

Percy Bysshe Shelley

## Agapē vs. Eros in Poetry: Percy Shelley vs. the ‘Romantics’



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# The Reawakening Of Classical Metaphor

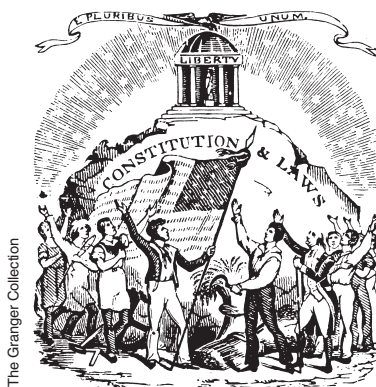
by Paul Gallagher

In the years Europe felt the impact of the American Revolution, the “ideas of 1789,” and the immigration of Friedrich Schiller’s dramas, profound changes took place in English poetry. In its style, a deadly 150-year straitjacket was finally thrown off—the sing-song “Augustan couplets” of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. In the content of poetry, a battle took place. On one side, these years continued the brief lives of the only two great English Classical poets of the last three-hundred fifty years—Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821), and that of Scotland’s Robert Burns (1759-1796). On the other side

stood the Romantics, whose doctrine led to the modern “existentialist” death of poetry.

This period saw the most intense political repression in Europe, also inspired—negatively—by the *threat* to Europe’s oligarchy, of America’s successful republican example. Poets, like other leading figures, took sides in the struggle for freedom and justice. Percy Shelley, both political pamphleteer and immortal poet, understood the time—as Friedrich Schiller did—as “a great moment” in which people needed the uplifting beauty of poetry to make them better human beings. Both the concept of a historic turning point as a period of “polit-

*From Plato to the founding of the American Republic, poets have been the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’*



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ical mass strike,” and the idea of non-violent civil disobedience, received among their very earliest expressions in Shelley’s poems and pamphlets. Lyndon LaRouche has often cited Shelley’s concept that

[t]he most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods, there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little correspondence with that spirit of good, of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny . . . they are yet compelled to serve the power which is seated upon the throne of their own souls. (P.B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1820).

Shelley, like Friedrich Schiller, understood that poetry is written to awaken “that spirit of good” in the human mind and soul, by a power of beauty which is *not of the senses*, but of Reason, of the Intellect. He knew that poetry uses images of sensuous power, only to lift the mind beyond and above them through Metaphor.

Shelley, in a word, was passionately a Platonist. He maintained that Plato, though not “technically” a poet, was among the greatest of all poets, by the power of paradox and Metaphor; and, as we shall see, Shelley believed that Socratic paradox was the basis of tragic drama. As Socrates spoke of poetry, playfully, in the *Phaedo* dialogue, Shelley too understood poetry as an activity of the Intellect and the reasoning soul, which recognizes in Creation its own beauty:

. . . The same dream came to me often in my past life, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another, but always saying the same thing: “Socrates,” it said, “make music [poetry], and work at it.” And I formerly thought it was urging and encouraging one to do what I was doing already, and that just as people encourage runners by cheering, so the dream was encouraging one to do what I was doing, that is, to make music, because philosophy was the greatest kind of music and I was working on that. But now . . . I thought it was safer not to go hence [to death] before making sure that I had done what I ought, by obeying the dream and composing verses. (*Phaedo*)

It is a great and pervasive fraud that today, all English poetry of Shelley’s period is falsely, blurringly named “Romantic,” and that Shelley and Keats—Classical poets, not Romantics—are lumped together with William Wordsworth, the “founding” poet of English Romanticism. This fraud indoctrinates successive generations to the fantasy that poetry is composed by “baring your

heart, your true deep emotions,” or by presenting the “true emotions” of characters. Such an idea has never created beautiful poetry, nor the ability to understand or recite it.

Romantic poetry, in opposition to what Shelley and Keats practiced, is founded on the doctrines of Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle invented the dogma that poetry is based on *sense images* and impressions, a dogma which became dominant in English poetry after Shakespeare’s death, from the time and influence of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Aristotle proclaimed that poetry was nothing but “a mode of imitation” of that which is perceived by the senses; thus, making all things “objects” of the senses:

It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood . . . . And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation . . . . [T]hough the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms, for example, of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures . . . ; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meanings of things, e.g., that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or coloring or some similar cause. (*Poetics*)

Aristotle proceeded to apply this definition, at length, to epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, and lyrical forms: we “delight” in the imitations (images) of *things we already know*, or in “things which happen” to noble or other characters in stories which are already well known. What these “things” cause in us, at best, are powerful emotions or “passions,” of fear, pity, admiration for a noble personage—if the imitation is skillful enough.

It is immediately clear and obvious, what a complete opposition exists between this Aristotelean “poetics,” and the Platonic idea of poetry proclaimed by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*. Shelley wrote poetry as he wrote pamphlets, to generate *new ideas*, thoughts *not* previously present in his hearers’ minds, “intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature.” To Shelley’s mind, to reach into the intellect and cause change, and some great or small experience of the emotional beauty of change, was the poet’s purpose:

Like a poet hidden  
In the light of thought,  
Singing hymns unbidden  
’Til the world is wrought  
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.

The Aristotelean dogma of “poetics,” directly from Aristotle and his ancient commentators Longinus and Quintilian, had been revived after Shakespeare’s death by the evil Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’ heir John Dryden, and Dryden’s heir Alexander Pope, had made the dogma of sense images even worse, by tagging mandatory “rhyming” onto it, and had tried to outlaw intellectual *change* and Metaphor entirely.<sup>1</sup> Two hundred years later, Wordsworth and the “Romantics” were still following Hobbes’ Aristotelean doctrine.

At that point, Shelley and Keats consciously attacked that doctrine to overthrow it, and made beautiful, metaphorical English poetry possible again. But, the Romantic current of Wordsworth prevailed, leading in the Twentieth century to existentialist poetry of pure sense images, thrown together without form or meter—unless we might name new forms, such as “meander-verse” and “stumble-verse,” jumbled with obscenities and random profanities, as the inventions of these new Romantics expressing their “true feelings.” Poetry has died an erotic death, and children are taught that any unashamed eroticism, any sing-song rhyming, is “poetry.”

Shelley, Keats, and Burns held to their ideal of poetic beauty and human freedom to their deaths, ostracized and outcast. They composed poetry to express of the human spirit, its highest activities and sentiments, its need to search for truth. They did not seek to paint passing pleasures nor erotic desires, except as ironies. They did not seek to image aristocratic “honor,” or the Romantic “past” of feudal chivalry—the stock in trade of Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Samuel T. Coleridge, and William Wordsworth.

Although Shelley and Keats were masters of poetic imagery, the core of their method was to contrast the creative freedom of the human mind—and the emotion of that creativity—against the depths of the mind when bound by sensual, erotic images and emotions. Shelley, from his boyhood, intensively studied and translated Plato’s dialogues, and knew that this highest emotion of creative activity, was what Plato termed *agapē*—the love of truth and justice. Keats expressed the idea in his famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which the passing of human generations is made noble, by the beauty they create to express this love to future generations. The urn’s Classical form is

. . . a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth, beauty,”—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

This conception Keats expressed, the Romantics scorned. Byron laughed at such ideas, and vilified Keats’

poetry in general; Wordsworth called it “petty paganism”; Sir Walter Scott considered it “Cockney drivell”; Coleridge would have put it in his opium pipe and smoked it indifferently with everything else. Shelley and Keats, in distinction to these, were the only great *Classical* English poets of the past three-hundred fifty years.

## Images of the Creative Mind

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That poetry expresses, above all, the beauty of the human mind’s power of reason, was stated by Shelley—provocatively—in the Preface to his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1819):

The imagery which I have employed will be found . . . to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. *This is unusual in modern poetry*, although Dante and Shakespeare are full of instances of the same kind; Dante, indeed, more than any other poet, and with greater success. But the Greek poets . . . were in the habitual use of this power. [Emphasis added]

Shelley pointed to lyrics like the following; a song of the spirit which comforts Prometheus in the second act of his drama, singing of how poets “nor seek nor find” pleasures of sense, but rather those of thought:

### Song

On a poet’s lips I slept,  
Dreaming like a love-adept  
In the sound his breathing kept;  
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,  
But lives upon the aerial kisses  
Of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses.  
He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom,  
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;  
But from these, create he can,  
Forms more real than mortal man,  
Nurslings of immortality!  
One of these awakened me,  
And I sped to succour thee.

As will become clear, no Romantic poet ever did, nor ever could write such a “song,” although they might envy its beauty. There is a spirit dreaming on a poet’s breath; awakened by a thought, a universal thought the poet has created (by adding dimensions to human pleasures and transforming beautiful sights to their causes). And *such* beauty alone can comfort the truth-seeking mind of Prometheus, savior of mankind. The song, as poetic lan-

guage, is sensually delightful, but its subject is *agapē*, the love of mankind's highest hopes. To Shelley, this was poetry's *sole* subject, entering at some level into all its forms. He wrote: "I always seek, in what I see, the manifestation of something beyond the present and tangible object."

Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, foreshadows Shelley's "Song" as the method of poetry:

. . . the body is constantly breaking in upon our studies and disturbing us with noise and confusion, so that it prevents us beholding the truth, and in fact we perceive that, if we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul alone.

To the British critics of Shelley's time, who idolized the aristocratic Romantics, this "Song" exemplified Shelley's "overblown, profuse and confused imagery." His poetry infuriated them because no image was what it seemed to be; his images flowed only to disappear into universal thoughts, new ideas. Such creative leaps, of which we all desire to be capable, were Shelley's purpose and subject in poetry. From his *Defence of Poetry*:

[a poem] is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.

And in the same:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own.

