of perspectives -- Preface, narrator, poet, as well as the use of both lyric and narrative poetic forms -- offers a number of competing readings. '*Alastor*' was published with eleven other poems in February 1816.

In 1816 Mary , Shelley and Clare travelled again, Clare persuading them to go to Switzerland, where she knew her former lover Byron was staying. The time spent in the company of Byron was productive for both Shelley and Mary ; she famously conceived her novel *Frankenstein*, during a ghost-story competition at Byron 's house at Lake Geneva. This setting inspired Shelley's '*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*' and '*Mont Blanc*'. Returning to England in September of 1816, they were told that Harriet Shelley had committed suicide. In December, Mary and Shelley married.

On his return to England, Shelley met Leigh Hunt and, through him, John Keats . The friendship with Hunt would also prove enduring. The latter half of 1817 was more settled, with the Shelleys moving to Marlow, spending a good deal of their time reading Classical literature; they were, however, pursued by debt collectors, and his health, which had always been precarious, became worse. The surgeon William Lawrence eventually urged Shelley to cease writing poetry and travel

to the warmer south, the usual treatment for consumptives. At Marlow Shelley had been working on *Laon and Cythna*, a narrative poem about an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. When *Laon and Cythna* was published Shelley was told by friends that it was dangerously radical. Shelley quickly withdrew it, and republished it in January 1818 under the new title *The Revolt of Islam* without the incestuous relationship. This was not enough for the conservative critics; a *Quarterly Review* article held that Shelley was member of a particular 'party' that had set out to demoralise the nation. Marilyn Butler has described the *Quarterly* as part of a 'consistent, orchestrated campaign against cultural subversion', which included as its targets such writers as Shelley, Hunt, Byron and Keats.

In 1818 the Shelleys and Claire left for Italy. They were nomadic at first, moving first to Leghorn (now Livorno), then Bagni de Lucca, Venice and Este. On Mary's journey to rendezvous with Shelley at Este their daughter, Clara, died. In September the Shelleys moved to Venice and Shelley began to write Act One of his great lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. Though this poetical drama refers to the lost final part of Aeschylus's dramatic trilogy about Prometheus, Shelley appropriated the myth to show an enlightened Prometheus forgive the tyrannical ruler Jupiter. Prometheus refuses to condemn such acts as the crucifixion of Christ and the violence of the French Revolution; instead he pities the tyrant who tortures him. Eventually in Act Four, written by December of the following year, humanity itself is redeemed through the release of Demogorgon; while Demogorgon is both Jupiter's son and therefore in a sense his successor, the cycle of violence and tragedy has been broken and humans are free. The poetic drama demonstrates Shelley's facility as poet, with an extraordinary array of verse forms used. *Prometheus*, which includes a love duet between the sun and the moon in Act Four, is as grand in its scope as in its scientific detail, and as politically contemporary as it is utopian.

During 1819 Shelley's and Mary's son William died, and their relationship worsened. When Shelley heard about the Peterloo Massacre, during which a number of unarmed people had been killed or seriously injured by charging yeomanry sent in to end a peaceful call for reform, he immediately wrote his great polemical poem, *Mask of Anarchy*. Shelley wanted to write 'popular songs' that, as he wrote in letters, would 'awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers'. These poems are a testament to his firm belief that England would witness a revolution before long. Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, with its rousing call to 'Rise like lions', was not published by Hunt when Shelley sent it to him. Afraid of the consequences, Hunt, who had already been imprisoned for libelling the Prince Regent, held on to the poem and did not publish it until 1832. Shelley's poem 'England in 1819' demonstrates the force with which Shelley objected to the oppressive government of England at this time, with its 'old mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king' and his corrupt and hypocritical ministers, 'Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know'. The suppression of Shelley's political poems continued through the Victorian period, privileging an image of Shelley as, in Matthew Arnold's words, an 'ineffectual angel'.

In 1819 Shelley wrote *Rosalind and Helen*, along with a number of other poems: a satirical attack on Wordsworth, Peter Bell the Third, and *A Philosophical View of Reform*. In October Shelley wrote 'Ode to the West Wind', his passionate invocation to the spirit of the West Wind, both 'Destroyer and Preserver'. Shelley's 'Ode' indicates that while contemporary readers did not value his writing, future readers might appreciate and revive the 'withered leaves' of his 'dead thoughts'. The expression of 'Ode to the West Wind' is of transcendent hope and energy achieved through suffering. In 1819 Shelley also wrote his verse tragedy *The Cenci*, based on the story of Beatrice Cenci, who was tried and executed for the murder of her father in Rome in 1599.

