THE ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CREED

OF

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

by

JAMES ADAMS PRENDERGAST, B.A. (MANITOBA)

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Prefatory Note.

This dissertation was not intended primarily as a defense of Percy Shelley, as in any sense an "apologia pro sua vita". The discussion of the subject was approached by me with an unprejudiced judgment, and with the purpose in view of a dispassionate analysis and examination of the actuating principles of the poet's concepts of ethics and politics. I have found, however, that it is impossible, so far as I am concerned, to remain absolutely neutral in forming an estimate of Shelley. I have found that practically every critic of Shelley inclines either to commendation or to condemnation, and my own reaction has been towards an admiration of Shelley and a sympathy with him and with his aims and ideals; not, however, as I hope, to that species of Shelley-adoration which is anathema to Professor Saintsbury.

My subdivisions of Shelley's ethical and political philosophy may seem arbitrary; but they suggested themselves to me as logical heads under which Shelley's philosophy might be discussed. For the idea to which I have made allusion in Chapter 1., of Shelley's advancing Atheism only as against the system of Deism, I am indebted to Dr. A.W. Crawford, of this University. This theory is original with Dr. Crawford, and has been exploited by none of the writers included in my bibliography.

I have proceeded, in this work, upon the assumption that its readers will have had some previous acquaintance with the life and works of Shelley; and I have therefore omitted any detailed reference to biography and to the content of poems, where these have not had direct bearing upon the subject under discussion.

J.A.P.

C O N T E N T S.

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INTRODUCTION.

Perhaps no character in the whole wide and varied range of English literature has been so misunderstood as has Percy Bysshe Shelley. His was a unique, almost bizarre personality; bafflingly complex, yet engagingly simple; seemingly, at times, possessed of the wisdom of all the ages, and at times strongly reminiscent of the round-eyed wonder and impish inquisitiveness of childhood. "Childlike" is certainly the word that best describes Shelley's mentality. He was as a child in his hopefulness, his irrepressibility, and his questing curiosity; free-hearted and self abnegatory, sensitive to real or fancied slight, he awakens in us a sympathetic wonder that the world should have turned against him with such bitter contumacy. Yet, childlike as he was, he was withal, a man, possessed of a strong man's purpose; with an abiding faith in the innate righteousness of his mission, and an abiding determination to dedicate his powers to the advancement of his ideal.

In a letter written to Peacock in 1820, Shelley said: "I consider poetry very subordinate to moral and political science; and, if I were well, certainly I would aspire to the latter, for I can conceive a great work, embodying the discoveries of all ages, and harmonizing the contending creeds by which mankind have been ruled". Shelley's purpose, then, in his writing, was the moral and political emancipation of humanity. He viewed with burning indignation the chains with which mankind was fettered in all its mental, spiritual, and physical manifestations; and he set himself with uncompromising steadfastness to use his genius in the interests of the oppressed against tyranny. He considered that the most important function of the poet was to sustain and encourage mankind

in its progress upward, and at the same time to keep that advance sane and steadfast, by restraining, through the promulgation of high ideals, the passions and prejudices to which mankind is prone. In his preface to "The Revolt of Islam", he says: "It is the business of a poet to communicate to others the pleasure and enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings in the vivid presence of which, withim his own mind, consists at once his inspiration and his reward". But further: "I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue, and be incited to those enquiries which have led to my moral and political creed, and to that of some of the subtlest intellects in the world". It is this moral and political creed which we propose to examine in this dissertation, elucidating its principles, and indicating the unity underlying it in all its manifestations.

The spirit which moved Shelley in his reforming zeal is shown in his dedication to "The Revolt of Islam", in the lines,

> "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
> Without reproach or check".

He might well have said, with Montesquieu, "Could I but succeed so as to persuade those who command to increase their knowledge in what they prescribe, and those who obey to find a new pleasure resulting from obedience - I should think myself the most happy of mortals. The most happy of mortals should I think myself could I contribute to make

mankind recover from their prejudices". (1)

In spite of his high ideals and steadfast purpose, however, Shelley was taken amiss by the great majority of his readers, and especially by the exponents of the old order. The excesses of the French Revolution had aroused in the minds of men a horror of advanced thinking, and even Southey, malcontent as he was in the days of his youth, recoiled from the doctrines of Shelley with all the strength of his late-found conservatism. There were those, however, who saw beyond the surface of Shelley's teaching; and these were converted to sympathy with the cause of the youthful bard by the sincerity and intensity of his purpose. Trelawney relates the story of a priest who entered the shop of a German bookseller at Lausanne. Browsing among some recently issued editions, he picked up and commenced to read a copy of "Queen Mab"; and after a few moments' perusal, exploded "Infidel, Jacobin, leveller! Nothing can stop this spread of blasphemy but the stake and the faggot; the world is retrograding into accursed heathenism and universal anarchy! "

"To my taste", said the bookseller, "the fruit is crude, but well-flavored; it requires a strong stomach to digest it; the writer is an enthusiast, and has the true spirit of a poet; he aims at regenerating, not, like Byron and Moore, levelling mankind. They say he is but a boy, and this his first offering; if that be true, we shall hear of him again." (2) This story depicts the contrasting opinions of Shelley which many of his contemporaries held.

(1) Montesquieu - preface to "Spirit of the Laws".

(2) Trelawney, E.J. Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron - p.3.

Trelawney relates also Byron's comment concerning Shelley; "He alone, in this age of humbug, dares stem the current, as he did today the flooded Arno in his skiff; although I could not observe he made any progress, the attempt is better than being swept along as all the rest are, with the filthy garbage scoured off its banks". (1) A tribute such as this from the cynical and jealous spirit of Byron has a real value as a contribution towards an estimate of Shelley's character, and is demonstrative of the way in which the earnestness of Shelley impressed itself upon those who knew him.

We have seen, then, that Shelley in his writings, both prose and poetry, was working towards the advancement of his own moral and political creed, a creed which he implicitly believed to embody the best aspirations that were in humanity. The application of his philosophy he hoped would lead mankind to the goal of its higher ideals, long constrained within the shackles of convention and superstition, tradition and material tyranny. Irrational and visionary as his doctrines may seem at first glance, they are all based on a foundation of solid thinking and honest conviction, and are coming to be regarded, in the light of modern thinking, as progressive rather than retrogressive.

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(1) Trelawney, E.J. - "Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron". p.39.

PART 1.

ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Chapter 1 - Shelley's Attitude Towards Contemporary Theology.

Despite the conviction, still to some extent prevailing, that Shelley was an atheist, we find from a consideration of his expressed opinions concerning religion, that he had a well-defined theology, unorthodox, but sincere. At Eton, it is true, Shelley was distinguished by the designation "Atheist"; but Hogg declares that this appellation was conferred upon the foremost rebel against the higher school authorities, and had no theological significance. In later life, the poet laid claim to being an atheist, but never in the accepted sense of the term. Trelawney once asked him, "Why do you call yourself an atheist? It annihilates you in this world". Shelley replied: "It is a word of abuse to stop discussion, a painted devil to frighten the foolish, a threat to intimidate the wise and good. I used it to express my horror of superstition; I took up the word, as a knight takes up a gauntlet, in defiance of injustice". (1) This "Atheism" is not a conviction of the non-existence of a Supreme Being; rather it is the word in its old Eton sense. It is Shelley rebelling against constituted authority and arbitrary paternalism in religious thinking. Trelawney said of him: "If his glorious conception of gods and men constituted an atheist, I am afraid that all that listened were little better". (1)

(1) Trelawney, E.J. - "Recollections of the Last Days of Byron and Shelley". p.60.

Shelley was never really an atheist, for he was naturally and essentially religious. His religion, however, tended rather to the Greek and Platonic than to the Biblical or Christian. Thus, in one of the spasmodic passionate outbursts which characterized his ardent nature, he declared: "The genius of human happiness must tear every leaf from the accursed book of God ere man can read the inscription of his heart". (1) The narrowness and formalism of the Hebraid religion were distasteful to Shelley, and he believed the Bible to be an instrument of oppression in the hands of oppressors. We may well comprehend that Shelley would have little sympathy for a religion that claimed to possess the sole favor of God, and small use for the conception of a God who would choose for his own children one particular nation, to the exclusion of the remainder of mankind.

"Men, in general," said Rousseau, "make God like themselves; the virtuous make him good, and the profligate make him wicked; ill-tempered and bilious devotees see nothing but hell, because they would willingly damn all mankind; while loving and gentle souls disbelieve in it altogether". It was this idea of God, engendered in the souls of men, against which Shelley warred so ardently; little realizing that Rousseau's statement applied so well to him, that his whole system of theology was colored by his own personality. "Man, by resembling God", he said, "fulfils most accurately the tendencies of his nature; and God comprehends within himself all that constitutes human perfection. Thus, God is a model through which the excellence of man is to be estimated, whilst the abstract perfection of the human character is the type of the actual perfection of the divine". (2) Shelley's own God, like that of his master Plato, was an aesthetic

(1) Woodberry, George E. - Shelley's Poetical Works - Vol.I. p.354.

(2) Rhys, Ernest - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p. 96.

being; both approached Him from the aesthetic side. Both, too, were doubtful as to the omnipotence of Deity, since the existence of evil seemed to them to imply a contradiction in the conception of an all-powerful God of good.

Shelley was at bottom a mystic; but there had been engendered and fostered in him, through contemporary influences and circumstances, a rationalistic impulse. The clash of these two essentially conflicting moulds of thought is to be seen most distinctly in the poet's vague and troubled endeavors to seek the inner truth of Deity.

While he was still an undergraduate at Oxford, Shelley, in a letter to Hogg, invoked God, "Whose mercy is great". A little later he wrote: "It is impossible not to believe in the soul of the universe, the intelligent and necessarily beneficient actuating principle" ... "I may not be able to adduce proofs, but I think the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on which we trample, are in themselves arguments more conclusive than any which can be advanced, that some vast intellect actuates infinity". (1) This example represents the positive aspect of Shelley's faith, which persisted throughout, and was sometimes shadowed, but never entirely obliterated, by the negative and rationalistic impulse that was also a part of him.

Only two months before his expulsion for the writing of the "Necessity of Atheism", he was involved in a controversy with Hogg concerning the existence of a Supreme Being. "I here take God (and a God exists) to witness", he declaims ... "Oh, that this Deity were the soul of the universe,

(1) Dowden, Edward - Percy Bysshe Shelley - p.48.

the spirit of imperishable love! (1) This is very far from aethism; it is in fact an arraignment of the God of the Deists, who denied God as the "soul of the universe". The Deistic God was a far-off being, unmoved and untouched by the affairs of this world, impalpable and immutable. Omar Khayyam expressed the idea in his stanza:

"And that inverted bowl we call the sky,
Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die,
Lift not your hands to it for help; for it
Moves impotently on as Thou or I."

So far from being the "soul of the Universe", this God was merely Creator, with only a supremely detached interest in his creation. This whole conception was foreign to and entirely untenable in the light of Shelley's creed. It is true that he laid claim to being an atheist beofre his expulsion from Oxford; but with the significant qualification, "in the popular sense of the word 'God".

The most frequent and violent reference sto religion by Shelley are found during this early period, immediately after his expulsion from Oxford. Perhaps we may be justified in believing that a certain bitterness, engendered by a sense of injustice done him, colored and hardened his whole belief at this juncture of his life. Here, too, the influence of Godwin - who had written to H.B. Rosser: "in the vulgar conception of the word, I think a man is right who does not believe in God" - was at its strongest. At any rate, although Shelley's conviction in respect of religion was never materially changed, it was tempered in time by a marked degree of

(1) Ingpen, Roger - "The Letters of P.B. Shelley" - p.41.

tolerance, and by an appreciation of the potentialities for good that were inherent in religion. It would therefore seem that this youthful violence was dissipated, as through a sort of safety-valve, in "Queen Mab," and that is does not express the true Shelley, but a Shelley modified and somewhat perverted by immediate circumstances.

About 1812 Shelley came into contact with the System of Nature of Holbach, whose disciple Volney was. Shelley referred to the System of Holbach as "one of the most eloquent vindications of atheism". This System of Nature is a diatribe against religion, an attempt to settle the iniquities of religion and to formulate an acceptable atheistic doctrine. From this work Shelley drew the profession of atheism of "Queen Mab", and of the Doctrine of Necessity, which later appeared personified as Demogorgon in "Prometheus Unbound".

In the sixth canto of "Queen Mab", Shelley gives his account, transferred from Holbach, of the origin and development of religion. Commencing with the worship of the elements and of material objects, it passed into adoration of personified spirits whom the elements served, and concluded in monotheism, the centralizing of all these spiritual beings in one, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.

In a later passage occurs the much-quoted apparent vaunt of Shelley's atheism:

"There is no God.

Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed".

He appended in his notes to the poem the following declaration: "If the ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, the knowledge of nature is calculated to destroy them." Borrowing again from Holbach, he apostrophizes -

"Necessity, thou mother of the world".

This is the very doctrine advanced later in "Prometheus Unbound", where Necessity, personified in Demogorgon, overthrows Jupiter, the false god whom ignorant men have been worshipping. Shelley's conception of Necessity was -

"A spirit of activity and life,
That knows no change, cessation, or decay".

While in his notes to "Queen Mab", Shelley assigns to Necessity dominion over Mind as well as Matter, and says that it "utterly destroys religion"; and while in the poem itself he apparently denies the existence of a Deity; he appends a note which clarifies his position, while it indicates the dual forces which were ever at strife in his nature. He declares that his denial relates only to a creative deity; the conception of an omnipresent spirit coeval and coeternal with creation stands unchallenged. Examining the idea of the creative deity from the respective standpoints of the Senses, Reason, and Testimony, he comes to the conclusion that "having no proofs from either of the three sources of conviction, the mind cannot believe the existence of a creative God".