Shelley was expressing uniquely Platonic ideas about the relation of the One (Beauty and Truth) to the many, creative actions in the minds of individuals:

Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the . . . epic, dramatic and lyrical forms because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts, divested of shape and action . . .

and that was Shelley's purpose as well. "This is unusual in modern poetry," wrote Shelley, polemically, of himself. He knew the degeneration of English poetry after Shakespeare and Milton, continuously, for two centuries. Its stock, in the Romantic generation before Keats and Shelley, had become images of nature, of childish innocence, "rural simplicity," or chivalric "passions."

In his *Defense*, Shelley wrote that poetry at its happiest—when it may celebrate an age of human progress and freedom—was "of the imagination and the intellect."

But when culture decays, poets "retreat to pleasure, passions, and natural scenery"—they become "erotic poets." Then, if social corruption hardens even these erotic pleasures to dull and bestial forms, poets descend and still attempt to touch men and move them, even through such rude passions. If still ignored even thus, poetry's "voice is heard, like the footsteps of Astraea [goddess of Justice], departing from the world."

Shelley could have been forecasting the Twentieth century. In fact, he might have been forecasting the Nineteenth-century course of poetry, except for his own and Keats' powerful influence, after their deaths, especially upon Edgar Allan Poe and other American poets. For Shelley, poetry, even at the worst—when seeking to draw smiles of joy from stones—always seeks to lure its listeners higher, back to its core: "the imagination and the intellect."

William Wordsworth, the celebrated, "revolutionary" poet of Shelley's boyhood, had become by 1814 an active political Tory, a reactionary in a time of great repression and growing poverty; an apostasy which angered many of his fellow men-of-letters. Shelley wrote a biting sonnet which, alone, cut to the mental link between Wordsworth's Romanticism and his political betrayal. This was the degeneration of his own creative powers, owing to the loss of *agapē*.

#### To Wordsworth (1815)

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know  
That things depart which never may return:  
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,  
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.  
These common woes I feel. One loss is mine  
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.  
Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine  
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:  
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood  
Above the blind and battling multitude:  
In honored poverty thy voice did weave  
Songs consecrate in truth and liberty,—  
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
Thus having been, that thou should'st cease to be.

When Wordsworth had thus "ceased to be," he was forty-five years of age, with thirty-five more years to live. Mourning the "lost innocence" of childhood, Wordsworth—and this is Shelley's ironic point—did not mourn the lost promise of 1789 for freedom and justice in Europe, nor the crushing of the human spirit in cruel political reaction after the French Revolution's disaster. Rather, Wordsworth embraced that reaction. *Agapē* was not among the Romantic emotions his poetry expressed. So, Shelley mourned *him*, as one dead.



## Wordsworth vs. Shelley: What Is Poetry?

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William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge launched the Romantic movement in English poetry with their 1800 volume of *Lyrical Ballads*, ostensibly as an assault on the reigning, didactic style of Dryden's Augustan age. It became immensely popular, and shaped the development of all subsequent poetry in English. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" opened the book; but, as he wrote few other poems—and had trouble finishing even those—all the other lyrics in the volume, and its Preface, were by Wordsworth. An enthusiast of French Jacobinism, Wordsworth was by then very British; he spiked his Preface with a furious stab at Friedrich Schiller and his co-founders of the German Classical drama, Goethe and Lessing: "The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, *sickly and stupid German tragedies, and extravagant stories in verse.*" [Emphasis added]

Here, at the opening of the Romantic deluge to follow, was pungent evidence of the profound impact of Schiller and Goethe on English writers during the American Revolutionary period, even upon those writers who deeply resented that influence, like Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott. When Shelley wrote in *A Defence of Poetry*—"the connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form"—he showed his devotion to Schiller's dramas, which were unique for this connection. (Nowhere in Aristotle's *Poetics*' long discussion of drama, is this connection discussed, although Aristotle goes into great detail as to what is supposed to make tragic dramas *popular*.)

This Wordsworth "Preface" to the entire Romantic movement in poetry, makes a direct contrast to Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* of twenty years later: the contrast between *eros* and *agapē*, and between populism and republicanism. Listen to Wordsworth:

The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes. . . . I have wished to keep my reader in the company of flesh and blood.

Whatever portion of this faculty [imagination] we may suppose even the greatest poet to possess, the language which it will suggest to him must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions. . . . [The poet] will feel that there is no necessity to trick out or to elevate Nature.

Now, Shelley:

For [the poet] not only beholds the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present. . . . A poet participates in the infinite, the eternal, and the One.

And just after asserting, again, that "Plato was essentially a poet," Shelley adds:

Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

Not so Wordsworth. From his Preface, again:

I have said that poetry is but the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion, reflected in tranquility, till [the emotion] does itself actually exist again in the mind. . . . But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly, with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the viable universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat. . . .

Now, again Shelley:

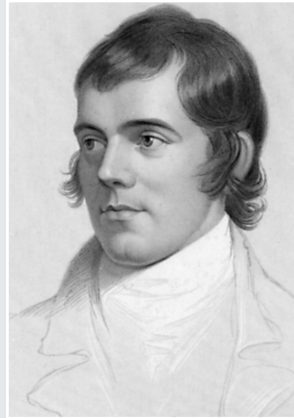
The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

To Shelley, poetry expresses the power of mind to have dominion over nature, to transform it and to draw from it what is eternal. To Wordsworth, as to Aristotle, poetry attempts only to initiate "real" senses and emotions, or to express the moral "laws" repeated and believed by ordinary men and women. Poetry's source, to Wordsworth, is the simple imitation of common life:

The principal object, then, which I posed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life . . . [L]ow and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the passions of the heart find a better soil . . . because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity . . . and because, from their rank in society, and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.

Such blessed dummies were, to him, the English common people, whose conditions of life had been declining steadily since 1750. Tory gentlemen owned their votes, and would soon own Wordsworth. Shelley, a convinced republican all his life, took his idea of poetry's source from Plato's *Republic*—*agapē*:

Robert Burns



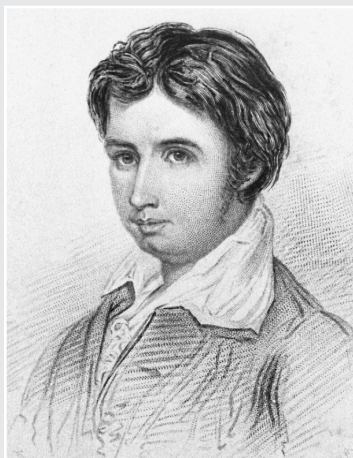
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John Keats

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Leigh Hunt



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Love, which found a worthy poet in Plato alone among the ancients, has been celebrated by a chorus of the greatest writers of the renovated world; and the music has penetrated the caverns of society, and its echoes still drown the dissonance of arms and superstition . . . planting, as it were, trophies in the human mind of the sublimest victory over sensuality and force.

Wordsworth wrote that poetry could have to do with science *only after* the “things of science” became habitual impressions to the common man. Then, the poet might “carry sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself.” Shelley’s conception was that poetry was the essential basis of scientific discovery:

The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements of poetry, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences . . .

Wordsworth’s *theory* for the method of the Romantic movement in poetry was nothing but that of Hobbesian materialism, and was definitely worse than Wordsworth’s poetry itself—although many of his “Lyrical Ballads” were, in fact, just versifications of a mindless, Daoist conception of Nature, bemoaning the evil of human civilization:

Sweet is the love which Nature brings,  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things—  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart.  
That watches and receives.

—from “*The Tables Turned*” (1798)

There are many such. Note how the stanzas of the following ballad of Wordsworth, show not the least shift, of thought nor state of mind, from the first to the last. They are related only as reinforcing logic: *the first two stanzas could have served for the whole poem*. This is the complete absence of paradox and Metaphor, which in Classical poetry move us toward truth.

#### Lines Written in Early Spring (1798)

I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I sate reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,  
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played;  
Their thoughts I cannot measure:—  
But the least motion that they made,  
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from Heaven be sent,  
If such be Nature's holy plan,  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

One almost hears the small tinkling of the ice in the glasses in the hushed parlor of the Queen's Club, just when one of the gentlemen lets out a sigh over the drift of things: Tsk, tsk! What man has made of man!

Is "I'd rather be a flower!" the whole truth and emotion we can expect from the most important and celebrated Romantic poet in English? This sounds like Alexander Pope; and indeed, we find Wordsworth, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, remarking that

we see that Pope, by the power of verse alone, has continued to render the plainest common sense interesting, and even frequently to invest it with the appearance of passion.

## 'A Very Resolved Republican'

Shelley's poetry could truly be contrasted to all Romantic poetry, by the philosophical expression of G.W. Leibniz:

The excellence of minds [is such] that God considers them preferable to other creatures; that minds express God rather than the world, but that the other substances express the world rather than God. (*Discourse on Metaphysics*)

Shelley strove more strongly than any poet of his time or since, that his poetry express the beauty of the mind, and "God rather than the world." He even polemicized with Keats about this, against any trace of mere style or sentiment, no matter how lovely. His purpose in poetry was to reform human civilization, by arousing the love of beauty and the passion for truth. Yet Shelley was, in the "media-public opinion" of his time,

the veritable monster at war with all the world, excommu-

nicated by the Fathers of the Church, deprived of his civil rights by the fiat of a grim Lord Chancellor, discarded by every member of his family, and denounced by the rival sages of our literature as the founder of a Satanic school

—the words of a British traveller shocked to meet Shelley in Italy, as though coming face-to-face with the Antichrist himself.