1820 was spent in Pisa and Leghorn, where Shelley wrote 'Ode to a Skylark' and 'The Witch of Atlas', among other poems. He also met Emilia Viviani, the beautiful seventeen year-old heiress who inspired his long poem 'Epipsychidion', completed by February 1821. When Shelley heard of Keats's death he immediately began an elegy, *Adonais*, claiming that hostile reviews of Keats's poetry had hastened his death. Though the 'frail Form' among the mourners can be identified as a self-portrait, the representation of Keats clearly had as much to do with Shelley's rejection by critics as Keats's. The poem shows Shelley's Platonism during this period, with lines which evoke an idea that there are two worlds, one temporary and temporal, which imperfectly reflects the perfect and true other world: 'The One remains, the many change and pass.' Even Shelley's Platonism, though, is ultimately subject to his scepticism. The poem's treatment of death and posterity permitted him to imagine the extinction of the self, the limiting nature of which had been a preoccupation throughout his poetry.

In his *Defence of Poetry* written in 1821 but unpublished until 1840, Shelley famously expressed his belief in the poet's moral function, that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'. Shelley also wrote *Hellas* in 1821, celebrating the Greek War of Independence. His repeated attempts to persuade his friends to join him finally materialised: Byron moved to Pisa and the Hunt family arrived in Italy in 1822. Byron, Hunt and Shelley had decided to form a political and literary journal, *The Liberal*. Shelley's prolific poetic career was cut short on 8 July 1822 when his boat the *Don Juan* sank in a storm, returning from a welcoming visit to the Hunts, and Shelley was drowned. He had been writing a play, *Charles the First*, and was in the middle of his visionary poem 'The Triumph of Life'.

A contemporary critic, William Hazlitt, rejected what he saw as Shelley's fevered and diseased imagination. Despite their similar politics, Hazlitt felt that Shelley had brought these political ideals into disrepute. In his poetry, Hazlitt objected most to Shelley's idiosyncratic use of metaphor, which, Hazlitt observed, lost all sight of the thing being described. This was an astute criticism of Shelley and while it was a reason for Hazlitt and others to dislike his poetry, it has also been a reason for critical approval.

After Shelley's death Mary edited and published a selection of Shelley's poems from imperfect published and notebook versions. She minimised the potential scandal of the publication. Concerned about her own reputation and the inheritance of their only surviving son, Percy, she consented to Shelley's father's restrictive stipulations. Canonised as Keats was by the Victorians, Shelley became one of the particular favourites of the Pre-Raphaelites. What they favoured, however, was not the hard-hitting political Shelley but the effeminate and fragile figure that could be seen in his poetry, missing the point that Shelley questioned and judged harshly such self-obsession. Shelley, in Robert Browning's eyes, was a 'subjective poet', 'impelled to embody that which he perceives'. His work could not, according to Browning, be considered as separate from the poet's personality. It was precisely this personality, and the insistence on 'creeds outworn, tyrants and priests', that T.S. Eliot objected to in Shelley's verse in the twentieth century. Political differences meant that the New Critics, for example, were often unable to carefully decode the sentiments that so offended them. Again, Shelley's poetic metaphors were seen as a problem. F.R. Leavis found that while Wordsworth presented an 'object' and 'emotion seems to derive from what is being presented', Shelley 'offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void'. The New Critics tended to see a Shelley who was confused and imprecise in his images, a poet who flouted the rules of metaphor by ignoring the material and sensual 'object'.

That which the New Critics regarded as a fault, critics since the 1960s have seen as a strength. Shelley was resurrected by critics such as Harold Bloom, Earl Wasserman and M.H. Abrams during the sixties and seventies. Wasserman's readings of Shelley are still influential today. Utilising the work of C.E. Pulos, who carefully proved Shelley's sceptical idealism in his book *The Deep Truth* (1954), Wasserman skilfully weaves Shelley's work into a coherent, while complex, philosophy. These critics, while still valuable today, have been criticised for their lack of historical readings and the pseudo-religious language and ideas they employ. In 1974 Kenneth Neill Cameron set the agenda for historicist readings of Shelley, with his biographical critical account of Shelley's life and work, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (this followed on from his 1954 account of Shelley's early life *The Young Shelley*). Critics such as Stuart Curran, Timothy Clark and P.M.S. Dawson continued to fill in lost or submerged political and historical contexts for Shelley's poetry and prose. Shelley's notebooks were newly examined and work found there, some of which had never been published, was incorporated into critical accounts. These efforts have been consolidated into the standard edition of Shelley's poetry, edited by Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest, themselves key scholars in modern Shelley studies. The first two volumes of this project have been completed. Shelley's prose is also currently being edited by Timothy Webb, following a first volume edited by E.B. Murray. The notebooks themselves have been published in facsimile edition.

Shelley's facility and his avant-garde questioning of the relationship between language and meaning has led to his being analysed by theorists of various persuasions during the last few

decades. Deconstructive, structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodern critics have found Shelley's poetry pliable and responsive. In particular, Shelley final poem, 'The Triumph of Life', with its incompleteness and palimpsestic nature (the existence of a number of uncanceled 'versions' and attempts at the poem in notebook), has offered a playground for interrogative and thought-provoking readings by critics such as Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Tiltottama Rajan. The array and extent of theoretical approaches applied to Shelley in recent years gives the truth to Wordsworth 's estimation: 'Shelley is one of the best artists of us all: I mean in workmanship of style.'