"Queen Mab" presents, with admirable precision and strong conviction, Shelley's conception of a Cosmos - unity and universality in nature and law. Nature produces all things, both good and evil; yet the invariable tendency of this powerful spirit is onward and upward, a course of advancement to nobler developments. In this poem Shelley seems possessed of a well-marked Pantheism. Man unconsciously works towards the

attainment of the supreme good, carrying out the will of the spirit that is in the universe - a spirit external to humanity. This spirit, with Shelley, bears a close relation to his conception of Necessity, a conception which he owed in large parts to William Godwin. In "Queen Mab", it is to be noticed that Shelley's all-embracing spirit is Necessity itself:

"Even the minutest molecule of light
That is an April sunbeam's fleeting glow
Fulfils its destined though invisible work,
The universal spirit guides."

Again,

"Spirit of Nature! All-sufficing power,
Necessity' Thou mother of the world!"

Shelley's conception of Necessity is set forth by him as follows: "He who asserts the doctrine of Necessity, means that, contemplating the events which compose the moral and spiritual universe, he beholds only an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects, no one of which could occupy and other place than it does occupy, or act in any other place than it does act. (1) According to this doctrine, then, the actions of every human being are performed by him as it were under a sort of compulsion. The infinite series of causes generated in the imensity of time before his birth impel him to act as he does. The "motives" which determine his conduct are merely the effects of this chain of causes in operation. In illustration of this theory, Shelley contends that the old farmer is more experienced than the youthful novice "because there is a uniform, undeniable Necessity in the operations of the material universe". (2)

(1) Woodberry, George E. - The Poetical Works of Shelley - Vol.I. p. 356.

(2) Ibid. - p. 357.

The operations of Necessity were not confined to Matter, however, for it held dominion also over Mind. "The actions of the will have a regular conjunction with circumstances and characters; motive is to voluntary action what cause is to effect". Shelley carried this doctrine to its logical conclusion of destroying the accepted notions of reward and punishment, which would thus of themselves be considered merely motives employed for the purpose of controlling given lines of conduct. This theory abolished punishment of criminals, as being incapable of producing happiness to anyone; at the same time, the theory would discourage vice, in preventing the criminal from a repetition of his crime. The Necessarian's compassion for the evil-doer is unmixed with the desire for revenge or cruelty.

"Prometheus Unbound" expresses man's mistaken idea of God. Jupiter was an anthropomorphic creation of men, who, personified in their champion Prometheus, possessed a secret that emasculated the great god. Worshipped one day as supreme, he is the next cast down as a devil. Man was enslaved by the very fiction that he himself had set up. When Prometheus, the human mind, is unbound from the chains of oppression and tradition which had held him impotent for ages, the world passes from degradation to eternal progress and perfectibility.

According to Shelley, the contemporary conception of God was anthropomorphic; the motive power of the universe "became a man endowed with human qualities and governing the universe as an earthly monarch governs his kingdom". The doctrine of Necessity declared that no events could have happened otherwise than they did; if God created good, he

created evil also. But the Necessarian saw that there is no absolute good and evil in the universe, for they are relative to our own peculiar condition. While Shelley agreed with the teachings of Christ which declared that the good should "see God", he had his own interpretation of that phrase, to fit in with his own theology. The God whom the good will see, said Shelley, is not an actual King of Heaven on his golden throne; the reward of righteousness is intercourse with the Universal God, derived from communion of man and nature. Shelley further asserted that Christ explicitly repudiated the doctrine of a God of vengeance - "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you". As to Christ's picture of future paradise, Shelley recognizes it to be beautiful, even though it be untrue. It is, he infers, no more than a product of the imagination of a sublime and holy poet, discontented with the narrow limitations of this world.

So far, Shelley seems given entirely to materialism in his theology, to the rationalistic element in his nature. Even discounting the youthful recklessness behind "Queen Mab" - the sentiments of which poem he later repudiated - his prose works and some of his later verse display the same characteristic. In "The Revolt of Islam", in certain passages at least, Necessity is still the pervading spirit of the universe - an unseeing and unfeeling force moving with irresistible sway. In "Julian and Maddalo", however, Shelley moves away from this pronounced determinism, and enunciates the freedom of the human will:

"it is our will
That thus enchains us to permitted ill.
We might be otherwise - we might be all
We dream of, happy, high, majestical."

In "Prometheus Unbound", we find the poet expanding still further his early narrow vision. Now, Love is entirely free from the control of "Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change". In "Adonais", Love has actually become the ruling force of the universe:

"That light whose smile kindles the Universe,
That beauty in which all things work and move,
That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love,
Which through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
The fire for which all thirst".

In the year of his death, Shelley wrote: "The doctrines of the French and material philosophers are as false as they are pernicious". In the prose fragment "On Life", written about 1819, he stated: "The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, its fatal consequences in morals, and their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism. This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk, and dispenses them from thinking. But I was discontented with such a view of things as it afforded. Man is a

being of higher aspirations, 'looking before and after', whose thoughts 'wander through eternity', disclaiming alliance with transience and decay; existing but in the future and the past; being not what he is, but what he has been and shall be". (1) Matter and motion as ultimate realities had thus removed from Shelley's spiritual conceptions; universal mind and its phenomena were now to him the ultimate factors of existence.

As he pregressed in years, and as his mental faculties ripened towards maturity, Shelley cast off the shackles of the materialistic of Godwinian school of thought that had to some extent bound his own thinking in theology. As we have seen, the positive aspect of his nature was rapidly gaining ascendancy over the negative or rationalistic impulse; and we should perhaps be not far wrong in asserting that Shelley had not at the time of his death completely formulated a theology that would be entirely acceptable to him. Essentially religious as he was, and possessed of what the late Dr. Corson has called in him a powerful "Cosmic Consciousness" - that is, a sense of the ultimate unity of things, and of the motive power beyond them - he early recoiled from the Deistic dogma of the Augustan Era, which was forced upon him at home. The Deistic conception of God he cast off uncompromisingly, but was unable to formulate a conception of God which would meet satisfactorily with his own convictions. This uncertainty in his mind let to the apparent atheism of many of his utterances, and led to his temporary acceptance of the Doctrine of Necessity; a doctrine

(1) Rhys, Ernest - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p.73.

with which, as we have seen, he was later dissatisfied, and which he ultimately discarded. He saw the power of Love beyond that of Necessity, before Death lifted the Veil for him.

Shelley seemed never to be satisfied perfectly on the score either of religion or of immortality. "The Sensitive Plant" and "Prometheus Unbound" declare the permanence of the beautiful; but this attitude is not indicative necessarily of a well-defined belief in immortality, as it can be explained by the poet's Platonism and by his Pantheistic tendencies. In "Adonais", that Platonism merges into a lofty Pantheism, which expresses Shelley's faith in the essential immortality of things good and beautiful - the ethical and the aesthetic being to him synonymous. Throughout his expressed thinking on the subject of immortality, however, we see that same conflict between the mysticism and the rationalism, the positive and the negative impulses of his nature ; Plato on the one hand as against Godwin and the French Materialists on the other. Thus, in a conversation with Trelawney, he says: "Death is the veil which those who live call life; they sleep, and it is lifted. Intelligence should be imperishable; the art of printing has made it so in this planet." In reply to Trelawney's query, "Do you believe in the immortality of the spirit"?, he answers "Certainly not; how can I? We know nothing; we have no evidence; we cannot express our inmost thoughts. They are incomprehensible even to ourselves." (1) All this is rationalistic enough, and leading to no definite decision on the question in the mind of the poet. In the same coldly analytic spirit did he

(1) Trelawney, E.J. - "Recollections of the Last Days of Byron and Shelley" - p.59.

examine the question of immortality in his essay "On a Future State"; and to no more definite conclusion did he arrive. He endeavored to attain to a satisfactory conviction along the lines of logical reasoning, and he failed to convince himself. We must be, he reasoned, individually considered, the same after death as before birth; and we cannot conceive of the possibility of pre-existence. This last statement, it will be noticed, is at variance with the belief, fostered in him by the doctrines of Plato, and engendered primarily in his own mysticism, of a life before this. We recall Hogg's amusing anecdote of the poet's Oxford days, when Shelley considerably startled a mother by attempting to elicit from her infant some statement concerning the infinity from which he had so newly arrived. In the rationalistic mood in which he wrote this essay, however, Shelley had obviously discarded that particular opinion, and drew from the non-existence of an anterior life the conclusion of the non-existence of a posterior one. We have no reason to suppose, he declared, that the mind, which is seen to decay with the body, will experience a renascence when the body itself has died and passed into nothingness. "This desire to be forever as we are; the reluctance to a violent and unexperienced change, which is common to all the animated and inanimate combinations of the universe, is, indeed, the secret persuasion which gives birth to the opinion of a future state". (1) Shelley made of the question of the immortality of the soul a thing totally distinct and separate from religion. In this essay, he stated that the belief of the soul's immortality is a thing totally foreign to the question of God's existence, and to the question of future rewards and punishments.

(1) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.82

On June 20, 1811, Shelley wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener a letter wherein he declared; "Neither will soul perish; in a future existence it will lose all consciousness of having formerly lived elsewhere - will begin life anew, possibly under a shape of which we have now no idea". (1(Here he is expressing a somewhat amorphous belief in immortality, but still under the rationalistic influence; arguing along the scientific line of the imperishability of matter. In a letter written a year later, he compares the state of the soul in sleep to its condition in death.

In another mood, midway between mysticism and materialism, Shelley resigned himself to the inscrutability of the question, and preserved a neutral attitude of passivity. Thus, on July 28, 1814, he wrote in his journal; "I had time in that moment to reflect and even to reason upon death; it was rather a thing of discomfort and disappointment than horror to me. We should never be separated, but in death we might not know and feel our union as now. I hope, but my hopes are not unmixed with fear for what will befall this inestimable spirit when we appear to die". (2) On another occasion he said to Trelawney: "With regard to the great question, the System of the Universe, I have no curiosity on that subject. I am content to see no further into futurity than Plato and Bacon. My mind is tranquil; I have no fears and some hopes. In our present gross material state our faculties are clouded; - when Death removes our clay coverings the mystery will be solved". (3)

(1) Ingpen, Roger - Letters of P.B. Shelley. p.97

(2) Dowden, Edward - P.B. Shelley - p.248.

(3) Trelawney, E.J. - "Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron". - p.78.

In contrast to all these negative arguments and neutral affirmations, in his utterance in a letter of October 10, 1811; "Certainly reason can never either account for, or prove the truth of, feeling. I have considered it in every possible light, and reason tells me that death is the boundary of life of man; and yet I believe, I feel, the direct contrary. The senses are the only inlets of knowledge, and there is an inward sense that has persuaded me of this". (1) Later writings confirm this doctrine in him of the imagination as proof of the soul's immortality; and he goes so far as even to extend his hypothesis to plants. Emotion, then, appears to have overcome the force of reason in him; and he gives way to the mysticism that was at the bottom of his mental and spiritual constitution.

In his positive utterances on immortality, Shelley reasoned along lines similar to those employed by Plato. He took a spiritual view of the world which is heaven, a world which was to him of the mind or of the soul. Only the pure have sufficient spiritual affinity with the highest heaven to attain to it. Rather than a distinct separate existence, it is the true essence of this, when the soul is delivered from the errors of the body; the condition in which the soul perceives things in their true perspective.

While, throughout "Adonais", Shelley displays his uncertainty as to the explicit nature of immortality, he is possessed with a vast hopefulness, which, in conjunction with his soaring imagination, leads him, as he progresses, to a faith clearer and more steadfast. "The inheritors of unfulfilled renown", welcoming their "New-admired guest",

(1) Ingpen, Roger - The Letters of P.B. Shelley. - p.142.

"Rose, robed in dazzling immortality.
'Thou art become as one of us", they cry;
'It was for thee yon kingless sphere has long
Swung blind in unascended majesty,
Silent alone amid an heaven of song,
Assume thy winged throne, thou Vesper of our throng!'"

In this conception we can find nothing but a powerful conviction in the imperishability of the individual soul. Himself a poet, it is highly probable that Shelley, in considering the destiny of his friend and fellow-imortal, Keats, after death, could not reconcile the wonderful and essential individuality of the divinely endowed poetic soul with his own preconceived Pantheistic notions. Just as with his Doctrine of Necessity, Shelley found his theory of Pantheism unsatisfying and inadequate; and in his ultimate conception of God and of immortality, he attained, before his death, a faith more beautiful and steadfast than any which had been his before.

Chapter 11. - Shelley's Attitude Towards Christianity.

Shelley's attitude toward Christianity was a direct resultant of his hatred of tyranny and his strong belief in the freedom of the individual. We can trace throughout his writings a vehement opposition to the Christian religion; but only to the religion as established and practised at his time, and not to its essential principles as promulgated by its Founder. He declared to Elizabeth Hitchener that Christianity was militant against truth and reason; and to Trelawney, "The doctrines of Christianity are fatal to genius and originality; they limit thought." His hatred was directed towards the Old Testament dicta; and he exempted, in the fulness of his mental development, the personality and precepts of Christ from his attacks upon Christianity. To these views he held with considerable pertinacity throughout his life, so far at least as the accepted notions of Christianity were concerned; but he later came to entertain a profound respect and reverence for the inner essence of the Christian faith. Against the forms under which humankind had cloaked the true spirit of Christ, Shelley hurled all the indignation that was generated in him by oppression of any kind. No sympathy was in him for a religion which would doom to eternal torment myriads of human souls.

His vehement opposition to Christianity, then, was at bottom an abhorrence of the Paulinistic doctrines and dogma, which had cut off the light of Christ's truth, and made the Church a thing of cruelty, intolerance, hatred, and oppression. In many significant utterances, Shelley showed clearly that Paulinism was in his belief of a religion of

retrogression, Gilfillan and De Quincey are authorities for the statement that the mere mention of Christianity was sufficient to throw Shelley into a transfiguration of hate. In notes to some of his early poems, he refers to Christianity as "the established religion which war, imprisonment, assassination, and falsehood, and deeds of unexampled atrocity, have made what it is." (1) Heaven and Hell were advanced by the Christian religion, he considered, as determinants of conduct, which ought to be determined only by inherent love of virtue. The basic notion of Christianity also, that Christ died to atone for the original sin of humanity, Shelley scouted with the words, ...all that miserable tale of the Devil and Eve and an Intercessor, with the childish mummeries of the God of the Jews, is irreconcileable with the knowledge of the stars. The works of his fingers have born witness against him". The extravagance to which Shelley carried his dislike of certain aspects of Christianity, is illustrated in his affirmation: "I am acquainted with a lady of considerable accomplishments and the mother of a numerous family, whom the Christian religion has goaded to incurable insanity. A parallel case is, I believe, within the experience of every physician."(2) It must be remembered here that Shelley is speaking of the effects of the religion as established at the time, and not of its elemental principles. He realized, and acknowledged at another time, that Christianity is a religion of passion; but forgot that a religion of passion is prone to engender fanaticism to an extent that a religion of reason, such as Shelley advocated, is not.