At nineteen, Shelley wrote a college friend:

What, then, can happiness arise from? Can we hesitate? Love, love—and though every mental faculty is bewildered by the agony which is, in this life, its too constant attendant, still is that not to be preferred to the sensations of epicureanism? . . . Love, love, *infinite in extent*, external in duration, yet perfectible; but can we suppose that this reward will arise spontaneously, or that our nature itself could be without some cause—a first cause—God? Do I love the person, the embodied entity, if I may be allowed the expression? I love what is superior, what is excellent, or what I conceive to be so; and I wish to be profoundly convinced of the existence of a deity, that so superior a spirit might derive happiness from my exertions: for love is heaven, and heaven is love.

Before the age of twenty, Shelley had read, re-read, and begun to make translations from the Greek of Plato's dialogues. He wrestled with the radical materialist doctrines of the British and French Enlightenment—which he also studied in his teens—and Plato conquered the materialists Hume and Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau. He rejected the favors of British radical Rousseauvian anarchist and Romantic novelist, William Godwin, who had been the teenaged Shelley's political/intellectual ideal, and whose daughter was Shelley's wife, Mary—author of *Frankenstein*, *Valperga*, and other Romantic novels. At twenty-seven, Shelley was to write:

The doctrines of the French and material philosophy are as false as they are pernicious. . . . This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. Man is a being of high aspirations, "looking before and after," whose "thoughts wander through the infinite," . . . existing but in the future and the past; being not what he is, but what he has been and shall be. ("On Life," 1819)

The gulf between the Classical and Romantic poets of England, Scotland, and Germany, put them on opposite sides of the fight over the new American ideal of republicanism. Shelley held to that ideal *after* the French Revolution's failure and the disaster of Bonapartism. In 1814, during the worst period of reaction in Europe, Shelley wrote his associate and friend Leigh Hunt: "I certainly am a very resolved republican . . . I always go on until I am stopped, and I am never stopped." He continued to publish political pamphlets up through that time. Only

slowly did he realize, that *poetry* was the means of reform, through beauty, which would survive him—his “talent”—and that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” In “The Revolt of Islam” (1814), America appears thus in the hero’s words:

“There is a people mighty in its youth,  
 A land beyond the Oceans of the West,  
 Where, though with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth  
 Are worshipped; from a glorious Mother’s breast,  
 Who, since high Athens fell, among the rest  
 Sate like the Queen of Nations, but in woe,  
 By inbred monsters outraged and oppressed,  
 Turns to her chainless child for succour now,  
 It draws the milk of Power in Wisdom’s fullest flow.

“That land is like an Eagle, whose young gaze  
 Feeds on the noontide beam; whose golden plume  
 Floats moveless on the storm, and in the blaze  
 Of sunrise gleams, when Earth is wrapped in gloom;  
 An epitaph of glory for the tomb  
 Of murdered Europe may thy fame be made,  
 Great People! As the sands shall thou become;  
 Thy growth is swift as morn, when night must fade;  
 The multitudinous Earth shall sleep beneath thy shade.

“Yes, in the desert there is built a home  
 For Freedom. Genius is made strong to rear  
 The monuments of man beneath the dome  
 Of a new Heaven; myriads assemble there,  
 Whom the proud lords of man, in rage or fear,  
 Drive from their wasted homes: the boon I pray  
 Is this—that Cythna shall be convoyed there—  
 Nay, start not at the name—America!  
 And then to you, this night, Laon will I betray.

“With me do what you will. I am your foe!  
 The light of such of joy as makes the stare  
 Of hungry snakes like living emeralds grow,  
 Shone in a hundred human eyes—‘Where, where  
 Is Laon? Haste! fly! drag him swiftly here!  
 We grant thy boon.’—‘I put no trust in ye,  
 Swear by the Power ye dread.’—‘We swear, we swear!’  
 The Stranger threw his vest back suddenly,  
 And smiled in gentle pride, and said ‘Lo! I am he!’

Shelley was aware that the most celebrated English Romantic poets and novelists he knew, or knew of, had all become anti-republican Conservatives: Wordsworth, Robert Southey, Samuel Coleridge; Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott had always been aristocratic reactionaries, despite Byron’s “revolutionary” adventures in Greece; William Godwin was an anarchist preaching that *all* associations of citizens were wrong and that progress would never result from them. Shelley wrote his republican friend Leigh Hunt, in 1819, “I doubt whether I ought not to expose this solemn lie; for such, and not a man, is

Godwin.” Shelley’s friend and fellow-poet, Thomas Love Peacock, went to work for the British East India Company, and wound up publishing an essay claiming that poetry was nothing but a useless adornment to modern life. It was against this piece of apostasy, that Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry*.

The powerful Duke of Norfolk, who controlled Wordsworth politically by 1814, made a serious effort to “catch” and control Shelley, whose father the Duke knew. Shelley was several times cordially invited to Norfolk’s ancestral estate, Greystoke—which was the source-location for another Romantic nature-myth, “Tarzan.” There, Shelley—in very bad financial circumstances—was introduced to William and Raisley Calvert, gentlemen brothers who coordinated Wordsworth’s political activity for the Conservative Party, and helped Wordsworth financially. At about the same time, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the influential Tory-linked literary magazine controlled by Sir Walter Scott and his family, tried to lure Shelley into abandoning his principles. While other journals, and even popular newspapers, were making Shelley notorious as an enemy of society and a mad, evil poet, *Blackwood’s* began to praise his “genius”—while clucking, “If only he would reform his morals.”

Shelley’s notes to his wife make clear that he placed Sir Walter Scott personally behind this operation. When *Frankenstein* appeared as Mary Shelley’s first novel, *Blackwood’s* publicly affected to believe that Percy Shelley was the real author. And they praised to the skies this work of pure Romanticism, which portrayed man’s fate as a *creature of chemicals*, seething with uncontrollable emotions. (That this Romantic outburst against science had been written by *Mary Shelley*, Sir Walter Scott knew directly from Lord Byron—it was Byron who had suggested the story to her.)

These aristocratic messages to Shelley—that if he abandoned the “intellectual beauty” of his poetry, and became a Romantic, “erotic” author, his complete ostracism from the public might be reversed—failed to lure him from his life’s mission. In 1821, Byron told Shelley that Byron’s publisher, the Tory John Murray, was urging him to stick to “my Corsair style, to please the ladies.” Byron insisted Murray was right:

[A]ll I have yet written has been for the women. You must wait until I am forty; their influence will then die a natural death, and I will show the men what I can do.

Shelley, horrified by Byron’s self-description as an erotic “little me,” replied:

Do it now—write only what your conviction of the truth inspires you to write. You should give counsel to the wise,



not take off from the foolish. Time will reverse the judgment of the vulgar.<sup>2</sup>

## Shelley and Byron

In 1813 Britain was again attempting to destroy America by war; Leigh Hunt and other republican publishers were in prison, for such crimes as affronting the Prince Regent (the future George IV); Shelley, in his pamphlet, *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, was denouncing that Prince for spending £120,000 on a single lavish dinner, while Englishmen were hung for debts or imprisoned for printing Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*. At some of those same lavish dinners, the Prince Regent's favored guests included Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott. Scott presented Byron with an antique bejewelled sword. Byron presented Scott with a large silver vase, full of dead men's bones! Byron wrote Scott:

Let me talk to you of the Prince Regent. He ordered me to be presented to him at a ball; and after some sayings, particularly pleasing from royal lips, as to my own attempts, he talked to me of you and your immortalities; he preferred you to every bard past and present, and asked which of your works pleased me most.

The opposed mental and moral qualities of Shelley and Byron were recorded by many who knew them both or observed them together. This included, memorably, their opposition on an issue of fundamental importance to poetry: the work of Shakespeare. During Shelley's lifetime, Shakespeare was not seen, in Britain particularly, as Schiller had seen and studied him—a guide to tragic drama;—nor as Lincoln saw him—a guide to statecraft and wisdom;—nor as he is seen today by all who care about civilization and culture. Shakespeare's plays had been driven from the British stage by John Dryden's imitations in the Seventeenth century. The Eighteenth-century British and French Enlightenment despised him. Samuel Pepys, the famous "diarist," called *Romeo and Juliet* the worst play he had ever seen. Voltaire denounced Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian and clown, and excoriated *Hamlet*. Byron's attitude, that Shakespeare was an "uncultivated genius" whose tragedies made no sense, was the conventional "wisdom" of the English literary world by the later Eighteenth century.

Shelley wrote a dissertation on *Hamlet*, which appeared in 1830 in the *New Monthly Magazine*, as part of a "conversation of Byron and Shelley on the Character of Hamlet." We will leave aside this "conversation," recorded only by a third party. Byron thought the ghost of Hamlet's father "seems to come and go without any reason at all." But to Shelley, the ghost "makes us think

upon the inviable world around us, and within us, and whose purposes . . . are to us most awfully accountable." This merely points our attention to the crucial passage of Shelley's actual dissertation. There, he characterized *Hamlet* as showing forth the method of Plato's *Parmenides* dialogue:

The lessons of the tragic poet [Shakespeare—PG] are like the demonstrations, *er absurdo*, of Parmenides; since the mind's eye is so blinded, so "drunk-asleep," to use Hamlet's words, as not by intuition to recognize the beauty of virtue; [rather] to prove it, as it were, by the clashing contradiction of two opposite extremes; as if a man derived a more sensible consciousness of health . . . from having previously been in sickness.

Shakespeare's employment of the paradoxes in Hamlet's character, to waken in the spectators' minds a new idea of the demands of statecraft and government, has been uniquely developed by Lyndon LaRouche.<sup>3</sup> It is the spectator to the tragedy who receives a newly sensible consciousness of virtue, from watching the fatal contradiction of extremes in Hamlet's behavior: the contemplative who cannot act or change under the demands of a changed situation; the "practical man of action," who suddenly acts as if ideas and thought were worthless. So Shelley described Shakespeare's art, with skillful reference also to the conflicts of Hamlet with Polonius.