(1) Woodberry - G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works - p.375

(2) Ibid, - p.350.

Shelley saw that the Christian religion had been maintained by all sorts of tyranny and injustice. According to him, it was a religion not commenced and continued by the mere force of reasoning and persuasion, but one hung on the feeble thread of superstition and deceit. Christianity demands belief upon paid of eternal punishment; yet fails to consider that belief is absolutely distinct from volition. Such a religion, therefore, is arbitrary and unjust.

Christianity, Shelley held, is based on miracles, prophecies, and martydoms. It has never been shown, however, as he pointed out in this connection, that Nature's laws could be broken through; all miracles can be explained in the light of reason and science. "The prophecies of Moses, Hosea, and Isaiah are unsubstantiated, and the very proof of their authenticity is lacking". (1) Thus disposing of any divine basis for Christianity, Shelley declared that it had become in practise a creed of intolerance and despotism. To him, religion was a "prolific fiend", a useful instrument in the hands of the oppressors of mankind. Working upon the superstitious imaginations of the credulous people, it bound them even more firmly than political ties in chains of spiritual restriction. According to the established precepts of religion, demons walk the earth, slaves serve in heaven, and men suffer everlasting torments in hell; and the divinity of such a religion in the light of Shelley's belief was a monstrous impossibility. On the subject of war, Shelley generalized as usual from Volney's particularizations. "War is the statesman's game, the priest's delight," cried the poet; while according to Volney, "'God blesses your arms', say the priests, 'continue to fast and fight'. And they sprinkled water on the people. And the

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works. - p.380.

people breathed nothing but war and slaughter". Since Shelley thus followed Volney in conceiving of organized religion as instigating and encouraging war, we can understand his hatred of creed; for he would not recognize war as a legitimate instrument even in the overthrowing of hated oppression.

For another reason, Shelley cherished a dislike for Christianity. He was imbued with a great reverence for the genius of the classic age, whose influence he considered to have been exterminated by the new faith. In "Queen Mab" he says:

"Where Cicero and Antoninus lived,
A cowled and hypocritical monk
Prays, curses, and deceives."

And in a letter to Peacock: "But for the Christian religion, which put the finishing stroke on the ancient system, but for those changes that conducted Athens to its ruin - to what an eminence might humanity have not arrived!". (1) To Godwin he writes: "The first doubts which arose in my boyish mind concerning the genuineness of the Christian religion, as a revelation from divinity, were excited by a contemplation of the virtues and genius of ancient Rome. Shall Socrates and Cicero perish while the meanest hind of England inherits eternal life?" (2) Again he stated: "It seems to have been one of the first effects of the Christian religion, to destroy the power of producing beauty in art". This to Shelley was a crime of primary magnitude, for his Platonism made beauty to him closely allied to, if not synonymous with, truth and goodness. A sin against beauty was a moral misdemeanor, and an institution which countenanced and even associated itself with such

(1) Strong, A.I. - Three Studies in Shelley. - p.13
(2) Ibid. - p.14

a transgression of moral precept was anathema in the nature of the belief that Shelley had.

This hostility of Shelley, however, as we have mentioned, was directed primarily, not toward the spirit of the Christian faith, but towards the practical application of that spirit in its modified and perverted form. "The letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion", said Lessing. "Consequently, criticism of the letter and of the Bible are not necessarily criticisms of the spirit and of religion. There was religion before there was a Bible. Christianity existed before the evangelists and the apostles wrote. The Christian religion is not true because the evangelists and the apostles taught it; but the evangelists and the apostles taught it because it is true". (1) Shelley accepted and even endeavored to promote all that was universal in the Christian religion; he rejected only its provincialisms. Thus he wrote to Peacock at Marlow in 1815: "I feel strongly inclined to enter the Church ... Of the moral doctrines of Christianity I am a more decided disciple than many of its more ostentatious professors. And consider for a moment how much good a good clergyman may do ... It is an admirable institution that admits the possibility of diffusing such men over the surface of the land". In the "Philosophical View of Reform", written about 1820, he stated his opinion of the true nature of the Christian faith, and of the manner in which it had been perverted: "Names borrowed from the life and opinions of Jesus Christ were employed as symbols of domination and imposture; and a system of liberty and equality - for such was the system planted by that great Reformer - was

(1) Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim - "Axiomata".

perverted to support oppression". (1) Later he wrote: "The New Testament is in everyone's hand, and the few who read it with the simple sincerity of an unbiassed judgment may perceive how distinct from the opinions of any of those professing themselves orthodox were the doctrines and actions of Jesus Christ ... He affirms, therefore, no more than that a simple, sincere mind is the indispensable requisite of true science and true happiness. He affirms that a being of pure and gentle habits will not fail to be aware of, in every thought, benignant visitings from the invisible energies by which he is surrounded". (2) He went on to say that the ignorance of the Dark Ages was in no way to be imputed to the influence of the Christian doctrines; for the evil that might have been regarded as a result of their agencies followed in reality from the extinction of the poetic principle, in conjunction with the spread of despotism and superstition. The fundamental tenets, then, were in his opinion in no way responsible for the later fallacies developed in the Christian faith. While Shelley was in Ireland, he wrote: "I have met with some waverers between Christianity and Deism. I shall attempt to make them reject all the bad and take all the good of the Jewish books. I have often thought that the moral sayings of Jesus Christ might be very useful, if selected from the mystery and immorality which surrounds them; it is a little work I have in contemplation". (3) "The Triumph of Life" declares the same principle in the lines -

(1) Shelley, P.B. - A Philosophical View of Reform - p.2.

(2) Ibid. - p.7.

(3) Clutton - Brock A, - Shelley, the Man and the Poet - p.59.

"And Gregory and John, and men divine,
Who rose like shadows between man and God,
Till that eclipse, still hanging over heaven,
Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode
For the true sun it quenched".

Shelley would never acknowledge the divinity of Christ's person. He wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener: "What is to be thought of Jesus Christ's divinity? To me it appears clear as day that it is the falsehood of human kind". (1) His conception of God as a spirit pervading the universe, and his pronounced antipathy of any anthropomorphic concept of Deity, made it impossible for him to accept Christ's Sonship, much less the doctrine of the Trinity, which gave to Christ absolute Godhead. In his notes to "Queen Mab", he wrote: "It is impossible to believe that the spirit that pervades this infinite machine, begat a son upon the body of a Jewish woman". (2) Shelley was readily prepared to acknowledge the greatness of Jesus in his character of social reformer; but as the Son of God, Christ appeared to him as a "hypocritical demon". To this conviction, Shelley adhered with consistency throughout his life. But at one period, he seems to have doubted even Christ's uprightness and sincerity of purpose. In "Queen Mab", Ahasuerus refers to Christ as a "malignant soul", who brought strife and hatred on earth; and speaks further of his "godlike malice". In the notes to the same poem, Shelley has a footnote in contravention of the homage he had paid to Christ in His human character: "Since writing this

(1) Strong, A.I., - Three Studies in Shelley. - p.15

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - Poetical Works of Shelley. - p.360.

note I have some reason to suspect that Jesus was an ambitious man who aspired to the throne of Judaea".

This state of mind, however, was shallow and transitory. It must be remembered that "Queen Mab" was Shelley's juvenile confession of faith only; and that he later repudiated the extreme sentiments expressed in that work. Throughout his maturer writings we can clearly perceive a steadily growing reverence for the divine human character of the Nazarene, and of sympathy with his purpose and ideals. In direct contrast with the expressions of "Queen Mab" is this extract from "Prometheus Unbound", with reference to Christ :

"One came forth of gentle worth
Smiling on the sanguine earth;
His words outlived him, like swift poison
Withering up truth, peace, and pity.
Look! Where round the wide horizon
Many a million-peopled city
Vomits smoke on the bright air.
Hark that outcry of despair!
'Tis his mild and gentle ghost
Wailing for the faith he kindled:
Look again, the flames almost
To a glow-worm's lamp have dwindled."

This is a beautiful tribute to Christ's person, but it expresses also Shelley's unmodified opinion of the evils of perverted Christianity. Christ, he realized, was a great man, "a man of pure life, who desired to rescue his countrymen from the tyranny of their barbarous and

degrading superstitions." (1) He shared the common fate allotted to the benefactors of mankind, and was "sacrificed to the honor of that God with whom he was afterwards confounded." (2) Shelley's ready sympathy was aroused by the self-sacrifice and nobility of Christ's character, for he himself knew something of the stony path that is the lot, in this world, of the reformer, who, like Christ, would "trample on all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind". (3) "Jesus", he says, "stands out in the foremost list of those true heroes who have died in the glorious martyrdom of liberty, and have braved torture, contempt, and poverty, in the cause of suffering humanity". (4) In "Hellas", Shelley pays his greatest tribute to the essential faith of Christ; with a note, however, which limits while it amplifies the passage:

"A power from the unknown God,
A Promethean conqueror, came;
Like a triumphal path he trod
The thorns of death and shame.
A mortal shape to him
Was like the vapor dim
Which the orient planet animates with light;
Hell, Sin, and Slavery came
Like bloodhounds mild and tame,
Nor preyed, until their Lord had taken flight;

(1) Rhys, Ernest, - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p.85

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works . - p.374

(3) Rhys, Ernest, - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p.102.

(4) Ibid. - p.375

The Moon of Mahomet

Arose, and it shall set;

While blazoned as on Heaven's immortal noon

The cross leads generations on."

The note states: "The popular notions of Christianity are represented in this chorus as true in their relation to the worship they superseded; and that which in all probability they will supersede, without considering their merits in a relation more universal".

Shelley considered that Christ had indulged in a certain amount of necessary equivocation, that he might supersede the old faith with his own truer religion. It was his task to establish a new conception of God and of religion. "A God of wroth and of revenge is not the creation of Jesus but of the hatreds of men. Against this superstition, which destroyed men and blackened the character of God, Jesus protested with earnest eloquence." In order to make an opening for the introduction of his revolutionary precepts, "he accomodated his doctrines to the prepossessions of those whom he addressed ... 'Think not that I am come to destroy the Law and the Prophets. I am come not to destroy but to fulfil. Till heaven and earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in nowise pass away from the Law, till all be fulfilled". (1) Christ had first to secure the prejudices of his auditors, and Shelley condoned what he considered this necessary misrepresentation of Christ's own feelings. Having obtained the attention and predisposition of his hearers, Jesus proceeded to qualify and finally to abrogate the ancient Jewish code.

Shelley's ultimate conception of the true character of Christ

(1) Rhys, Ernest , - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p. 100.

is expressed in this passage: "We discover that he is the enemy of oppression and of falsehood; that he is the advocate of equal justice; that he is neither disposed to sanction bloodshed nor deceit; under whatsoever pretences their practise may be vindicated. We discover that he was a man of weak and majestic demeanor, calm in danger, of natural and simple thoughts and habits; beloved to adoration by his adherents; unmoved, solemn, and sincere". (1) This same adoration of his adherents was productive, as Shelley thought, of the fallacious idea of Christ as God Himself. "His extraordinary genius, the wide and rapid effect of his unexampled doctrines, his invincible gentleness and benignity, the devoted love borne to him by his adherents, suggested a persuasion to them that he was something divine". (2) The doctrines of Christ in themselves were so analogous to those advocated by Shelley that the latter could have nothing but the sincerest sympathy for the essential creed of Jesus. Although Shelley was unorthodox in the extreme in his religious profession, he was in spirit as heartfelt a Christian as many of the more aggressively militant followers of the Christian faith. Gilbert Thomas" summing up expresses the true relation of Shelley to Christianity: "This much at least is clear, that if 'Christianity' implies primarily a loyalty to dogma and superstition and established authority, then Shelley was the blasphemer that his contemporaries took him to be. But if, on the other hand, it means the practice of love and mercy, if it involves a spiritual kinship with the simple-hearted Christ Who set a child in the midst of the wise men, then Shelley was an 'atheist' only in that he was more Christian than the Christians." (3)

(1) Rhys, Ernest - Essays and Letters of Shelley - p.98

(2) Ibid. - p.83

(3) Thomas, Gilbert - "The Divine Poet", in the Fortnightly Review.

Chapter III. - Shelley's Personal Morality.

Shelley has been criticized and reviled variously as atheist, pagan, and revolutionary; but the most damnatory accusations that have been levelled against him have been on the score of his personal morality. Nor have they been without basis entirely., although with small ground for absolute justification. There was much in Shelley's life that laid itself open to misinterpretation and attack. For Shelley was a child of impulse, following every inner urging without choice or restraint, like the dead leaves driven about the universe by his own West Wind. He was so little bound by circumstances that he was quite unapprehensive of any cruelty in a change of sentiment; and he was thus almost entirely unconscious of the sorrow which he might have brought into the lives of women.

The child of impulse, he yet succeeded in subjecting to his creed every impulse that affected him; and his life, seemingly aimless, was actually laid along the lines of his own philosophy. In a note to "Queen Mab" he said: "Constancy has nothing virtuous in itself, independently of the pleasure it confers ,and partakes of the temporizing spirit of vice in proportion as it endures tamely moral defects of magnitude in the object of its indiscreet choice." (1) Again, "The connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of both parties, and is naturally dissolved when its evils are greater than its benefits." (2)

(1) "The Poetical Works of Shelley" - ed. by Woodberry, Vol.I, p.352.

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works, Vol. I, p.351.

The central fact about which revolves all the "chatter about Shelley" in connection with his personal morality, is his desertion of Harriet Westbrook. Judged by any standard, the action was one which would scarcely admit of complete justification; but according to Shelley's standards, to the mould in which he was case, the act may be at least condoned.

Shelley was never in love with Harriet Westbrook. He married her in the chivalrous heat of the moment, on a quixotic impulse, if you will, borne away by the appeal of a maiden in distress, an appeal to his innate hatred of tyranny in any form. Before the legal consummation of the union, Shelley said of it that it "more resembled exerted action than inspired passion". The formal marriage itself was a direct violation of one of Shelley's most cherished principles - that of free love, in which he was a passionate believer all his days. For the sake, of Harriet, he submitted to the bonds of matrimony, which were to him oppressive and irksome, since he realized the fragility of woman's reputation; for "reputation and its consequent advantages", he said, "are rights", which should not be given over without the sanction of some sufficient cause.

Shelley's union with Harriet, then, was not so much even as one of his Platonic alliances. He never seems for a moment to have regarded Harriet as a soul-affinity; she was merely a bright, engaging , likeable girl, far below him in power of intellect, and quite incapable of comprehending his transcendent genius.

Harriet, as time progressed, gradually abandoned her early attempts to attain to an approximation of her gifted husband's intellectual level; while he was developing rapidly, both mentally and aesthetically.

Perhaps, too, Shelley's dislike of the omnipresent Eliza Westbrook qualified his affection for Harriet; and it is more than likely that the dour Eliza infected Harriet's feelings towards Shelley. At any rate, there arose some very real cause or causes of incompatibility between the two, of which disaffection Shelley, in 1817, wrote, in connection with the Chancery suit: "Delicacy forbids me to say more than that we were disunited by incurable dissensions".

From Shelley's lines "To Harriet, May, 1814", we gather that the alienation came primarily from Harriet's side; for the poet is evidently here pleading despairingly for the return of her love for him. According to Thornton Hunt, the definite act of separation came from Harriet; and it is certain that in Shelley's soul there rankled a sense of injustice done him, and of bitterness for the seemingly cold and cruel hardness with which Harriet fronted him.

Accordingly, when Shelley met Mary Godwin, and found in her one who united practically all the attractions which he considered desirable in women, he was drawn as irresistibly to her as she to him. He found in her a soothing emollient to his lacerated spirit, disillusioned as he was in his first wife, and aching in heart at her infidelity to him. It appeared soon that poor Harriet had never the intention of making the separation complete and permanent; but Shelley, though he maintained towards her an attitude of brotherly kindness and protagonism, was definitely removed from any consideration of her in a connubial relation. Further, he was convinced that she had become enamoured of a certain Captain Ryan, and that, indeed, she had been false to him before he united his life with that of Mary Godwin. "I learn just now from Godwin," wrote Shelley to Mary in 1814, "that he has evidence that Harriet was unfaithful

to me four months before I left England with you". (1)

Shelley, then, believed himself fully justified in his action. We may adjudge that action rash and ill-considered; but we must still remember that the standards by which we regulate our moral conduct are vastly different from the actuating principles of the moral philosophy of Shelley; who was, after all, a genius, with a mind and spirit apart from the many. His was a sensitive and highly-strung nature, and he fled from infidelity and coldness with all the force of the reaction inspired by his own loyal and warmly loving temperament. As to the ultimate consequences of the separation, in the tragic death of Harriet, Shelley was as deeply shocked and grief-smitten as any. It is an instance of the ingenuous magnanimity of the poet's mind that he forgave Harriet her supposed ill-treatment of him, and thought of her always with kindness; going so far even as to write inviting her to visit him and Mary on the Continent. Her tragic passing, therefore, was a staggering blow to him. Years after, in 1820, Shelley wrote as follows to Southey, who had entreated him to judge, in reviewing his life, whether his opinions had not brought paid and sorrow to other people, and guilt to himself:

"You select a single passage out of a life not only otherwise spotless, but spent in an impassioned pursuit of virtue, which looks like a blot, merely because I regulated my domestic arrangements without deferring to the notions of the vulgar, although I might have done so quite as conveniently had I descended to their base thoughts - this you call guilt. I might answer you in another manner. But I take God to witness, if such a Being is now regarding both you and me; and I pledge myself, if we meet, as perhaps you expect, before Him after death, to repeat the same in his presence - that you accuse me wrongfully. I am innocent of ill, either done or intended;

(1) Dowden, Edward, - P.B. Shelley - p.236.

the consequences you allude to flowed in no respect from me". (1)

It was Shelley's heartfelt conviction, however ill-founded it may have been, that he was doing the right thing in leaving Harriet for Mary. The passionate intensity of his assertion to Southey can leave little doubt as to his sincerity in the matter. Joined to his belief in Harriet's infidelity and cruelty - which, if they did not actually exist, were at least very real and poignant to him - was his conception of the ideal soul-mate, for the present realized in Mary Godwin; and these facts, with his firm conviction of the right of free love, justified absolutely to him his own conduct.

Shelley advocated constancy to one woman while love reigned, but held that the union of the sexes was intolerable, unholy, and unsanctified when love passed away. He was supremely idealistic in his conception of love, and demanded too much for human nature. In his essay "On Love", he said: "If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love". (2) It is little wonder that the rather commonplace Harriet should cease to satisfy this Utopian concept, or that Shelley, impregnated as he was with this idea, should lose the warmth of his regard for Harriet, and should welcome the opportunity of uniting himself with another who approached more nearly to his abstract ideal. Further, Shelley's conduct in this unfortunate affair is justifiable to a certain extent on the ground of consistency with that phase of his

(1) Dowden, Edward - Percy Bysshe Shelley - p.458.

(2) "Essays and Letters of Shelley" edited by Edward Rhys, p. 52.

philosophy, in which individual liberty of choice was inherent; had the onus fallen on him, he would have borne it as unflinchingly as he expected Harriet to do. Though Prometheus, who is perhaps the best expression of the poet's true self in all his poetry, says "I wish no living thing to suffer paid", he says also "Pain is my element ... Let man be free". Shelley had the idea of freedom as sometimes bringing paid; but, accepting it himself, he expected others to do so with like philosophical resignation.

In a letter to Harriet, he voiced the above sentiments thus: "What law ought to specify the extent of the grievances which should limit the duration of the union of wife and husband?" (1) His answer to the question accorded with the revolutionary doctrines which he had assimilated from Godwin: "A husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love one another ... The present system of restraint does no more, in the majority of instances, than make hypocrites or open enemies. Persons of delicacy and virtue, unhappily united to one whom they find it impossible to love, spend the loveliest season of their life in unproductive efforts to appear otherwise than they are, for the sake of the feelings of their partner, or the welfare of their mutual offspring; those of less generosity and refinement openly avow their disappointment, and linger out the remnant of that union which only death can dissolve, in a state of incurable bickering and hostility. The early education of the children takes its color from the squabbles of their parents; they are nursed in a systematic school of ill-humor, violence, and falsehood. Had they been suffered to part at the moment when indifference rendered their union irksome, they would have been spared many years of misery; they would have connected themselves more suitably, and would have found that happiness in

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works. - p.350.

the society of more congenial partners, which is forever denied them by the despotism of marriage. They would have been separately useful and happy members of society, who, whilst united, were miserable, and rendered misanthropical by misery". (1) This is a fine utterance, absolutely logical in the abstract. But Shelley was too impractical and visionary to see that the human spirit guides itself little by doctrines; driven by impulse, it is sensitive and easily injured. He failed to consider ~~that~~ the possibility of disaffection on the part of one member to a union, while all the strength of that original feeling that had brought about the affinity remained unbroken on the other side. What the solution was to a problem of this nature, Shelley does not tell us, because he never considered the hypothesis. His own wild and wandering spirit was more or less easily disaffected; and with the peculiar narrowness or one-sidedness which characterized him at times, he failed to realize the alternative possibility here. The application of this philosophy to his own marriage with Harriet seems at first glance heartless. Never can it be entirely justified; but according to Shelley's conscience - and to what other monitor can we be responsible? - he was acting for the best. Nevertheless, we can feel the justice and the poignancy of poor Harriet's cry: "My God! he had better have thought like other people!"

"The Revolt of Islam" was written to show that love was the "sole law" which should govern the moral world. Always in Shelley's envisionings, love is supreme; in his Golden Age, it fills all the world. Shelley, like Browning, was impressed with the conviction that "love is the only good in the world", and that its universal reign was the highest state to which man

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works. p.352.

could attain. Despite this conception, he was yet convinced that evil was inherent in the universe, in its present condition at least. And although evil was thus to him a positive force, he held still that it was eradicable; that the division between the present world and the ideal state is of the thinnest.

The influence of Plato on Shelley is strongly marked in the latter's philospphy of morality. According to Plato, the Idea of the Good vanished from the intellect of man with birth, and was regained only through the process of the true education, which turned the soul to the light. Hence we see the duality of Plato's conception of Virtue. Though intuitive, it was subdued, and only to be attained through recollection or through the reconception of the Idea of the Good. Shelley's conception of morality did not follow the Aristotelian argument of habit, nor the Kantian one of effort. To him, Virtue was a passion, an assertion of Love, as an inherent universal guiding principle, and as a unity combining all poetry, virtue, thought, beauty, and prudence.

This whole conception embodying Shelley's ideal of abstract morality is presented in the chorus of the beneficent spirits in the first act of "Prometheus Unbound". Strong interprets the symbolism of the spirits thus: The First embodies universal enlightenment; the Second, the highest passion - that of the soul; the Third embodies the intellectual passion, that thirst for knowledge called by Plato the intellectual Eros, and considered by him akin to sexual passion in its most pure and spiritual form; the Fourth spirit is passion working in beauty - the inspiring force of poetry. In this whole figure we see the sense that Shelley possessed of of the beauty of ethical goodness; it illustrates his conception of Virtue in its relation to the other forms of truth and beauty; and, to quote

Strong, "it is also inspired with that craving for unity which has been shown by a great living critic to be one of the master-passions of his soul". (1)

The ardor of Shelley's being, coupled with the above-mentioned passion for unity, made goodness to him very close to sensuous beauty, and passing very easily into passion. This more or less facile transition occurs in "The Revolt of Islam", where the passion for freedom of Laon and Cythna, in Canto V, becomes the amorous passion of Canto VI. Prometheus, it will be noticed, is lover as well as deliverer. Passion itself, Shelley considered, was not so much innate, as the popular expression phrased it, as "co-existent with our organization".

Shelley held throughout to his tenet that love was a state of mind, a delirious ecstasy to be cultivated for its own sake without particular reference to its object. Unfortunately for him in this belief, he failed to consider the results which must, in the nature of things, follow from this ecstasy, since the incitements by which it is produced are incitements to action. Concerning the state of love in him, Shelley wrote: "Do I love the person, the embodied identity, if I may be allowed the expression? No. I love what is superior, what is excellent, or what I conceive to be so." (2) The difficulty with Shelley was, that these superiorities and excellences were often the products of his imagination, or were the idealized disguise of his unconscious desire, as in the case of women.

It was from this particular phase of Shelley's moral philosophy that his poem "Alastor" was generated. This poem is doubtless a reaction

(1) Strong, A.T. - "Three Studies in Shelley".

(2) Clutton, Brock A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet". p.25

from his early faith in the possibility of realizing the ideal in this world. With the buoyant optimism common to youth, he had accepted as indubitable fact that love would bring him the supreme good in life; unlike most youths, however, he had intertwined his ideal of love with his ideal of the Golden Age. Now, at the writing of "Alastor", he had undergone a great disillusionment concerning love. In Mary, he had found what he had conceived to be his ideal, and the millennium was yet afar. So in this poem, the ideal to which he had to whole-heartedly attempted to attain had become a deceptive, dancing, will-o'-the-wisp, even before and never grasped, and wreaking ruin upon men through the finest attributes within them.

The great fault of Shelley's philosophy of love was in his failure to realize that in his yearning for the ideal there was a necessary, though to him non-existent, mixture of appetite. It is in the immutable nature of things that man's ideal of woman should be formed with the connivance of an instinct purely animal; and however much the man may ignore that instinct and bury it deep within his subconscious mind, it is still there. So it was with Shelley, who ignored this instinct to the extent of oblivion in his consideration of union of the sexes. Thus, in his original draft of "The Revolt of Islam", he created Laon and Cythna brother and sister, the stigma of incest never for a moment entering his mind. It was only at the remonstrance of his publisher, Ollier, that Shelley removed the cause of offence, though even then under protest. (1) The fact remains, however, that appetite exists in man's conception of the ideal, even though it be subdued. Since appetite is satiated with realization, while the ideal is immortal with the spirit, the admixture of the two brings into juxtaposition

(1) Clutton, Brock A, - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet" - p. 152.

fundamentally conflicting notions; and when appetite has been expressed too definitely in the ideal, and passes with its own satisfaction, the ideal still exists, betrayed and forsaken.

The first divine inspiration of love passes, not because it is false or illusory, but because our mundane minds cannot sustain it in its spirituality. Out of this first elevating passion, however, comes a pure and steadfast affection, more secure and satisfying. Shelley, in his craving for perfection, was impatient of the "habit of affection" coming after the primary bliss of love. He yearned towards the pristine ecstatic rapture for itself, and was too much inclined to think love gone when that moment faded, as inevitably it must. In his relations with women, this violent reaction from his first attachment, this irreconcileability of the ideal and reality, is shown in various of his writings. In his early acquaintance with Eliza Westbrook, he referred to her as "rather superior to the generality" and as "a very amiable girl". Two years later he wrote of her: "I certainly hate her with all my heart and soul ... a blind and loathsome worm that cannot see to sting". (1) In "Epipsychidion" he sings to Emilia Viviani:

"Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
All that is insupportable in thee
Of light and love and immortality!
Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse!
Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!"

Later in the same year he states: "The 'Epipsychidion' I cannot look at;

(1) Ingpen, Roger - "The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley" - p.419.

the person whom it celebrates was cloud instead of a Juno, and poor Ixion starts from the centaur that was the offspring of his own embrace". (1) Just after his marriage with Harriet Westbrook he hailed Elizabeth Hitchener as "sister of my soul". Not very long afterwards he wrote, in a letter to Hogg: "She is an artful, superficial, ugly, hermaphroditical beast of a woman, and my astonishment at my fatuity, inconsistency, and bad taste was never so great as after living four months with her as an inmate. What would Hell be were such a woman in Heaven?" (2)

Hogg testifies to the strange attraction which seemed to draw women to Shelley like moths to the candle-flame. Shelley himself declared that in a former incarnation he had loved Antigone, and that for this reason he could find no content in any mortal alliance. He was actuated in his relations with women by a lofty idealism that was at utter variance with the fundamental facts of human nature; and his inevitable disillusionment spelled tragedy for the women for whom he conceived a soul-affinity.