Shelley considered tragedy as built upon Platonic dialogue. At the end of his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, he stated that in reworking, from Aeschylus, the elements of tragedy and of human history, he "would take Plato as my model." Both Shelley and Keats thought Shakespeare's *King Lear* the greatest example of this principle of tragedy. In *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley developed the principle again:

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense, the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation of the highest good.

## Shelley's Political Writings

All Classical poetry's aim is to draw the listener or reader up, from sensual images or emotions, through imagination (the effect of creative Metaphor), to see the beauty of an enduring truth. This was also the aim of Shelley's pamphlets—to draw people from obsession with immediate oppressions and disputes, up to some under-

standing of the beauty of human reason in action. We have seen that Shelley believed in Plato's method of leading minds upward through paradox and metaphor; and that he considered Plato's quality of paradox *in prose* to be as metaphorical as poetry. At nineteen, he began pamphleteering, first with the goal of independence for Ireland.

The philosophical ammunition for this came not only from Plato. Shelley was ardently attracted to the music of Haydn and Mozart; and according to his youthful friend Thomas L. Peacock, "Schiller's *Robbers* and *Maid of Orleans* and Goethe's *Faust* took the deepest root in Shelley's mind and character." In addition, while at prep school and Oxford College, Shelley was mightily attracted to the works of Benjamin Franklin, whose experiments with electricity Shelley attempted to perform himself. "He swore by Benjamin Franklin as proof of the triumph of the mind," wrote Shelley's cousin Thomas Medwin.

Young Percy Shelley was a devotee of two teachers and "apostles" of science: Adam Walker, who lectured on the new breakthroughs of Benjamin Franklin in electricity, Lavoisier in chemistry, Herschel in astronomy; and the Scot Dr. George Lind, who belonged to the Lunar Society of Franklin's friends Joseph Priestley and James Watt, and who gave Shelley works by Franklin, Condorcet, Lucretius, and Pliny, and started him learning German. While still at prep school, Shelley started experiments with electrical batteries and devices, microscopes, burning glasses, etc., and constructed a small steam engine, which exploded. Ten years later, in 1820, he was to finance construction of a steamboat to work the Bay of Naples. But already at Oxford, Shelley took to writing letters to political or religious leaders, and in them, he forecast the practical use of electricity, new means of heating, irrigation, synthetic fertilizers, and the wide use of air-balloon flight and railroads. Science, he would later predict, "will end African slavery forever."

At twenty, while living in western Wales, Shelley "organized a paying water district" to enable Member of Parliament John Madox, and his engineer John Williams, to build a long courseway/embankment across the swampy delta of a river. This "great work" created a small lake, controlled flooding and created new farmland; it became known as "Tremadoc." Shelley travelled the district raising funds, and during one storm, took the emergency decision to sink a loaded vessel in the breach of the uncompleted dam, saving it. Madox later wrote of

Mr. Shelley's numerous acts of benevolence, his relieving the distresses of the poor, visiting them . . . and supplying them with food and raiment and fuel during the winter.

The pamphlets Shelley wrote, with the exception of *A Defence of Poetry*, were not influential. Their tiny circulation was only enough to incense their aristocratic targets against him. But they show the same quality of mind as his poetry. To Shelley, the most beautiful image was neither lake nor mountaintop, nor carefree child; but rather, a citizenry raising itself to act in the spirit of reason, for freedom and justice. His first pamphlets were *An Address to the Irish People* and the immediately following *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists* (both 1812), in which "I propose an association which shall have for its immediate objects Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland." Shelley's letters show his hope that this would spark a wave of movements for freedom all over Europe. Yet, the slogan of the *Address* was that Irishmen must "Think, Read, and Reflect."

The *Proposals* brings out the idea of a special period, of political mass strikes:

Occasions like these are the proper ones for leading mankind to their own interest by awakening in their minds a love for the interest of their fellows—a plant that grows in every soil . . .

I regard the present state of the public mind in Ireland to be one of those occasions which [we] dare not leave unseized. I perceive that the public interest is excited; I perceive that individual interest has, in a certain degree, quitted individual concern, to generalize itself with universal feeling. . . . I desire that means should be taken with energy and expedition, in this important yet fleeting crisis, to feed the unpolluted flame at which nations and ages may light the torch of Liberty and Virtue!

. . . [T]he hearts of individuals vibrate not merely for themselves, their families and their friends, but for posterity, *for a people*, till their country becomes the world . . .

Shelley ended the *Address* by appealing to the American Revolutionary spirit:

I conclude with the words of LaFayette, a name endeavored by its peerless bearer to every lover of the human race: "For a nation to love liberty, it is sufficient that she know it; to be free, it is sufficient that she wills it."

In 1814, Shelley wrote *A Declaration of Rights* and the far bolder *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*—a public defense of the publisher D.I. Eaton, who had been imprisoned and bankrupted by the Lord Chancellor Ellenborough for publishing Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* in England. This pamphlet included an attack on Lord Shelburne's head of British Secret Intelligence, Jeremy Bentham. Shelley wrote, but did not publish, a fragment of an attack on capital punishment in 1813, *On the Punishment of Death*, in which again the *cognitive* idea of a "mass

strike period” was seen in the opening lines:

The first law, which it becomes a reformer to propose and support at the approach of great political change, is the abolition of the penalty of death.

By 1817, when Shelley published his pamphlet *On the Death of the Princess Charlotte*, the English “Chartist” movement was mass-distributing his poem “Queen Mab,” with its radical Preface. After the notorious “Manchester Massacre” of peacefully demonstrating English workingmen in 1819, the Chartists also took up Shelley’s poetic denunciation of Lord Castlereagh, “The Masque of Anarchy.” This continued for twenty to thirty more years, although Shelley considered his youthful “Queen Mab” a bad poem, and an embarrassment to the cause of truth and reason he fought for.

It is in “The Masque of Anarchy,” that there is heard the first idea of peaceful civil disobedience. Karl Marx would later claim that Shelley was “a revolutionist”; but Shelley wrote in 1819 to Leigh Hunt,

The great thing to do is to hold the balance between popular impatience and tyrannical obstinacy, to inculcate with favor both the right of resistance and the duty of forbearance. You know my principles incite me to take all the good I can get in politics, forever aspiring to something more. I am one of those whom nothing will fully satisfy, but who are ready to be partially satisfied [by] all that is practicable.

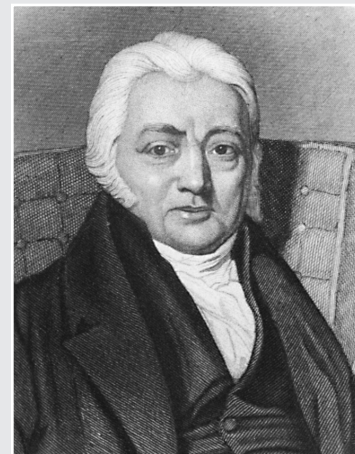
*On the Death of the Princess Charlotte* was daringly written to say that the English people, then being led by the royals in mourning the Prince Regent’s popular and “liberal” younger sister, should instead be mourning the corpse of Liberty, killed by the oligarchy. The pamphlet traced the growing national indebtedness of the British Isles to the 1694 founding of the Bank of England, which had created a “second aristocracy” (of finance, rather than land), and since 1750 had reduced the British subjects’ real standard of existence by half.

Shelley’s most extraordinary political pamphlet was one never published in his century. By the end of 1819, when he wrote *A Philosophical View of Reform*, he was so widely vilified in both literary journals and general publications, that he could not get a publisher to print it, even at his own expense. He had few allies or friends. In Pisa, Italy, early in 1820, an English officer who happened to see Shelley picking up mail, was so incensed to be in the presence of the “arch-fiend and atheist” that he assaulted Shelley with deadly force right there in the post office. Swiss newspapers printed slanders against him, although he had not been there in three years. He carried, and practiced with, pistols. In Wales he had escaped assassi-



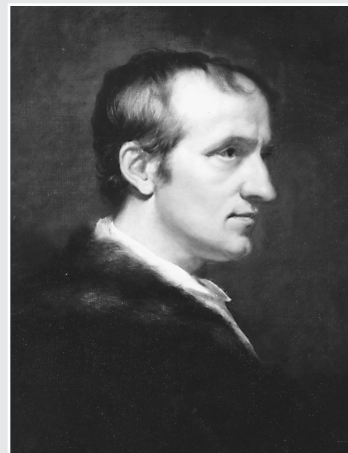
William  
Wordsworth

The Granger Collection



Samuel  
Taylor  
Coleridge

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



William  
Godwin

The Granger Collection

nation, in 1814, by a man whose motives were never made clear. And, when his boat sank in a storm in the Bay of Naples in 1822, drowning him and a close friend, an inquiry established that the boat had been (deliberately or accidentally) rammed and stove in, by another boat which then made no effort to save the victims, nor make a report.

*A Philosophical View of Reform* (“of the existing institutions of the English government”) was the most difficult of statements to make in Europe after the 1815 Congress of Vienna—a direct appeal for *American* principles of sovereign self-government:

The system of government of the United States of America was the first practical illustration of the new philosophy. . . . America holds forth the victorious example of an immensely populous, and, as far as the external arts of life are concerned, a highly civilized community administered according to republican forums. . . . Lastly, it has an institution by which it is honorably distinguished from all other governments which ever existed. It constitutionally acknowledges the progress of human self-improvement.

Shelley was here clearly pointing to the commitment to “promote the General Welfare” in the U.S. Constitution’s Preamble. Aside from reform of the miserable condition of suffrage in Britain, this pamphlet detailed the British national debt, as the means by which the old landed aristocracy had deliberately created a second—financial—aristocracy from its ranks:

If this [second] aristocracy had arisen, with a false and depreciated currency, to the exclusion of the other [aristocracy], its existence would have been a moral calamity and disgrace. . . . But the hereditary aristocracy, who held the political administration of affairs, took the measures which created this other, for purposes peculiarly its own.

The results of this double-aristocracy’s actions and existence, Shelley showed to include the real halving of the English laborers’ standard of life during the Eighteenth century. He called for the reduction, and then abolition of interest to national debt-holders, and for putting the burden of taxation on this speculation. He counselled massive non-violent civil disobedience, as he portrayed it in “The Masque of Anarchy” composed at the same time, if government refused reform. Back in 1812, in a letter about a meeting with Robert Southey (one of the Romantic poets who had “gone Tory”), Shelley had stated the guiding conception of his political efforts:

Southey says expediency ought to [be] made the ground of politics, but not of morals. I urged that the most fatal error that ever happened in the world was the separation of polit-

ical and moral science; that the former ought to be entirely regulated by the latter, as whatever was a right criterion for an individual, must be so for society.

## 1789 and Schiller

Percy Shelley’s view of the nature of poetry and its importance was so much like the view which radiated from Friedrich Schiller twenty-five years earlier, as to be virtually identical. When Schiller wrote, in the “Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man” in 1793,

Art has to take leave of reality, and elevate itself above want, with honest boldness, for Art is a daughter of Freedom, and it will receive its prescriptions from the necessity of the mind, and not from urgent need;

and

[Beauty] must be sought in an abstraction—because it cannot be derived from any concretely given example, but, instead, this abstract notion must justify and guide our judgement of each concrete case—and this abstract notion must be capable of demonstration out of the possibility of sensuously reasoning nature. In a word: it must be demonstrable that beauty is a necessary condition of mankind;

he could have been writing Shelley’s 1820 *Defence of Poetry*, or inspiring Shelley’s great “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” of 1816. When Schiller wrote *The Theatre as a Moral Institution*, he could have been shaping Shelley’s views of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* twenty-five years later, as reported above.

And again, we find this in Plato’s *Phaedo* dialogue, where Socrates passes from discussing his own “music making” as philosopher and poet, to speaking of “absolute beauty and goodness”:

[D]id you ever reach them with any of the bodily senses? . . . Would not that man [reach them] most perfectly who approaches each thing, so far as possible, with the reason alone, not introducing sight into his reasoning nor dragging in any of the other senses along with his thinking, but who employs pure, absolute reason in his attempt to search out the pure essence of things. . . . Is this not the man, Simmas, if anyone, to attain to the knowledge of reality?

Shelley spoke and translated in Greek, Latin, and four modern languages besides English; but he knew German least well, and there is no evidence from his correspondence, that he knew any of Schiller’s historical or critical works, or his poetry. He did know, from 1812 on, the English author who twenty years earlier had begun writing and lecturing about Schiller’s dramas—M.G. “Monk” Lewis—and he was profoundly moved by



Schiller's and Goethe's plays, from which he attempted to translate scenes.

While Shakespeare's plays gathered dust, or were "re-written," in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century England, Schiller had studied and wrestled with them intensely, internalizing Shakespeare's revolutionary ability to make tragedy arise from the truth of human character itself, and of turning points in human history. Goethe's and Schiller's decisions about the *style* of dramatic verse were to have a powerful impact in England.

A century and a half before Shelley and Keats were born, a terrible degeneration of English poetry had been brought on by John Dryden and the so-called English Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> From the 1650's, all English poetry was squeezed into rhyming couplets, of lines of ten sing-song syllables each. Every couplet—virtually every line—was composed as a self-enclosed "sound-bite," marked off by ending rhymes which jingled like the carriage-return of an old typewriter.

Schiller and his German fellow-poets Lessing, Goethe, and Körner had taken as *their* models, the unrhymed "blank verse" of Shakespeare and Milton. They built a new German dramatic theater on the love of justice and human freedom. They boldly wrote Europe's first "non-rhyming plays" (in blank verse) since Shakespeare's time.

Beginning 1788, the plays of Schiller and Goethe were introduced into Britain, first by the Scot Henry MacKenzie and M.G. Lewis. Their effect was profound. Among other things, the English stage saw a revival of full, undoctored plays of Shakespeare!

Schiller's impact was such, that it struck even Sir Walter Scott, the arch-feudalist and bitter opponent of the American republic.<sup>5</sup> Scott wrote, of his own youth, that "like the rest of the world, I was taken in by the bombast of Schiller," and that he then had wished to write plays like Schiller's. Obviously, Scott rejected Schiller's majestic optimism about human freedom and progress, and came to idealize Dryden. But many English poets were liberated from the deadly Augustan sing-song style and its rules. Wordsworth and other Romantics were among the first to be so liberated, although they shared Scott's *resentment* of Schiller's optimism, which set forth the beauty of the human soul as the love of freedom and justice for all men. Samuel T. Coleridge, Wordsworth's Romantic collaborator, became known as translator of Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy of tragic dramas, in 1798-1800. But Coleridge's correspondence with William Godwin shows Coleridge complaining bitterly about having Schiller to translate, and Godwin commiserating with anti-Schiller sentiments. Coleridge wrote

his famous "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" at that time, but very little poetry afterwards.

Byron, from 1800 to 1850 the most "popular" Romantic poet in any language, disliked Schiller's tragedies, as well as those of Shakespeare. Here can be seen one of the sharpest contrasts between Schiller and Shelley, on the one hand, and the Romantics, on the other, showing the universal antagonism between them. Schiller wrote his beloved play *Wilhelm Tell*, as an inspiring and beautiful portrayal of the Swiss Cantons' battle for independence from the Austrian Hapsburg Empire. Byron wrote a long poem arising from the same struggle in history, entitled "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1814). Byron's poem is "spoken" by François de Bonnavard, Sixteenth-century Swiss patriot imprisoned for six years in a Hapsburg dungeon at Chillon, on Lake Geneva (*below* the lake level), whose father and brother died in chains beside him. The verse style of the poem is free and often solemnly powerful, as Byron exploits the horrors of de Bonnavard's captivity, and its pathos. But, where Schiller brought the human spirit of Tell to triumph over all the brutal torments of the Hapsburg tyrant Gessler, Byron did the opposite. In the concluding Canto XIV of "The Prisoner of Chillon," Byron willfully portrays the *failure* of human freedom:

It might be years, or months, or days—  
I kept no count, I took no note—  
I had no hope my eyes to raise,  
And clear them of their dreary mote;  
At last men came to set me free,  
I asked not why, and recked not where,  
It was at last the same to me  
Fettered or fetterless to be;  
I learned to love despair.  
And thus when they appeared at last,  
And all my bonds aside were cast,  
These heavy walls to me had grown  
A hermitage—and all my own!  
\* \* \*  
My very chains and I grew friends,  
So much a long commission tends  
To make us what we are;—even I  
Regained my freedom with a sigh.

So this long Romantic poem ends as if Byron wished to say: "There is no beauty to truth!" And if one reads "The Prisoner of Chillon" again, now with this conclusion in mind and memory, many of the poem's beauties fade. Byron was consistent in this—he despised Keats' poetry. He hated Keats most for his attack on Pope and the Augustan style; although Byron, superficially, was freed from that style himself.

## Reawakening Metaphor

English poetry won, then, a new “freedom of style,” although it is clear that the emotions of Romantic poetry were quite opposed to that emotion of *agapē* which inspired Schiller, who had, more than any other, brought that new freedom. To see this new freedom, we can start—by way of contrast—with a poem by Samuel Felton Matthew, a close personal friend of John Keats, and a serious, though minor, poet. Matthew, like many Nineteenth-century English poets, continued to use the Augustan style of closed, rhyming couplets:

### On Socrates (c.1835)

When he of Grecian oracles confest  
To be of men the wisest and the best—  
The good old Socrates was doomed to death,  
For teaching Greece a more enlightened faith,  
Bidding her spurn tradition’s crafty lies,  
And learn of simple nature to be wise;  
How looked, what said he in that trying hour,  
Which was to prove his spirit’s utmost power?  
The poisoned cup into his hand was given,  
Which firmly taking, he looked up to heaven,  
And said with sweet composure, whether or no  
My deeds have pleased my God, I do not know,  
But this I know, my purpose it hath been,  
And that my purpose hath by him been seen.  
Conscious of this, my soul, upheld by faith  
In his great mercy, fearlessly meets death.  
Erasmus, when he read this, tho’ allied  
To Rome’s proud church, yet all unbigoted,  
Kissing the book, cried out in ecstasy,  
“Ora pro nobis, Sancté Socraté.”

When Matthew wrote this, just so had English poets written for two hundred years, in the mold of Hobbes and Dryden. As Keats wrote, they were taught

. . . to smoothe, inlay, and clip, and fit,  
’Til, like the certain wands of Jacob’s wit,  
Their verses tallied. Easy was the task;  
A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask  
Of Poesy . . . .

Worse, Matthew composed his “On Socrates” without sensing any need for the paradox and ambiguity of Metaphor, to stir the mind as Socrates had, from “facts” or “events,” toward Truth. Matthew juxtaposed two images which were each just like the other: Socrates’ nobility in meeting death; Erasmus’ piety in exalting the noble Socrates.

But Socrates taught, in Plato’s *Republic*, that *only* when human reason is baffled by a *difference* between the possible meanings of events, a discrepancy between

images in the mind, is the intellect moved actively to seek truth. Matthew, in his poem, ignored Socrates’ own principle of paradox—Metaphor.