"The Witch of Atlas" extols the beauty of free love; which was, as Shelley conceived it, beautiful in its entire excape from reality, depicting as it did youthful passion untrammelled by the restraints of circumstance. To him, the natural passion essential to the propagation of the human race was all in all, the herald of the Golden Age; but he did not realize it for what it was. The equally necessary discipline of this passion was to him tyranny, malign and irrational. "Not even the intercourse of the sexes", he wrote, "is exempt from the despotism of positive institutions". (3)

(1) Clutton, Brock A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet", - p.223.

(2) Ingpen, Roger - "The Letters of P.B. Shelley". - p.367

(3) Woodberry, G.E. - "Shelley's Poetical Works" - p.350.

He declared that law, in pretending to control and discipline passion, served merely to wither love, while it induced hypocrisy.

Shelley declared that love should be free; that latitude in the marriage bond was essential, as the human mind is too variable to hold constancy to any one woman. The result of the established system, he contended, is that ill-mated persons are obliged to spend their lives in an atmosphere of unhappiness and even of tragedy; their children are "nursed in a systematic school of ill-humor, violence, and falsehood". He advocated the roc-and-branch abolition of the whole institution of marriage, since choice and change would thereby be exempted from arbitrary restraint. "Chastity", he said,"is a monkish and evangelical superstition, a greater foe to natural temperance even than unintellectual sensuality. It strikes at the root of all domestic happiness, and consigns more than half of the human race to misery that some few may monopolize according to law. A system could not well have been devised more studiously hostile to human happiness than marriage". (1) At the same time, he was far from advocating promiscuous intercourse, which, he said, as a matter of fact would not necessarily follow from the establishment of the principles of free love. How far he was removed from any licentious point of view on the subject of sexual intercourse, is shown in his review of Hogg's "Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff", of which review Dowden says: "He rises, with all the ardor of one who knows the sanctity of love, to utter his reprobation and horror of the merchandise of sensual pleasures". (2)

(1) Ibid, - p.353.

(2) Dowden, Edward - "Percy Bysshe Shelley". p. 273.

The passage referred to is an attack upon some of the precepts of the Prince's tutor Bruhle; and Shelley's own words are: "But we cannot regard his commendation to his pupil to indulge in promiscuous concubinage without horror or detestation. The author appears to deem the loveless intercourse of brutal appetite, a venial offence against delicacy and virtue! He asserts that a transient connection with a cultivated female may contribute to form the heart without essentially vitiating the sensibilities. It is our duty to protest against so pernicious and disgusting an opinion. No man can arise pure from the poisonous embraces of a prostitute, or sinless from the desolated hopes of a confiding heart. Whatever may be the claims of chastity, whatever the advantages of simple and pure affection, these ties, these benefits, are of equal obligation to either sex. Domestic relations depend for their integrity upon a complete reciprocity of duties". (1)

It seems evident that what Shelley objected to in the existing system of morality, was nothing so much as the arbitrary restraints it imposed upon individual freedom. Shelley talked fervidly of hypocrisy and vice, but what really stirred him to revolt was the tyrannical nature of our moral laws. Always aroused by tyranny of any sort, he was fired to opposition by this particular - and necessary, though he did not see that - form of social czarism. "Religion and morality", he said, "as they now stand, compose a practical code of misery and servitude". (2) This is his ultimate and most scathing arraignment of the system.

Within Shelley there burned a hatred of the flesh as intense as that of any puritan; but unlike a puritan, he chose rather to ignore the

(1) Shelley's Review of Hogg's "Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff, Publications of the Shelley Society.

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - "Shelley's Poetical Works" - p.354.

flesh than to mortify it. Love was to him more divine than natural, "an inspiration which produced children as music and poetry are produced".(1) It cannot be denied that this is a beautiful conception, worthy the mind of a poet; it will be said, however, that it is visionary and unreasonable. It is only so because it is prophetic of a nobler condition of being, far beyond the ordinary mortals of the dust, and which only the soaring imagination of a poet would envision on earth. Shelley was aware that passion must be productive of results, and he therefore decided that in the perfection of its state it would be without results, completely sterile. This is the burden of his theme in "Epipsychidion", which is just such another escape from reality as the furtherance of the doctrine of free love by the Witch of Atlas. "Epipsychidion" is thus a pure exercise of fancy - a flight of the imagination, or a statement of the poet's abstract conceptions of love. It was a resume of Shelley's abstract philosophical principles, the voice of his hermaphroditic soul. The love which is expressed is sexless, almost feminine - spiritual affinity rather than sensual attraction. The keynote of the sentiment of the poem is expressed in the lines -

"True love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away".

This is a fundamentally uncarnal type of love; for sexual love is never without the element of selfishness, which in turn engenders jealousy.

Childlike in his sentimentalism, Shelley was unrepelled, even positively attracted, by things which to the normal sexual mind would be

(1) Clutton, Brock A, - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet".

disgusting and indicative of perversity; such, for example, as the union of Laon and Cythna before referred to. "Epipsychidion" is his great song of love, his confession of the place of love in his own being. It shows the transient nature of his love, a love which had no real root within him, based as it was on emotions which were like fitful breezes ruffling the surface of a woodland pond. In June, 1822, he wrote concerning this poem: "It is an idealized history of my life and feelings. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error - and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it - consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is, perhaps, eternal". (1) This is the same sentiment which he had before expressed poetically in "Alastor".

"Epipsychidion", however, is an abstract declaration rather than a practical affirmation. He said himself: "'Epipsychidion' is a mystery; as to real flesh and blood, you know that I do not deal in those articles; you might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton as expect anything human or earthly from me". (2) Emilia Viviani was to Shelley, not so much an individual, as the type and symbol of the eternal feminine; beautiful Womanhood, bound and struggling for freedom, she aroused all that was liberty-loving and chivalrous in the ardent breast of the poet. It is certain, however, that the actual consummation of the desire expressed in the poem would have seriously embarrassed Shelley; though we may be equally certain that he would have seen no moral opprobrium attached to such a liaison, but merely a moral responsibility to provide adequately for Emilia and at the same time for his wife Mary.

(1) Ingpen, Roger - "The Letters of P.B. Shelley". - p. 976.

(2) Clutton, Brock, A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet" - p.226

The whole thought behind the poem seems to indicate that Shelley was naturally polygamous, though it is unlikely in the extreme that he ever considered putting into practice his abstract and practically unconscious precept. He realized the necessity of physical monogamy, but desired the spiritual stimulus of polygamous emotions, failing to realize the physical basis of these feelings, yet enjoying their sensation. However, an entry in his journal, in 1814, seems to indicate a dawning conception in him of the necessity of mental and spiritual as well as physical monogamy. The entry states:

"Beware of weakly giving way to trivial sympathies. Content yourself with one great affection - with a single mighty hope; let the rest of mankind be the subjects of your benevolence, your justice, and, as human beings, of your sensibility; but, as you value many hours of peace, never suffer more than one even to approach the hallowed circle." (1)

Shelley's general morality was actuated by the highest standards. Except in those cases wherein his own peculiar philosophy clashed with the accepted conventions of the rest of humanity, his moral life was above reproach. The abuse which was cast upon him was almost totally undeserved from any standpoint, and absolutely uncalled-for from the point of view of Shelley himself. He wrote to Mary from Ravenna: "Good far more than evil impulses, love far more than hatred, has been to me, except so far as you have been the object of it, the source of all sorts of mischief". (2) Byron said to Trelawney: "And Shelley, too, the best and most benevolent of men; they hooted him out of his country like a mad-dog, for questioning a dogma.

(1) Clutton, Brock, A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet", - p.98.

(2) Rhys, Ernest - "The Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.355.

Man is the same rancorous beast now that he was from the beginning, and if the Christ they profess to worship reappeared, they would again crucify him". (1)

Ribaldry offended Shelley; he would be aroused, says Hogg, "and indeed more indignant than would appear to be consistent with the singular mildness of his nature, at a coarse and awkward jest, especially if it were immodest or uncleanly; in the latter case his anger was unbounded, and his uneasiness pre-eminent". (2) This sort of thing was abhorrent to Shelley's Platonic soul; he referred at one time to "obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life". (3) He stated, again, that one of the greatest distinctions between the constitutions of ancient Greece and those of modern Europe is the difference in regulations and sentiments concerning sexual intercourse. This advance he attributed to the levelling doctrines of Jesus Christ, to the influence of chivalry, or to the natural disparity between Celt and Greek. In this circumstance, and in the abolition of slavery, he considered that the modern Europeans had made an advance over the Greeks greater than in any other respect. While he was a determined advocate of individual liberty and freedom of choice and action, he was an equally determined opponent of license. "Sobriety of mind and body", he said, "is necessary to those who would be free; because, without sobriety, a high sense of philanthropy cannot actuate the heart, nor cool and determined courage execute its dictates". (4)

Shelley was himself the very embodiment of unselfishness and generosity. His biographers cite numberless instances of the absolutely self-

(1) Trelawney, E.J. - "Recollections of the Last Days of Byron & Shelley" p.63.
(2) Dowden, Edward - "Percy Bysshe Shelley" - p.36.
(3) Rhys, Ernest, - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.18
(4) Ibid. - p.383.

abnegatory philanthropy of the poet; and indeed his life is a model of Christian self-sacrifice in the interests of others. He lived himself in comparative poverty while maintaining financially men like Godwin and Hunt, and exerting his powers to the utmost in their behalf. While he lived at Tremadoc, he occupied himself continually with philanthropy among the poor of that district; and the impoverished lace-makers of Marlow were relieved in their distress by his beneficence. There is a story on record of Shelley's arriving home one day shoeless, having given his shoes to an old man who lacked footgear. This is an indication of the spirit which Shelley bore throughout the world, and of the greatness of his heart.

Shelley took a very broad view of philanthropy. The distinction between the selfish and the virtuous man, he said, lies in the fact that the imagination of the latter is much less circumscribed than that of the former. Selfishness follows from ignorance; the child's lack of sympathy for others in pain is a result of his own ignorance, rather than of his lack of sensibility. Disinterestedness is natural to human beings, he concluded; and in this fact lies the explanation of the power which love exercises over the human heart. As a result of his consideration of virtue in humanity, Shelley reached the conclusion that man is capable of desiring and pursuing good for its own sake.

Shelley considered will to be the ommipotent force in the individual nature; and he never, in his brief span of life, conceived of any other impulse within himself except that will. Appetites and instincts to him were will, and therefore spiritual; he therefore ignored, as totally non-existent, the animal that was in him - although perhaps in lesser degree - in common with other men. The passion of love he translated into a passion for a higher condition, and any hindrance to this love-passion

was to him a hindrance to his achieving a nobler condition of being; and was hence tyrannous and restrictive. The essential conflict between our appetites and the conditions of our being, he realized; but he attributed this conflict to some external tyrannous force. This fallacious conception explains his rebellion against existing institutions, including that of marriage, which he considered as restrictive of the free exercise of will, and hence of progress to a higher plane of humanity.

Shelley made joy the test of the distinction between right and wrong. This would be all very well in an ideal state; but in an imperfect world of imperfect beings, joy is a perilous criterion, even for men with souls as elevated as was Shelley's above grossness and cruelty. The true test of the distinction between good and bad pleasures is our will, which must be disciplined for the testing; and to this ~~testing~~ discipline Shelley would not consent. Results meant nothing to him, for he considered them to be the fault of circumstances, and not of the action itself. To quote Clutton-Brock: "Yet it might be said of him, as it was said of someone else, that he was born too good ever to become a saint. He had a facility in virtue like the facility of Raphael in art; and there were moral dangers in that facility". (1)

(1) Clutton-Brock, A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet".

PART II.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Chapter IV - Social Doctrines.

Dissatisfaction with things as they are is an almost inevitable accompaniment of the poetic nature; for the vaulting fancy of the poet sees afar the divine beauty of perfection, while his highly sensitized aesthetic faculties magnify a hundredfold to him the ugliness and squalor engendered by the imperfection of his environment. Thus it is that every truly great social or economic movement has its poetic expression; and that almost cataclysmic political upheaval, the French Revolution, was given voice in England by the Romantic School of poets, young men who sought to shatter and cast off the old outworn moulds of thought, and to erect a new code of behaviour in the relations of man with man.

As the French Revolution spent itself in unrestrained passion, however, and degenerated into misery and oppression but little removed from the conditions of the Ancien Regime, the corresponding reaction followed in England, with the result that former radicals among the poets, like Wordsworth and Southey, gravitated towards conservatism; and the same result attended in the realm of politics. Thus it was, that when Shelley appeared before the English people, he stood almost alone in his denunciation of existing conditions, conditions which of themselves cried aloud for consideration and reform. The Prince Regent was spending money extravagantly, while the masses existed in the most grinding penury. The men to whom the destinies of the nation were entrusted were too much absorbed in their game of politics to think of attempting reform in the interest of the poor; and any who raised his voice in protest at this iniquitous condition of things was decried as a revolutionary and jacobin. Shelley was stigmatized

as a destructive radical because of such utterances as this: "They may feed and riot, and sin to the last moment; the groans of the wretched may pass unheeded till the latest moment of this infamous revelry - till the storm burst upon them, and the oppressed take ruinous vengeance upon the oppressors", (1) but he was not inciting action towards such a catastrophe. Rather was he pointing out its imminence in view of the existing political state of the country. The example of the French Revolution had little influence in conducting him to conservatism, for he saw beyond the surface of the apparent debacle on the Continent. In his preface to "The Revolt of Islam" he said: "The panic which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution, is gradually giving way to sanity. It has ceased to be believed that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquillity of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened". (2) Shelley was in advance of his time in this respect, that his perspective was not distorted by fear of a recurrence in England of the French Reign of Terror. While he deplored the excesses of the French Revolution, he saw them as a result of the same causes to which the leaders of the movement owed their other miseries and mistakes; and he considered the license and unrestraint which followed as "additional proof of the need for that long-delayed change which they accompanied and disgraced". (3)

(1) Clutton-Brock, A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet" - p.50.