Now, look at one of William Wordsworth’s best-known sonnets. Here appears a certain degree of freedom of verse, letting the poetic phrases be governed by the poetic ideas, rather than by a sing-song rule of rhyming couplets. But, is there Metaphor, any idea that is not on the literal, “sensible” surface?

### The World Is Too Much With Us (1801)

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! I’d rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

There is a Romantic mourning over national scenery and a vaguely “Greek” nature-mythology. But the mind is not moved from one thought, or state, to another. The Romantics wrote endless such pretty complaints. Here is Sir Walter Scott, who so resented the Schiller who taught him poetry. This is from Scott’s much-celebrated “Lady of the Lake”:

Time rolls his ceaseless course. The race of yore,  
Who danced our infancy upon their knee,  
And told our marvelling boyhood legends’ store  
Of their strange ventures happed by land and sea,  
How they are blotted from the thing’s that be!  
How few, all weak and withered of their force,  
Wait on the verge of dark eternity,  
Like stranded wrecks, the tide returning hoarse  
To sweep them from our sight. Time rolls his ceaseless  
course.

The Romantics might have strayed into the temples of those ancient Chaldean mystery-religions, against which the early Christian church fought. These cults all worshipped two primordial deities—Time, and Space (the Deep)—and taught that all matter, including human life, was cursed.

The following Wordsworth sonnet has still more poetic freedom and lyrical quality—but the same, unchanging state of mind.

### **It Is a Beauteous Evening** (1805)

It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free;  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heav'n broods o'er the Sea:  
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,  
And doth with his eternal motion make  
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.  
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,  
If thou appear'st untouched by solemn thought,  
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:  
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year,  
And worshipping'st at the Temple's inner shrine,  
God being with thee when we know it not.

What difference between the little girl and the Sea? Both given the same “dear and divine” nature, because untouched by human thought! The evening worships . . . the child worships . . . nothing is present at the sonnet's concluding couplet, which has changed in any way from the “natural feeling” of the opening. Here, Metaphor does not operate, banned by the old Hobbesian dogma of “images of sensual experience.”

Next is Wordsworth in another meter, rediscovered in that period: the Italian “sesta rima” (“six-line rhyme”) of Dante and Petrarch. If such emotions as this—“how pleasant is Nature”—were poetry, we were all poets; or, more accurately, we had then no need of poets:

### **I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud** (1807)

I wandered lonely as a Cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden Daffodils;  
Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
  
Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.  
  
The waves beside them danced, but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:—  
A poet could not be but gay,  
In such a jocund company;  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:  
  
For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the Daffodils.

## Keats

What a difference is the Classical character of John Keats' poetry: lyrically and beautifully free in its verse; but also obeying the art of Metaphor. Keats wrote the following dedicatory sonnet for his first major poem, *Endymion*; he composed it in minutes, in a roomful of friends correcting his book-galleys and waiting for the printer's messenger. Keats drew a storm of opposition to the book by dedicating it to Leigh Hunt, the English republican editor and publisher, who had already been imprisoned for affronting the Prince Regent. The sonnet *seems* to have the theme of Wordsworth's sonnet, “The World Is Too Much With Us,” but a singular change takes over the concluding “sextet” of lines. That shift of thought, even in this slight, friendly dedication, is the work of Metaphor:

### **To Leigh Hunt, Esq.** (1815)

Glory and loveliness have pass'd away;  
For if we wander out in early morn,  
No wreathed incense do we see upborne  
Into the East, to meet the smiling day:  
No crowd of nymphs soft-voic'd and young, and gay,  
In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,  
Roses, and pinks, and violets to adorn  
The shrine of Flora in her early May.  
But there are left delights as high as these,  
And I shall ever bless my destiny,  
That in a time, when under pleasant trees  
Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free,  
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please  
With these poor offerings, a man like thee.

Glory and loveliness, then, have not passed away! They lie in the power of human perfectibility, of *change*: beauty is not worshipped in the Nature-god Pan, but in the human beauty of free minds, like that of Leigh Hunt. This change begins at the ninth line. The real “turn” of Metaphor is the delightful irony of “a free, a leafy luxury”—republican freedom of thought!

Given more than a few minutes for a sonnet, Keats created more complex Metaphor from a simple idea—in the following, a woman's remembered beauty. Romantic poets dwelt on images of nature; classical poets transcended them with “longing” for a higher state of mind. Even in the opening quatrain is felt the discrepancy between the relation of time to natural processes, and the transformation of time in human mental processes.

*George Gordon,  
Lord Byron*



The Granger Collection



*Sir Walter Scott*

*Robert  
Southey*



The Granger Collection

To — (1817)

Time's sea has been five years at its slow ebb,  
Long hours have to and fro let creep the sand,  
Since I was tangled in thy beauty's web,  
And snared by the ingloving of your hand.  
And yet I never look on midnight sky,  
But I behold thine eyes' well-remembered light;  
I cannot look upon the rose's dye,  
But to thy cheek my soul doth take its flight;  
I cannot look on any budding flower,  
But my fond ear, in fancy at thy lips,  
And harkening for a love-sound, doth devour  
Its sweets in the wrong sense:— thou dost eclipse  
All my delights with sweet remembering,  
And grief unto my darling joys dost bring.

“The natural sensations” or emotions are confused and baffled, as a memory of human beauty—more powerful than they—carries them away and changes them. Although the senses are sharply aware, they are, at the same time, eclipsed by the presence of memory of human love, which is present but lost. Thus, the more sensual delight, the greater grief and melancholy. Keats constructed one of his later, great odes—the “Ode to Melancholy”—out of the same paradox.

In Classical poetry in all its themes, this is the only real meaning of “images of natural beauty”: they are an ephemeral and lower species than human beauty, which is itself only passing, but points to the *inner* beauty of the mind and spirit, the spark of divine potential which may endure. Classical poets create Metaphor—beginning, as Socrates said, from discrepancy and even confusion among sense images and emotions—to evoke the longing for the more lasting beauty “of the imagination and the intellect.” This sonnet of Shakespeare, for example, was composed of the same metaphor we just saw recreated by Keats:

#### Sonnet XCVIII

From you have I been absent in the Spring,  
When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,  
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,  
That heavy Saturn laughed and leaped with him;  
Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell  
Of different flowers in odor and in hue,  
Could make me any Summer's story tell,  
Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew:  
Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,  
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;  
They were but sweet, but figures of delight,  
Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.  
Yet seemed it Winter still, and, you away,  
As with your shadow I with these did play.



## Shelley

In a Classical poem, there is always opened an interval, or pathway, from a lower state of mind, bound by erotic images and passing desires, to a relatively higher or more beautiful state of mind, characterized by *agapē*. Even if the poem shows the descent of a state of mind *down* that pathway, it creates a longing, in the listener, for the higher, more agapic state, characterized by an unselfish love of truth and of fellow humanity. The poem's pathway is often clearest when, from the standpoint of the concluding couplet, one is made to reexperience the opening lines in a different way.

Helga Zepp LaRouche gave a comprehensive concept of this effect, comprehending both Classical tragedy and poetry, in a presentation to a 1996 conference on education of the Russian State Duma (lower house of Parliament):

In Classical tragedy, the audience can observe whether the hero succeeds in finding a solution on a higher level, to prevent a tragic outcome, or fails to meet the challenge. The audience “sees,” as it were, the method of hypothesis-formation played out on the stage. In a Classical poem, the content is never located on the literal, prosaic level. Rather the composition as a whole contains a metaphor—a meaning—which goes beyond what is said directly. In both cases, the composition addresses that level of the intellect, which is capable of grasping that the pathway of human progress passes through absolute discontinuities; that is, points of absolute separation between one set of basic assumptions, connected to a given domain of experience, and another, different set of assumptions. That is why the experience of Metaphor in Classical poetry involves the same level of reason, which is responsible for revolutionary discoveries in science.

No classical poet is more focussed than Shelley on creating metaphors of such “*longings*” of *human Reason, for higher powers of Reason*. One more sonnet of Keats will lead us to this characteristic of *all* Shelley's poetry. Lyndon LaRouche has often written, that the significance of an individual's life is the “talent” he or she is given from earlier generations (“talent” in the sense of the parable); and that the “test of death” is whether, and how, that individual has been able to pass on that talent, to create, in future generations, a greater one. Here is how Keats, briefly, expressed this:

### When I Have Fears . . . (1818)

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,  
Before high-piled books, in charactery,  
Hold like rich garners the full-ripened grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,

And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

This poem rises above a sense of loss—not of objects of beauty, as in Romantic poetry, but rather of *powers* of creating beauty. The opening lines mock the human desire for fame; but also raise the real fear of death; the fear that one has “one talent which is death to hide,” and may not live to be able to pass that talent on. At the ninth line, a higher emotion appears—the joy of the intellect which a poet feels, while composing poetry which he or she believes *will* endure, and move others.

Keats took his own delight in creating beauty, and imagined *that* as a lover he would lose in death. But at the last three lines, there is a “turn” of Metaphor. “Unreflecting love”—even of one's own creative powers of mind—gives itself up and reflects on a more external potential. The threatening grief passes. This “fair creature of an hour”—the hour of composition, of creativity—does not really belong to the poet, but to future humanity.

Percy Shelley, insisting that the subjects of Classical poetry were the operations of the imagination and the intellect, had this idea of the “talent” of poetic beauty. He wrote that poets, in exercising it, became “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”:

The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry and ministers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature, all other thoughts. . . . Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. (*A Defence of Poetry*).

This was Schiller's ideal of classical beauty and drama as well. Poetic beauty is *not* the precise pointing of images, recalling their sensations and emotions; rather, it is moving and expanding the powers of the mind, through the creation of what Shelley called, in one of his most celebrated odes, “Intellectual Beauty.” In many Classical poems, the power of beautiful song is, itself, made the subject of the poem, to examine the operations of the minds the relations among creative thought, joy (love of one's own creativity and its effects), and *agapē* (love of that same creative potential in mankind and for mankind).