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - "Shelley's Poetical Works". p.116.

(3) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.17.

At the same time, Shelley saw clearly that although the Revolution overthrew monarchy, aristocracy, and hierarchy, it extinguished only partially the passions that gave rise to these perversions of government; and the result was a return, in a lesser degree, to the old system.

Shelley's radicalism was expressed in a violent denunciation of the tyrannical oppressions of the past, and in a strong faith in a future of liberty and innocence, where absence of laws would make men fit to govern themselves, by encouraging the exercise of their individual faculties for good. Since he thus considered laws as restraining the development of the moral nature of mankind, his antagonism was readily aroused by the mere existence of a law or a tradition. He was, however, as we have noticed, possessed of a boyish curiosity, which was as much a part of his impulse as the spirit of abstract liberty which drove him to the attack of existing institutions. His love of liberty and justice was an impersonal passion, impregnated as he was with a vast desire to share with all mankind the ideal state he imaged.

Shelley had a lofty conception of the nature and essence of politics. "The most fatal error that ever happened in the world", he said, "was the separation of political and ethical science ... politics are morals comprehensively enforced". ((1) Again he stated "Expediency is inadmissible in morals. Politics are only sound when conducted on principles of morality; they are, in fact, the morals of nations". (2) He advised the Irish people: "The was to liberty and happiness is never to transgress the rules of virtue and justice .. be calm, mild, deliberate, patient ... you are not all wise and good. You may be at some time, and then Ireland will be an earthly paradise." (3)

(1) Clutton-Brock, A. "Shelley, the Man and the Poet".p.51.

(2) Rhys, Ernest - "The Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.383

(3) x Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim - "Ernest and Falk". x(omit-(3) same as (1) p.58.

It is evident that Shelley conceived of social progress only through moral advancement; the idea of politics as a study separate and distinct from morals was untenable to him. He believed that the forms regulating human society have as their object the happiness of the individuals constituting that society; and the object is not merely happiness enjoyed by the individuals as sensitive beings, but the manner in which such happiness is distributed among them as social entities. Happiness produced by community of effort, and maintained by the common care, should be distributed equitably to individuals in proportion to their rightful claims upon it. He held that justice is an elementary law of human nature, and is the regulating force of benevolence. "The abolition of personal slavery", he said, "is the basis of the highest political hope that it can enter into the mind of man to conceive". The essence of Shelley's conception of the function of society as organized in the State is expressed by Lessing in "Ernest and Falk" as follows: "People unite rather that through and in this union every individual may the better and more surely enjoy his share of welfare. The total of the welfare of all its members is the welfare of the state; beside this there is none. Every other kind of welfare of the State, whereby individuals suffer and must suffer, is a cloak for tyranny. Nothing else". (1)

Shelley's fundamental position in respect of government is set forth in his words "The only use of government is to repress the vices of men. If man were today sinless, tomorrow he would have a right to demand that government and all its evils should cease". (2) He considered that laws tended to restrain the impulse of the individual towards good for itself; and we have seen that he had reached the conclusion that man was capable of pursuing good for its own

(1) Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim - "Ernest and Falk".

(2) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.383.

sake. The arbitrary restraints of the man-made institutions of law, tradition, and custom, did more to militate against moral perfection in humanity then any inherent faults possessed by mankind. In this advocacy of the abolition of government and the happy state of anarchy, Shelley was the son of William Godwin. "Government", said Godwin, "in its very nature counteracts the development of the individual mind". Shelley wrote:

"The man
Of virtuous soul commands not, nor obeys.
Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame
A mechanized automaton". (1) ("Queen Mab").

In the "Revolt of Islam", the poem which asserts Shelley's faith in the inevitability of the reign of Reason and the advent of the Golden Age, Laon, the hero-poet, sacrifices himself in the noble cause of liberty, and falls before the ponderous advance of tyranny. This same conviction of ultimate social well-being on earth is expressed in Shelley's saying: "Every great nation either has been or is or will be free".

While Shelley objected strenuously to injustice and to a system of privilege, he did not, as he said, "insult common sense by insisting on the natural equality of man". (2) So far as this was practicable, he held it to be desirable. That state of society which approximated most nearly to an equal partition of benefits and evils was to be preferred, other things being equal. For from physical improvement, produced by the effort consequent

(1) Woodberry, G.E. "Poetical Works of Shelley" - p.28.
(2) Woodberry, G.E. "Poetical Works of Shelley" - p.348 Vol. I.

upon labor, the rich are precluded; and from moral improvement, to which leisure is essential, the poor are debarred. Shelley said: "A state which should combine the advantages of both would be subjected to the evils of neither". (1) Further, "the first principle of political reform is the natural equality of men"; this, be it noted, not with regard to property, but to rights. "That equality of possession which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than a political truth, and is such as social institutions cannot without mischief inflexibly secure". (2) Saintsbury has said that Shelley would have turned backward the whole wheel of society, without regard to the ruin he might cause by this action; but the words of the poet which have been quoted would seem to indicate that he was possessed of a very fair conception of the rights of vested interests. The equality of possessions whose existence he denied, he recognized as one of the ultimate attainments of civilization - an attainment towards which it is the duty of mankind to strive, but which in the present condition of human nature is impossible of immediate realization. He hated inequality - "Titles are tinsel, power a corrupter, glory a bubble, and excessive wealth a libel on its possessor", (3) - but at the same time he saw the futility of any attempt at revolution of the social order.

Shelley was satisfied, however, that man has progressed steadily in respect of equality. The growth of justice, he saw, had lessened inequality, and justice in turn had been engendered by the spread of that universal knowledge which he considered to be the panacea of the social ills of the world. Christ endeavored to apply in practice his principle of

(1) Ibid - p.349.

(2) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.70

(3) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.383.

strict and absolute equality; but ancient precedent and tradition triumphed over the transitory glow of enthusiasm aroused by the precepts of the great Reformer, and the system failed; since in its nature equality must result from rather than precede moral improvement in society. The numerous attempts at the establishment of equality, however, have in spite of their failure remained as monuments to mark the advance of truth and justice. Rousseau held that equality among mankind could be secured by a reversion of society to a primitive state. It was his theory that civilization had engendered inequality and privilege; that civilization was degeneration, and that our conception of progression was in reality retrogression. Shelley scouted this theory, which is in its nature essentially pessimistic. He declared: "Nothing is more obviously false than that the remedy for the inequality among men consists in their return to the condition of savages and beasts ... Uncivilized man is the most pernicious and miserable of beings, and that violence and injustice which are the genuine indication of real inequality, obtain in the society of these beings without palliation". (1) This is a constructive conception, embodying as it does the idea of perfection in a future, and not in a bygone, condition, and proclaiming the possibility of the attainment of social perfection through the application of the Golden Rule. It is interesting to note that Shelley considered that a play founded on Shakespeare's "Timon of Athens" would be an excellent mode of discussing our present social and political evils dramatically, and of descanting upon them.

It is in "Queen Mab" that Shelley's revolutionary principles are most fully set forth. This poem was his "juvenile confession of faith"; and though many of its doctrines were in the course of time modified, and many

(1) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p. 107

absolutely recanted by their author, it remains, in its point of view and fundamental reasoning, a faithful transcript of the true Shelley as he was for the greater part of his brief existence.

Many of the facts from which Shelley drew his generalizations in "Queen Mab" were advanced by the French writer Volney in his "Les Ruines". Both men considered kings as luxurious despots, who usurped their power through the exercise of wrong and oppression, and who lived entirely above and apart from the welfare of their subjects. The stability of their position is maintained, Shelley said, "in man's deep, unbettered woe". In other words, monarchs rule and maintain themselves by reason of the ignorance of those beneath them, whom it is in their interest to keep in a state of debasement. On the other hand, the oligarchy of the monied classes, which uses monarchy only as "the string which ties the robber's bundle", is much less lowering to the dignity of human nature than is absolute monarchy; but it is a cause of correspondingly greater suffering to the people.

"Prometheus Unbound", Greek in adornment and imagery, is revolutionary and modern in its essential spirit. It is the problem of "Queen Mab" over again, transcendentally beautified, with Shelley's flashing poetry at its supreme height. In the poem, Jupiter is Tyranny, the priests and kings of "Queen Mab"; set up by the human mind, as personified in Prometheus, he immediately enchains the power to which he owes his supremacy, realizing that the too great freedom and enlightenment of human thought would result inevitably in his own overthrow. Here again is the Volney-Shelley theory of the nature of monarchy, as existing by the consent of the masses, whose consent in turn is obtained and retained through the ignorance engendered

and sustained in them by the rulers. The Holbach-Shelley conception of Necessity as the motive force of the universe is here carried forward in the overthrow of Jupiter by Necessity as Demogorgon. Prometheus, as Mankind, possesses the secret which emasculates Jupiter; but it is only in the fulness of time, through the operations of "the undeniable necessity that is in the universe", that the power of oppression is overthrown. This is Shelley's prophecy of future freedom for humanity. With tyranny cast down, the Golden Age arrives; and Prometheus and Asia, the spiritual representation of ideal love in man and nature, are united, "Man with changeless nature coalescing," when the tyrannic human laws which separated them are swept away. As in "Queen Mab", Love reigns in a world of happy anarchy, where the individual lives untrammelled,

"Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man;
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless;
Exempt from law, worship, degree; the king
Over himself, just, gentle, wise".

"The Mask of Anarchy" displays, with the definiteness imposed by the limitations of reality, the ideal of man's better life, which seems at times so far-off and visionary in "Prometheus Unbound". Shelley, aroused by the "Manchester Massacre", saw in it the commencement of a series of events like those which lef up to the French Revolution; and he went forth, like the champion of the oppressed that he was, to break a lance in the cause of the industrious poor, with whom his sympathies always resided. He counselled peaceful opposition on the part of the victims of tyranny, and advised that they should bear with calm fortitude and resolution the power of oppression, which would expend itself on passive resistance and go down in ruin. At no time does Shelley condone the use of force or of lawlessness

even in the interest of freedom, but admonishes the oppressed to retain as their shield and defence the laws of England:

"The old laws of England - they
Whose reverend heads with age are grey,
Children of a wiser day;
And whose solemn voice must be
Thine own echo - Liberty".

These sentiments sound little like the utterances of the headstrong revolutionary that Shelley was popularly supposed to be; but they are consistent with all his maturer dicta on social conditions, with his youthful addresses to the Irish people, and with the "Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote", the product of his ripened judgment.

Shelley maintained that while war may be necessary in thesis, it is in practice a thing of horror and tyranny, productive of no good, and prolific of anguish and sorrow to the unfortunate instruments of its being; while those responsible for its origin and continuance remain safe and unmolested. Even in the cause of justice and freedom Shelley would not countenance the idea of warfare. "To employ murder as a means of justice", he said, "is an idea which a man of enlightened mind will not dwell upon with pleasure". (1) He saw in war, besides its injustice and inhumanity, a terrific waste of forces which might be turned towards furthering the achievement of social welfare in the world: "If all the thought which had been expended on the construction of engines of agony and death - the modes of aggression and defence, the raining of armies, and the acquirement of those arts of tyranny and falsehood without which mixed governments could neither be led nor governed - had been employed to promote the true welfare and extend the real empire of man, how different would have been the present

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - "Poetical Works of Shelley" - p.342.

situation of human society!" ((1))

The taking of life in any form was an action abhorrent to Shelley's belief in the right of the individual to life. According to his own pronouncement, the abolition of capital punishment was in the front rank of the social reforms advocated by him. The theory was prima facie futile, he held, because, since we know nothing of the nature of death or of the after life, we are unable to say whether death be punishment or reward, or merely negation. At any rate, viewed as mere punishment, the death penalty was, he considered, barbarous and outworn. "It is sufficiently clear that revenge, retaliation, atonement, expiation, are rules and motives, so far from deserving a place in any enlightened system of political life, that they are the chief sources of a prodigious class of miseries in the domestic circles of society". (2)

Shelley denounced further the futility of capital punishment considered as a deterrent. A strong-minded man, put to death for such a crime as high treason, could make death appear a heroic and beautiful thing; and the multitude, stirred to sympathy and admiration, would entertain no fear of death, if in the process they might excite such emotions in the bosoms of others as they themselves experienced on this occasion. The law is thus weakened by losing that sympathy which is necessary to its maintenance and progress. Further, persons endowed with a coarseness of spirit sufficient to make murder, rape, and plunder actions common to them, are ipso facto rendered insensible to the terror or pain associated with death. Thus, while performing no useful function on behalf of humanity, capital punishment confirms all the inhuman and unsocial impulses of men. "The meanest wretch is impressed with a sense of his own comparative merit. He is one of those on whom the tower of Siloam

(1) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.95.
(2) " " " " " " " p. 64.

fell not - he is such a one as Jesus Christ found not in all Samaria, who, in his own soul, throws the first stone at the woman taken in adultery". (1)

Shelley followed Locke in his conception of government by consent. He declared that government has rights only so far as it expresses the voice of the people by whose consent it exists. In itself it has no rights, since it is delegated by individuals for the purpose of securing their own rights. These are liberty and an equal share in natural resources; and a government which fails to procure for the people these rights may by them be discharged or revised, since it has violated the terms which justify its existence.

The rights of a minority, however, should always be recognized, though not so as to interfere with those of the majority. Since the benefit of the governed is the object and origin of government, no person can possess authority which does not proceed from the government; and this fact precludes the hypothesis of a small non-concurring body within a larger organization. The minority should therefore withdraw from the state and form a government according to their own notions. This is essential to the well-being of society; for all of its members should bear an equal share in the benefits and burdens of government. Any violation of the state of society may justify some degree of coercion on the violator; who, however, retains rights to the extent that the coercion be as slight as possible within the bounds of effectiveness. Force employed where reason will suffice is a sure indication of weakness in a state. At the same time, no person has the right of disturbing the peace of the

(1) Ibid - p.70

state by violation of any law, just or unjust. He should endeavor to secure its repeal, while maintaining towards it an attitude of passive acquiescence during its existence. It is the right and duty of every citizen to think, act, and speak freely; and no law has the right to forbid the practice of truth. Truth is the duty of mankind, and that which is a duty can never be criminal, whatever man-made laws may declare on the subject. "Government cannot make a law. It can only pronounce that which was the law before its organization, viz., the moral result of the imperishable relations of things". (1)

This, in brief, is Shelley's theory of the origin, constitution, and function of the state. Its obvious characteristic is the quantity of democracy and liberty implied in the organization of society; and to that extent, it is an admirable code of politics. But it has the great fault of impracticability in many of its aspects, and was in reality advanced by Shelley merely as a statement of what should be, rather than of what might be.

Shelley possessed a very great admiration for American institutions. He declared of Washington, "As a warrior and statesman he was righteous in all he did, unlike all who lived before or since; he never used his power but for the benefit of his fellow-creatures". (2) Further, he held up to admiration the constitution and government of the United States, which, "sufficiently remote from the accuracy of ideal excellence", was yet "scarcely less remote from the insolent and contaminating tyrannies under which, with some limitations of the term as regards England, Europe groaned at the period

(1) Rhys, Ernest - "Essays and Letters of Shelley" - p.382.

(2) Shelley, P. B. "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.12.

of the successful rebellion of America". (1) Strangely enough, in all his remarks upon American institutions, Shelley has no word to say concerning the practice of slavery then extant in the United States.

The excellence of the American system of government lay to Shelley in the fact that it had no king or other arbitrary officer extorting wealth or spreading corruption. The hereditary system of government extant in Europe had no counterpart in the United States, where the legislators were unbiased by considerations of class consciousness. Herein Shelley pointed to a weakness of the British House of Lords, whose members, in human nature, would legislate in the interest of that class to which they belonged, and to which their children would succeed. Shelley's conviction of the evils of monarchy and privilege was so pronounced that we can easily comprehend the respect which he would entertain for a system which, in theory at least, minimized privilege and swept away monarchy entirely.

Another phase of the American social system that appealed to Shelley was the non-existence there of an Established Chruch, the government pretending to exercise no control of any sort over the religious tenets of its individual citizens. Aside from the fact of permitting individual freedom, this condition had the additional recommendation of guaranteeing that government funds would not be misdirected towards the support of a clergy whose existence was a matter of supreme indifference to many of the contributors to those funds.

The ultimate factor to Shelley in the excellence of the American constitution was the clause which provided for its revision every ten years. This he considered a wise and foresighted provision for the application to the

(1) Ibid - p.12.

social state of interim discoveries tending towards its betterment. The error of the American constitution, he realized, was not that it did not represent adequately the will of the people as it was, but that did not provide for "the full development and salutary condition of that will".(1) It failed to provide that the will of the people should be as wise and just as possible; although Shelley stated that a constitution, by a faithful representation of the existing will of the people, might engender a wholesome condition of that will. And despite his admiration of the American constitution, he declared that that of Great Britain was one which lent itself readily, by reason of its versatility and flexibility, to advancing the cause of wisdom and virtue.

Shelley was an ardent democrat, but he was aware of the vast potential evil of democracy in the existing condition of things at the time at which he wrote. He held that universal suffrage was defensible in abstract theory only, as in practice it would inevitably tend to bring about a complete social revolution, which would be liable to that rapid decline which invariably attends sudden and violent change. He advocated that the people first be educated concerning their rights, and impressed with the idea of the peaceful and irresistible progress which follows the exercise of patience and reason. His own words in this connection are as follows: "I consider the adoption of universal suffrage, in the present unprepared state of public knowledge and feeling, a measure fraught with peril. I think that none but those who register their names as paying a certain small sum in direct taxes ought, at present, to send members to parliament". (2) This statement is remarkable in

(1) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.15.

(2) Ibid. -

that it marks the withdrawal by Shelley of his early pantisocratic principles, in his defence of the property qualifications for the right of franchise. He advocated further the disfranchisement of the rotten boroughs, the transference of their rights to the unenfranchised cities and boroughs, and the holding of triennial parliaments. Thus he hoped to bring about gradual and steady reform, to obtain without bloodshed or confusion ulterior improvements of a more important character. Only in the event of refusal of reform by the Houses of Parliament did he advocate universal suffrage and equal representation. He saw that anarchy is pernicious and dangerous, in that it threatens to bring down in ruin with itself the whole structure of society. Civil war he also denounced as tending merely to confirm in the people the military habits engendered by the prevailing system, and as being productive of nothing but violence and oppression.

Notwithstanding his denial of the right of universal suffrage, Shelley went on to assert that the voice of the people might demand, within reasonable limits, an extension of the franchise. He would ascertain the will of the people by a door-to-door canvass of the United Kingdom; and he expressed his willingness to aid in defraying the expenses of such a plebiscite by the contribution of a tithe of his annual income. Concerning the female suffrage as advocated by Jeremy Bentham and others, Shelley thought the project rather immature. None the less, he proclaimed that he would be the last to refrain from advancing any system tending to develop the capacities of all individuals.

Shelley saw numerous inconveniences in the system of voting by ballot, chief among which was, that the voter conceals the motives actuating him in his choice; which motives, if they were honorable, could cast no

obloquy on the voter through being known. Here Shelley missed the obvious argument for the hidden ballot, that the voter is by its means protected from the exertion upon him of undue influence by persons to whom he may be subject.

One of Shelley's visionary projects was an Association of Philanthropists, having as its purpose the establishment of a renascence of Ireland. The asscciation, whose immediate objects might be Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of the Union, had as an ultimate object the far wider and profounder idea of complete regeneration of the nation. Shelley had no conviction that the Catholic Emancipation would contribute, in itself, in any material way to the liberty of the Irish people; but he was earnestly opposed to any measure of disqualification for opinion. The weapons, then, of his association, were to be verbal; discussion and debate, and such united action as might be free from violence and disorder, were to be the means of advancement. The association, primarily moral, was, in the nature of Shelley's belief, to deal ultimately with politics; for to him, politics was but a department of morals. This conception explained to him the failure of the French Revolution, the leaders of which failed to conduct their political actions in proper concordance with the morals laws. To the Irish people Shelley said: "Before the restraints of government are lessened, it is fit that we should lessen the necessity for them." (1)

Shelley's pilgrimage to Ireland, in 1811, was actuated by him desire to bring freedom and emancipation to the distressed Irish people. He came to work for the Catholic Emancipation, but this merely as an earnest of a greater emancipation from all intolerance and external bonds, including the

(1) Shelley, P.B. - Address to the Irish People.

sway of Catholicism itself. He came to urge the repeal of the Union, in the interests of the downtrodden poor, and as a measure to ensure the return of the wealthy absentee landlords, who had deserted the country and left their estates to fall apart. These immediate steps towards freedom were to be merely the first advance on the road to the millennium, the Golden Age of human perfection. And as the first step in turn towards these immediate ameliorations, Shelley counselled for the Irish people "sobriety, virtue, thought, benevolence, intelligence"; "when you have those things", he said, "you may defy the tyrant". (1)

The principles on which Shelley based his Irish pamphlets are many and confusing. He was, in his own estimation, a pioneer of moral and intellectual reform rather than a political agitator. Order, not revolution, was his plea; the revolution which he advocated was tremendous and remote, and to be approached through moral and intellectual development.

Shelley, as we have noticed, was imbued with intensely democratic ideals respecting the institution of society; but he was little inclined to demagoguery, as is shown in his words to Hogg: "Perhaps you will say that my Republicanism is proud; it certainly is far removed from pothouse democracy, and knows with what a smile to hear the servile applause of an inconsistent mob. But though its cheeks could feel without a blush the hand of insult strike, its soul would shrink neither from the scaffold nor the stake, nor from those deeds and habits which are obnoxious to slaves in power". (2)

Byron said of Shelley that he was the best and least selfish of men he ever knew; a man who had made more sacrifices of his fortunes and feelings

(1) Shelley, P.B. - Address to the Irish People.

(2) Clutton-Brock, A. - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet". - p.69

than he had ever heard of. Hogg stated that Shelley's pre-eminent characteristic was his overflowing brotherliness. It is a fact that Shelley lived in straitened circumstances himself, while he was spending his substance in philanthropic endeavor, and trying to make the world more like his ideal of what it should be. Whatever may be said as to the wisdom of Shelley's social theories, nothing can be alleged against his sincerity in his endeavors to secure their application; nor can it be said that he did not himself practise the precepts which he expounded.

A dispassionate analysis of Shelley's social doctrines discloses no very startling revolutionary doctrines, from our modern standpoint. In the period of reaction in which Shelley lived, a man of advanced thought was sure to receive the brand of radical, whether or no he pleaded, as did Shelley, for moderation in the means of social reform. Shelley, for example, regarded the law of primogeniture as an evil of primary magnitude, and was doubtless stigmatized as a radical for this particular opinion. Yet a Conservative government in England has recently repealed this very law, without arousing any very great excitement in the country. Shelley's reputation as a revolutionary was established by the fact that he was ahead of his time in his social thinking; and he suffered from that misunderstanding which is the meed of the pioneer in the realm of politics.

Chapter V. - Economic Doctrines.

Shelley was no economist. He hated history as a mere relation of successive tyrannies, and would never give it serious consideration or critical study. He was therefore possessed of no very well-defined notions of economic progress, or of the relation of economic theories to the state of society at different periods of history. Further, he had not the coldly dispassionate and logical point of view which is necessary to the economist - the ability to consider a question from all sides with an equal absence of prejudice. As it was, Shelley has left us practically only one treatise - the "Philosophical View of Reform" - dealing with political reform from the purely economic standpoint. He had very little respect for the legislators of his country, and he seemed to act upon the principle that reform must come first as to the form of government before the mode of government could be satisfactorily altered. While he was yet a boy, his father took him once to see the House of Commons in session. Shelley's reaction to this signt was expressed in the words: "What creatures did I see there! What faces - what an expression of countenance - what wretched beings!" (1) However, in his brief economic writings, he left a definitely-planned scheme of reform; and if the conclusions he reached regarding particulars displayed little of the perspicacity of the economist, his generalizations display sound reasoning and logic.

The power which increased in the eighteenth century was not the power of the Crown, but the power of the rich; "Monarchy is only the string which ties the robber's bundle". (2) Shelley saw the danger that lay in

(1) Clutton-Brock, A - "Shelley, the Man and the Poet" - p.26.

(2) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.38.

economic oppression for a people who were but beginning to emerge from the thralldom of social tyranny. He scourged the contemporary profiteers, "this new aristocracy created out of an increase in public calamities". (1) An oligarchy of wealth was taking the place of the old aristocracy of birth. "English reformers exclaim against sinecures, but the true pension list is the rent-roll of the landed proprietors. Wealth is a power usurped by the few, to compel the many to labor for their benefit. The laws which support this system derive their force from the ignorance and credulity of its victims; they are the result of a conspiracy of the few against the many, who are themselves obliged to purchase this preeminence by the loss of all real comfort". (2)

"There is no real wealth", he declared, "but the labor of men". The money system he held to be inimical to the welfare of society, which would be no whit the better if gold and silver were as plentiful as grain. Shelley is here, of course, failing to distinguish between the price and the value of money; excessive cheapness of gold and silver would not necessarily imply constancy in its purchasing power. It is in fact the relative scarcity of gold and silver, rather than their intrinsic value, that make them useful as measures of the value of other commodities. Shelley is standing upon surer ground when he says that the system is one which permits individual aggrandizement at the expense of less fortunate persons. Society fetes and banquets, given ostensibly to alleviate the distress of the poor laboring classes, aggravate while they palliate the diseases they seek to remedy. The poor are set to labor to furnish "not those

(1) Ibid - p.45

(2) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works - p.349.

comforts of civilization without which civilized man is far more miserable than the meanest savage", but "for the pride of power, for the miserable isolation of pride, for the false pleasures of the hundredth part of society". (1) Under this system, the jeweller and the actor live in comparative opulence; while the far more useful and necessary farmer struggles in poverty. The reason, of course, why affairs of this nature failed to alleviate the distress of the poor, lay in the economic fact that an increased circulation of money has the same effect upon prices as an increase in the amount of money in circulation; that is, general prices, in relation to money, will rise. The mere extravagant expenditure of money creates only an illusory condition of economic well-being.

In attacking the system of paper currency, Shelley pointed out that the introduction of paper currency in place of gold has the effect of raising all prices; relative values of real property remain constant, while the purchasing power of the depreciated currency has been considerably lowered. This, of course, is only true when the paper currency is not securely established upon a gold basis. Shelley was also vigorously condemnatory of the device of national credit, which increased, as he said, the proportion of the idle to the workers, while it increased, at the same time, the amount of work to be done, through the "factitious wants of those indolent, priviledged persons". In utilizing the instrument of public credit, he said, the government misuses the trust reposed in it for the proper management of metallic currency, and engenders confusion and injustice. A man may write on a piece of paper what he pleases; he may say that he is worth a thousand when he is not worth a hundred pounds. If he can make others believe this, he has credit for the sum to which his name is attached".(2)

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works - p.348.

(2) Shelley, P.B. - Philosophical View of Reform - p.41.

Shelley held that as long as bills of this sort passed current, they defrauded the actual possessors of gold and silver, and the workman from "the advantages attached to increasing the nominal price of labor". He was right in his premise here, that trust is the basis of credit; but the conclusion he drew was somewhat unwarranted. Credit was a comparatively recent economic development in Shelley's day, and was looked upon from a good many quarters with distrust and suspicion; but it has proved itself since his time, in spite of any disadvantages attendant upon its use, a most useful, and now even essential, economic instrument.