Such a poem, was the song from *Prometheus Unbound*, above. Shelley's works are full of examples of the poet speaking to his own poetry—celebrating the way that creative beauty transforms thinking. “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (1816) is the most famous example. But we can take another simple “Song,” below. It is a set of paradoxes, of a despondent mind—uncreative, erotically fixed in gloom—against the state of creative happiness which it remembers, and longs to reach once again. It is a universal experience of mind. How can such despondence, no matter what it “tries to think of,” touch that creative joy and passion which is completely discontinuous from it, and will not stoop to it nor commiserate with it?

**Song** (1820)

Rarely, rarely comest thou,  
 Spirit of delight!  
 Wherefore hast thou left me now  
 Many a day and night?  
 Many a weary night and day  
 'Tis since thou art fled away.

How can ever one like me  
 Win thee back again?  
 With the joyous and the free  
 Thou wilt scoff at pain.  
 Spirit false! thou hast forgot  
 All but those who need thee not.

As a lizard with the shade  
 Of a trembling leaf,  
 Thou with sorrow art dismayed;—  
 Even the sighs of grief  
 Reproach thee, that thou art not near,  
 But reproach thou wilt not hear!

Let me set my mournful ditty  
 To a merry measure;  
 Thou wilt never come for pity,  
 Thou wilt come for pleasure;  
 Pity then will cut away  
 Those cruel wings, and thou wilt stay.

I love all that thou lovest,  
 Spirit of delight!  
 The fresh earth in new leaves drest,  
 And the starry night;  
 Autumn evening, and the morn  
 Where the golden mists are born.

I love snow, and all the forms  
 Of the radiant frost:  
 I love waves, and winds, and storms—  
 Everything almost  
 Which is Nature's, and may be  
 Untainted by man's misery.

I love tranquil solitude,  
 And such society  
 As is quiet, wise, and good;—  
 Between thee and me  
 What difference? but thou dost possess  
 The things I seek, not love them less.

I love Love—though he has wings,  
 And like light can flee;  
 But above all other things,  
 Spirit, I love thee—  
 Thou art love and life! Oh, come,  
 Make once more my heart thy home!

The poem's “longing voice” travels an upward, changing path to reach the “spirit of delight,” which paradoxically flees. First, the appeal to erotic “true emotions”—sorrowful complaint; righteous reproach; solicitousness of the “trembling leaf” trying to shield the ungrateful lizard from the sun. The spirit of delight is unmoved, no nearer, not even reproached.

Then, deceitfulness, with the “merry measure” of the song itself—at which point (fourth stanza) the meter itself acquires a more musical, rhythmical tone. But “pleasure” is not delight—“pleasure” is erotic, and would cut off the wings of delight and ground it! Then are worked the beautiful images of Nature, and its alleged everlastingness (Shelley is clearly mocking the Romantics). The sad paradox only reappears in the next-to-last stanza. The “longing voice” longs finally for love; not for its images, and not in a mere desire to be in love—no, for *creative* love, poetry. In creative passion the spirit of delight appears at last to come. So, a listener can remember and hear, in the last lines, the opening again (“Rarely, rarely comest thou”), with a new tone: “O come! Make once more my heart thy home!”

And one can still hear that longing voice from the depths, beneath this new “welcoming tone” of joy.

Rarely, rarely did any Romantic poet compose images of the operations of the mind, *and its creative powers of discovery*, in this way. As in the case of Byron's “Destruction of Sennacherib” [SEE Box, p. 56], Wordsworth came close to this domain of *agapē*, only when he accepted a poetic theme presented him from elsewhere. With Byron, it was the book of *Isaiah*, and he fell far short of his model. Even when Byron wrote his well-known little ballad, which is not cynical nor erotic like so much of his poetry,

So, we'll go no more a-roving,  
 So late into the night,  
 Though the heart be still as loving,  
 And the moon be still as bright. . . .

he was, for the most part, repeating the refrain of an older Scottish song, “The Jolly Beggar.”

Wordsworth, in 1805, read a manuscript of a *Tour of Scotland* by one Thomas Wilkinson. There he found the following description, of a metaphor of the human mind's beauty, or creative power:

Passed by a female who was reaping alone; she sang in Erse [Scots-Gaelic] as she bended over her sickle, the sweetest human voice I ever heard. Her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious long after they were heard no more.

A “natural scene,” not by flowery images or down-home country expression, but by virtue of an actual germ of truth—that nature is made memorable by human work and art. The memory of this solitary human voice persists, more beautiful than it actually was, to make the singer a metaphor of creative beauty. With this, Wordsworth wrote a poem comparable to Keats' sonnet, “To —,” quoted earlier:

#### The Solitary Reaper (1805)

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the Vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In springtime, from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
Or battles long ago:  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of today?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er her sickle bending;—  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And when [as] I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

This is not a Romantic poem—it violates Wordsworth's own dogmas of “familiar language, familiar passions, well-known sensations,” from his Preface. It is investigating an unknown quality of a human mind, known only by the beauty it has created.

#### Keats' ‘Grecian Urn’

This germ of a Classical poetic idea which Wordsworth was fortunate to receive from the Scottish traveller, is of the same type as the idea of Metaphor which guided John Keats' great “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” But Keats always worked with Metaphor—with ordered change to more elevated states of mind, the discovery of truth by seeking beauty. Thus, he expressed more powerfully the truth Wordsworth merely came upon for the incident of one poem.

Keats' “Ode” is constructed by paradoxes on the question: “What is that truth of ancient Greek civilization, which is kept so powerfully alive by this painted urn, sitting silently for two thousand years? Where, in the mere ‘scenes from natural life’ painted on it, is that truth?” The “Ode” questions all of the forms of *eros* visible on the urn—natural joys and pleasures, natural sorrows and pains. It proves, poetically, that *agapē* is higher and more true, than these erotic pursuits frozen in mid-act in ancient times.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter—therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

This is the paradox Wordsworth was given: “Will no one tell me what she sings? / . . . / The Maiden sang, / As if her song could have no ending.” Keats finally answers that the urn's truth is nothing else but the beauty of its “silent form.” This form, of art, passes down to us the “fair attitude” of Greek Platonic thought. The “Ode” concludes:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest marches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

This is the method of Classical poetry as Shelley defined it in his *Defence of Poetry*.

# The Principle of Balshazzar's Feast

During their lifetimes and for twenty years afterward, Keats' and Shelley's poetry remained, incredibly, essentially unknown. Meanwhile, the Romantic "Corsair," Lord Byron, was the most popular poet in the world, commanding £2,000 or more, sight unseen, for a major new poem, before the galleys were set. But Shelley instructed him: "time will reverse the judgment of the vulgar"; not just the passage of time, but the fullness of time. There, the relative *truth* of their poetry would be judged, and also the truth or falseness of that moment of European culture which was praising one poet and villifying the other.

Both wrote poetry on that very question: what, of human life, has the power to endure? In Byron's long work, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, there is a brief "Apostrophe to the Ocean," expressing the Romantic poet's idea of what endures—the powers of Nature, and human reverence of them. The opening couplet and final stanza express the character of this interlude,

## To the Ocean (1818)

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean,—roll!  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;  
\* \* \*  
Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee—  
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?  
Thy waters washed them power when they were free,  
And many a tyrant since; their shores obey  
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay  
Has dried up realms to deserts—not so thou,  
Unchangeable save to thy wild waves' play.  
Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow  
Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

But Byron could compose better than such a hymn to Gaia—he *could* write poetry whose subject appeared to be: what, of *human* life and stirring, endures? Such a poem was "The Destruction of Sennacherib." For the power of its imagery, it is widely known and quoted; and indeed, it may be the best Byron ever wrote, in great part because the subject was not his, nor the framing of it. They came from the Bible's *Book of Isaiah*. Yet, there is much more Metaphor in a few lines of *Isaiah*, Chapter 37, than in Byron's poem.

## The Destruction of Sennacherib (1811)

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;  
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,  
When the blue wave rolls nightly on old Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,  
The host with their banners of sunset were seen:  
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,  
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast,  
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;  
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,  
And their hearts but once heaved—and forever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,  
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;  
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,  
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,  
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail;  
And the tents were all silent—the banners alone—  
The lances uplifted—the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,  
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;  
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,  
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

The quatrains are unquestionably beautiful, although with a curious *sameness*. The great power of God acts in a sudden stroke, which is described in every possible effect, and in the final couplet, summarized. The poem is describing a great change, using many images—but is there *change* in the poem itself?

Is God only power and will—or is God also wisdom and perfection, and *thus* the highest cause of the ways of men? To the Romantic poet (and of course, to the British Lord, Byron), God is power and will, almost like Ocean. But to Isaiah, God, in those days of the early Seventh century B.C., was using evil to bring about good; using Sennacherib to try Israel and Egypt, and to bring forth a more-perfected "remnant" of Israel, through the faith and courage of Isaiah and King Hezekiah. Against the blaspheming Assyrian might of Sennacherib, conquerer of all oth-



er cities, who had twice demanded Jerusalem's surrender, and had demoralized and "turned" Hezekiah's own lieutenants,

Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord, saying, . . . "Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath to reproach the living God."

. . . Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying . . .

"This is the word which the Lord hath spoken concerning him; The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee [Sennacherib], and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee."

. . . "And the remnant that is escaped in the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. (*Isaiah* 37).