The national debt, he said, was incurred in the progress of two liberticide wars - the American Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars; and it was a debt contracted by the whole privileged class towards a portion of that class. In other words, according to Shelley, the creditors of the nation, being part of the same body with the debtors, and "owing as debtors while they possess a claim as creditors", agreed to abstain from demanding settlement of the debt, so that they might be maintained in luxury upon the accruing interest. "One of the first acts of a reformed government", said Shelley, "would undoubtedly be an effectual scheme for compelling these to compromise their debt between themselves ... the common tribunals may be invested with legal jurisdiction to award the proportion due upon the several claims of each". (1) He saw the danger of a national debt produced by a great war, and advocated repudiation of England's national debt - a compromise of the debt among the rich creditors themselves. In a letter written in the last year of his life, however, he seemed to have realized the fallaciousness of his proposed remedy; for he

(1) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.59.

said: "The Government must content itself with less in taxes, the landowner must submit to receive less rent, and the fundholder a diminished interest, or they will all get nothing". (1)

These financial impostures produced in England two aristocracies : That of the wealthy merchants and landed proprietors, and that of "attornies and excisemen and directors and government pensioners, usurers, stockjobbers, country bankers, with their dependents and descendants". (2) The first class Shelley admitted to have a certain degree of refinement; but the second category comprised "a set of pelting wretches", who considered commerce with their fellow-creatures but as a means to their own selfish advancement.

As a result of this double aristocracy, the laboring class, which had even hitherto been "deprived of those resources of sentiment and knowledge which might have been their lot could the wisdom of the institutions of social forms have established a system of strict justice", was now "more ignorant, immoral, miserable, and desperate". (3)

In short, Shelley attributed the prevailing misery among the laboring poor to the unequal distribution of property, under the form of the national debt; all property being, as he considered it, the produce of labor.

Shelley's propositions for national reform were in the main fivefold, embracing the abolition of the national debt, of the standing army, and of sinecures and tithes; but these last two he would abolish only "with every possible regard to the existing rights of the holders".

(1) Ingpen, Robert - Letters of P.B. Shelley - p.983.

(2) Shelley, P.B. - "Philosophical View of Reform" - p.45.

(3) Ibid - p.48.

Finally, he would make all creeds and religious opinions equal in the consideration of government, and would make justice swift, sure, and easy of access, while extending the institutions of the jury to every possible occasion of jurisprudence. With regard to his proposed abolition of the standing army, it is interesting to note that Shelley considered the maintenance of a permanent naval force, which would keep watch "round this glorious island against the less enlightened nations", quite permissible.

Shelley attacked the Malthusian Theory with a powerful indignation, denouncing it as heartless and selfish. Malthus maintained that individuals unable to support families in a reasonable standard of comfort should be forbidden to marry; but Shelley declared that if Malthus' proposition, that population increases only up, to the point of subsistence, were correct, then the disadvantages attendant upon social existence should be borne equally by all classes, and not exclusively by the poor. Since Shelley's time, the Malthusian Theory has been discredited, and is now discarded by the foremost economists.

Although it is doubtful if, in Shelley's time, the phrase "class consciousness" had been formulated in its present meaning, there is no doubt that Shelley himself was actuated by this force in his economic ideas. He gave very slight consideration to the results consequent upon the operation of economic forces, possibly because he was to a large extent unaware of their existence; but he attributed the miseries of the laboring classes directly to the exploitation of this class by the wealthy bourgeoisie. In spite of this Marxian conception, however, Shelley was distinctly not a Communist. He declared that what a man had honestly earned was rightfully his, both in use and disposal. The disposal of the property acquired through the labor, genius, economy, etc., of the individual, honorably exercised, is

at the discretion of the possessor; and all political institutions should defend his right to dispose of it according to his own will. Property acquired in this way might be equitably handed on by heritage and bequest; but ill-gotten wealth, such as that gained by exploitation of labor, should enjoy no such privilege, according to Shelley's belief.

Though some of Shelley's economic beliefs tended towards Socialism, he had too strong a conviction of personal liberty ever to become a Communist. At any rate, his economic writings, in the spirit in which they were written, show a similarity to the spirit of his social tenets. The ultimate social and economic reforms he advocated were perhaps radical; but the means which he counselled to these ends were moderate, peaceable, and just.

PART III.

CONCLUSION.

Chapter VI - The Unity of Shelley's Ethical and Political Principles.

Behind all the writings of Shelley, at the back of every theory which he propounded, there were forces which reduced all his thought into two great unifying principles. Throughout his moral philosophy, we have seen the duality of his nature, the rationalism and the idealism that were in him, dividing his mental attitude. In his political philosophy, both social and economic, we have seen how the radical nature of the reforms he preached was modified by the moderate means he advocated. But the two great factors that related all his writings were his ideal of freedom and his conception of the perfectibility of man and of the Golden Age.

Shelley conceived of evil as arising, not from the individual conscience or will, but from existing laws and institutions external to it. He hated history as a mere relation of successive tyrannies and oppressions, and would never seriously study it; and he was therefore possessed of crude notions only regarding the origin of civil institutions, of religion, both in itself and in creeds, and of much more. He was unjust - flagrantly so, as it may appear to some - to the Jewish and Christian religions, for the evil that they did far outbalanced in his sight the good that came from them. By all these institutions, he considered that the liberty of the individual was placed under undue and arbitrary restraint; and throughout all his work we can see that striving towards the achievement of complete freedom for men in their social, economic, religious, and moral relations.

Shelley's devotion, however, was directed towards the advancement of freedom, and not of license, for he wished to do nothing that would harm

society or its individual members. He was a crusader for freedom from fear, ignorance, and superstition; from laws, creeds, from political and social abuses, and from the to him fundamentally restrictive and tyrannous marriage vows. He was not merely destructive, like Byron, but revolutionary in the true sense of the word. That which disfigured him in the eyes of the world, and estranged him from society, was that he would destroy before he rebuilt. He taught that freedom from man-made laws was to be secured by obedience to Nature's law, of which the essence is freedom; and that this freedom from social and economic abuses was to be secured by the application of the Golden Rule among individuals.

It was in "Queen Mab" that Shelley made his most determined attack against existing laws and institutions. Eight years after the publication of the poem, he wrote in a letter to a friend concerning it: "I have not seen it for some years, but inasmuch as I recollect it, it is villainous trash and I dare say much better fitted to injure than serve the sacred cause which it advocated ... I am a devoted enemy to religious, political, and domestic oppression, and I regret this publication not so much from literary vanity as because I fear that it is better fitted to injure than serve the sacred cause of freedom". (1) Again, in 1821, he wrote to John Gisborne: "Queen Mab', a poem written by me when very young, in the most furious style, with long notes against Jesus Christ, and God the Father, and the king, and bishops, and marriage, and the devil knows what ..." (2) These remarks would seem to indicate that the spirit in which Shelley wrote "Queen Mab" was of a most transitory nature. But Mrs. Shelley, in 1839, wrote as

(1) Ingpen, Robert - Letters of P.B. Shelley - p.875.

(2) " " " " " " - p. 878.

follows: "In 'Queen Mab', Shelley poured out all the cherished speculations of his youth - all the irrepressible emotions of sympathy, censure, and hope, to which the present suffering, and what he considers the proper destiny of his fellow-creatures, gave birth ... A very few years had checked the ardor of Shelley's hopes, though he still thought them well-grounded, and that to advance their fulfilment was the noblest task man could achieve". (1) It was a conviction of the inexpediency, rather than of the wrongness of his opinions, that caused him to modify some and abandon others; he felt that his position was untenable, rather than ill-taken.

Zastrozzi is Shelley's ideal of the virtuous man. He gains freedom and happiness in a future state by his uncompromising opposition to the institutions of this world. Religious creed, prejudices engendered by convention and use, are swept away; marriage, an eternal bond between spiritual affinities, has no need of the vain sanction of human authority.

In conjunction with this fiery love of freedom, we can trace throughout Shelley's writings a strong conviction of the perfectibility of man. Freedom and the Golden Age were synonymous to Shelley; and he believed that when humanity sloughed off the arbitrary restrictions that chained it to the earth, it would rise to achieve the millennium. So it was that both his poetry and prose were dedicated to the advancement of humanity on the road to perfection.

Shelley's ideal world was an evolution from his own mind, coloured by his own wayward fancy. Its pre-eminent characteristics were the freedom before alluded to, and the divine quality of Beauty. Shelley displayed in all his poetry his essential Platonism, which considered beauty as a fundamental

(1) Woodberry, G.E. - Shelley's Poetical Works - p.413.

fact of human well-being; and this beauty was an inevitable accompaniment of the ideal state. In "Queen Mab" we have a picture of the Golden Age as idealized by Shelley. Reason is the ruling principle, while passion, subjected without restraint to the dictates of Reason, has free scope. There is a strong similarity here to Milton's ideal of the Golden Age as interpreted by Denis Saurat in his "Milton: The Man and the Thinker". This interpretation views Adam as Reason and Eve as Passion. While Reason rules, ideal happiness follows; but when Passion usurps and subdues Reason, the condition of perfect bliss is lost, never to be regained until Reason attains its rightful ascendancy. But, as Hancock says, this deification of Reason in Shelley is the direct consequence of Holbach, Rousseau, Condorcet, Godwin, and the whole of the rationalistic revolutionary school; so that Shelley can be distinguished as the disciple of no one writer on this point. (1) His conception of Reason itself is set forth in a letter to Hogg, written in 1813: "Now do not tell me that Reason is a cold and insensible arbiter. Reason is only an assemblage of our better feelings - passion considered under a peculiar mode of its operation". (2)

In "Prometheus Unbound", Shelley arrives at the conception of a nobler condition of things as promised by the higher excellences of this life. Here, for the first time, he attains to a grasp of the true promise of that universal imperfection with which he had hitherto been so impatient. For it is the universality of imperfection that leads to the comparison of good with bad, and the consequent striving toward the better. It was Browning's finely developed perception of this truth that made him the optimist he was;

(1) Hancock, A.E. - "The French Revolution and the English Poets".

(2) Ingpen, Roger - Letters of P.B. Shelley - p.382.

and whatever of pessimism there was in Tennyson, may be traced directly to his failure to realize fully the immense potentialities of human imperfection.

From the rather mechanical conception of the perfectibility of man achieved through the action of Necessity, and as the "glorious prize of a blindly working will", Shelley passes, in "Prometheus Unbound", to a more mystic conception. Here, man, in his perfected state, is not free from death and change; and the transfiguration has been wrought through the cosmic progression of love. Syllogism has given place to miracle, though to a miracle that is human in that it fulfills all the higher aspirations of mankind.

We find throughout Shelley's poetry a constant reiteration of his belief in the principle of beneficence existing at all times in the universe. This beneficence is not at all times a freely-working principle, as it is hidden from man by the Veil, which also appears with such frequency in Shelley's poems. When this veil is torn aside, humanity will attain to the ideal state of perfection. This image of the Veil is used by Shelley with varying significance; but the best use, and the one which seems most fully to explain the rest, is that in which it symbolizes Life. Thus, the present fabric of life is conceived of as veining humanity from the attainment of the highest self-realization. This conception shows the radical nature of the change which Shelley considered as necessary before the ideal state could be achieved; but it expresses at the same time his belief in the thinness of the division between good and evil, in his conviction of the ease with which the change might be accomplished in the fulness of man's desire. Strong says that the Veil, "though it sometimes signifies merely the obscurantism of worldly convention, generally implies far more than this, and means a cosmic fabric

alien to the truer and higher nature of the universe - a fabric which must be rent asunder so that the inner truth and beauty of things may be made manifest." (1)

That this conviction of the perfectibility of humanity was not merely an abstract poetic conception to Shelley, is shown in his letter to Lord Ellenborough, written in 1812, wherein he said: "The time is rapidly approaching, I hope that you, my lord, may live to behold its arrival, when the Mahometan, the Jew, the Christian, the Deist, and the Atheist, will live together in one community, equally sharing the benefits which arise from its association, and united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love". (2)

Critics have differed and will differ in arriving at a true estimate of Shelley's character. Some see him all good, while others he is the to incarnation of evil in a fair setting. Thus we have, at the one extreme, W.M. Rossetti speaking of Shelley's "archangel feet" while on the other side J.G. Fleay, admitting Shelley's greatness in the field of pure poetry, denounces his ethical and political teaching as dangerous and sophistical. These, however, are more or less extreme points of view; and it is most probable that the true Shelley may be found somewhere between these two. If Tolstoy was right in his conception of what constituted Art, then we can only conclude that Shelley's work was Art in its highest form; for Tolstoy says: "The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and the instinct of all men ...

"The destiny of art in our time is to transmit from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling that truth that well-being for men consists in being united together, and to set up, in place of the existing reign of

(1) Strong, A.E. - "Three Studies in Shelley".
(2) Ingpen, Roger - Letters of P.B. Shelley - p.336.

force, that Kingdom of God, that is, of love, which we all recognize to be the highest aim of human life". (1) To no other purpose than this was Shelley's genius dedicated while his life lasted. Whatever we may think of Shelley's teachings, we can scarcely doubt the intensity and sincerity of his purpose. As another great poet, Robert Browning, has said: "How shall we help believing in him when we find even his carnal speech to agree faithfully with the tone and rhythm of his most oracular utterances?". (2)

There is always the danger, in considering Shelley's character, of our being blinded by the flashing radiance of his poetry, which soars aloft, "pinnacled dim in the intense inane". Thus must Matthew Arnold have been impressed when he said that Shelley was "A beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain". (3) This is certainly not the Shelley whom his friends knew, and whose picture they have left to us. He was actually a dynamic, palpitating force, replete with energy, and almost violently conscious of his mission in life. In that phase of his character, Shelley was all man, virile and intense. But in another mood he was a spirit apart, a genius above the grossness of this earth, and whose fancy winged with the spheres. Francis Thompson comes very close to Shelley in these words: "He is gold dusty with tumbling amidst the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hand. " (4) I like to think of the poet hastening along the country lanes, with wild, far-off thoughts in his eyes, and a chaplet of flowers crowning his flying locks. Whatever devastating criticism may be levelled at his moral and political theories by mundane materialists, I am convinced that this golden poet in his inner spirit transcended criticism of the ordinary sort. He was of the company of choice spirits whose privilege it is on this earth to see beyond the Veil; his was

(1) Tolstoy, Leo - "What is Art?"
(2) Rhys, Ernest - Essays and Letters of Shelley - Intro. p.xiii
(3) Matthew Arnold - "Essays on Shelley".
(4) Francis Thompson - "Essays on Shelley"

that dazzling genius in whose presence we are almost impelled to close our eyes with holy dread,

"For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise".

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