And God, pleased through such *human faith and courage*, thus smote the arrogance of Sennacherib and destroyed it, leaving his personal destruction to come later, at the hands of his faithless sons. *Isaiah* is Classical poetry, expressing sacred love through the metaphor of the "daughter of Jerusalem." Byron's poem lacks what is manifest in these verses of *Isaiah*: higher state of mind, and lower; the potential of mental and emotional change—perfection.

What, of human life, truly has power to endure? Compare Byron's rolling, Romantic verses, to Shelley's sonnet, "Ozymandias." In it appears the *mind* of such as Sennacherib, and in contrast, that true quality of human mind, which endures:

#### Ozymandias (1817)

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half-sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the hand that fed.  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings—  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

In the opening quatrain is created an image, but an image in the mind of a traveller "from human history," who indicates this image partly by the amazement he manifests. At the words, "whose frown," this traveller's communication changes, becomes more impassioned. More than the mere size of the huge wrecked monument in the desert, he is astonished that Ozymandias' brutal passions still seem to live, "stamped on these lifeless things." And this is the work of another mind, and "hand," from history, that of the sculptor, who saw those passions so well he was able to mock them in stone. What can be known of this sculptor?—what, of his life, endures?

In the sextet—the six-line closing section from "And on the pedestal . . ."—the traveller's mind seems to step back in awe, and the poem "turns" on the great double-irony of the carved words. Though these are Ozymandias' words—carved at his command—at this turning point, this voice is not that of Ozymandias. This voice is mocking him and "his works"—which are obliterated without a trace—but at the same time it is mocking "ye mighty" of Shelley's time, the British imperial elite in its growing power, which saw itself as heir to the power of ancient empires. The voice is mocking the "mighty" of all time.

At the point of the words on the pedestal, Shelley creates a voice speaking above the mental images of the poem, and above time: "Ye mighty . . . despair!" Here there are actually simultaneous voices as in polyphonic music, and only when recording and re-hearing the sonnet, reflecting on it, does the mind recognize each one. The traveller is still telling his story in amazement; the words are those of Ozymandias' arrogant folly; but this ironic voice is that of the sculptor.

So, it is also the voice of the poet himself.

Thus, nothing of the life of Ozymandias endures, although he is the powerful "image" of the sonnet. The artist endures—in the quality of his mind and art, which was able to stamp a truth of life upon "lifeless things."

This is the quality of Metaphor, which Byron completely ignored in what he chose to compose from *Isaiah*: "The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee [Sennacherib], and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Zion hath shaken her head at thee."

## Metaphor Is Beauty

The characteristic opposition of Shelley's poetry and Wordsworth's, of Classical poetry and Romantic, is so indelible that it is recognized in poems of any length, even the shortest. A poet cannot write to pass erotic pleasures on to a reader or hearer, no matter his skill at describing such pleasures, and at the same time seek to work "a spirit of good" in that hearer, nor reach for what Socrates spoke of—"absolute beauty and goodness."

These two, opposed, sciences of the mind stand apart even more sharply in longer lyrical poems. In such, while still speaking "musically," the poet seeks not just the momentary influence of a song upon the hearer's mind. He or she seeks to work an effect upon the listener's memory and understanding, to incite an emotional and intellectual process which will cause both a pleasurable and a moral impact. What kind of pleasure? What kind of moral impact?

Wordsworth's 1802 poem, "The Leech-Gatherer; or, Resolution and Independence," was guided precisely by the method he presented in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which we contrasted to Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. That method was to portray common sensation and common people from rural life, to describe them vividly "as they are." We will see now, that in a longer poem especially, this evokes a *sense of the permanence of the existing order of things*—whatever its injustice and ugliness, it endures, and one atones by making a pact with it. (*It is just the same with today's Romantics, street poets and "rap" singers, for all the complaints they put into their rhymes!*)

"Resolution and Independence" employs an old stanza of Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), used by that founder of English poetry for his beautiful poems on courtly and universal love. The meter and rhyme create a characteristic "turn," or change of thought and feeling, between lines 4 and 5 of the stanza. Here's how Chaucer used it, in his *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>\*</sup> In the first stanza, Criseyde's heart lifts in the night at lines 4-5 (and so does the heart of the nightingale's mate, listening); in the second example, lines 4-5 shift night into day:

A nyghtyngale, upon a cedir grene,  
Under the chambre wal ther as she lay,  
Ful loude song ayein the moone shene,  
Peraunter,<sup>\*\*</sup> in his briddes wise, a lay

<sup>\*</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the Middle English of Chaucer's age, are encouraged to sound the lines out aloud. The relationship to modern English should become clear.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Perhaps

† carried her off

Of love, that made hire herte fresshe and gay.  
That herkned she so longe in good entente,  
Til at the laste the dede slep hire hente.†

\* \* \*

On hevене yet the sterres weren seene,  
Although ful pale ywoxen was the moone;  
And whiten gan the orisonte shene  
Al estward, as it wont is for to doone;  
Then Phebus with his rosy carte soone  
Gan after that to dresse him up to fare,  
Whan Troilus hath sent after Pandare.

In twenty stanzas of "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth seldom uses the potential for change embedded in the stanza by that extra rhyme between lines 4 and 5. But he does use his poetic skill in creating sensually-effective images. In the first three stanzas, he excites a pleasantly natural emotional effect—erotic, fixed, one-dimensional. Then in stanza four, he attempts to bring in *change*—to replace this fixed emotion with its opposite. We present here seven of the first eight stanzas, and then the final two:

*from The Leech-Gatherer; or, Resolution and Independence* (1802)

There was a roaring in the wind all night;  
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;  
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;  
The birds are singing in the distant woods;  
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;  
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;  
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

All things that love the sun are out of doors;  
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;  
The grass is bright with rain drops—on the moors  
The Hare is running races in her mirth;  
And with her feet she from the plashy earth  
Raises a mist; that, glittering in the sun,  
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

I was a traveller then upon the moor;  
I saw the Hare that raced about with joy;  
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;  
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:  
The pleasant season did my heart employ:  
My old remembrances went from one wholly;  
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy!

How then, in the upcoming stanza four, without remembrances, from nothing but pleasant sense-impressions, can Wordsworth—for his moral purposes in this poem—cause sadness to appear? He *asserts* it. We sense that the poem is suspended, or evaporated, while we receive an *explanation in logical terms*, as to why the poet

suddenly feels “low.” In stanzas five and six this explanation is extended and “explained.” By the time the old Man, of the rural People, appears, and the poem “restarts,” it had broken down completely, lost all semblance of beauty:

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might  
Of joy in minds that can no further go,  
As high as we have mounted in delight  
In our dejection do we sink as low,  
To me that morning did it happen so;  
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;  
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could  
name.

I heard the Skylark warbling in the sky;  
And I bethought me of the playful Hare:  
Even such a happy child of earth am I;  
Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;  
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;  
But there may come another day to me—  
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,  
As if life’s business were a summer mood:  
As if all needful things would come unsought  
To genial faith, still rich in genial good:  
But how can He expect that others should  
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call  
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

\* \* \*

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,  
A leading from above, a something given,  
Yet it befell, that, in this lovely place,  
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,  
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven  
I saw a Man before me unawares:  
The oldest man he seemed who ever wore gray hairs.

Why this breakdown in the poetic effect created in the opening stanzas? Because these stanzas, pleasant and well-drawn as they are, have within them no principle of change, no potential pathway for a shift in state of mind. They have no quality of Metaphor; and *without using Metaphor, it is not possible to make the poem’s listener experience a change in mental and emotional state*, no matter how you “describe it.” Let us again go to the *Phaedo* dialogue of Shelley’s beloved poet, Plato:

SOCRATES: If a man, when he has heard or seen, or in any other way perceived a thing, knows not only that thing, but also has a perception of some other thing, the knowledge of which is not the same, but different. . . .

CEBES: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Let me give you an example. Knowledge of a

man is different from knowledge of a lyre.

CEBES: Of course.

SOCRATES: Well, you know that a lover, when he sees a lyre or a cloak or anything else which his beloved is wont to use, perceives the lyre, and in his mind, receives an image of the boy to whom the lyre belongs. . . . [R]ecollection is caused by like things and also by unlike things. . . .

Socrates was describing Metaphor: as when Shakespeare, in his sonnet about the sights of Spring when his lover was absent, wrote, “As with your shadow, I with these did play”; as when Keats recalled the memory of a woman’s beauty, and said his mind was “snared by the unglowing of thy hand.”

In this twenty-stanza narrative poem, Wordsworth thought to *describe* a mind dejected when it had been delighted. But Shelley, in a “song” we saw earlier, *created* that mental image in one six-line stanza, as Wordsworth did not do in 150 lines:

Rarely, rarely cometh thou,  
Spirit of delight!  
Wherefore hast thou left me now  
Many a day and night?  
Many a weary night and day  
’Tis since thou art fled away.

We do not enter into the spirit of a mind in dejection, except by the recollection of a spirit of delight, whose absence and whose memory creates the sadness. That is why Shelley began this “song” not with images, but by directly evoking a spirit or state of mind, and creating a metaphor. Without Metaphor, such *movement of the mind* does not occur. This can be easily proven—here is the same stanza, without Metaphor:

Rarely, rarely now know I  
Anything but woe;  
Sighing now, my nights pass by,  
Sadly the days go;  
Many a weary night and day  
’Tis since last when I was gay.

This is how Wordsworth, or Byron, would have attempted Shelley’s stanza. Do you enter into this described melancholy spirit? Of course not! You cannot truthfully, memorably experience a state of mind, but through the longing for another, different—higher—state of mind. Or, as Shelley and Schiller both wrote about tragedy, the opposite is also true: It is only by the mortification of your sensual, lower spirits—as when you weep to see King Lear going mad, as all truth, justice, and love in his kingdom is being destroyed around him, and no hope seems left—that your higher, intellectual

and moral powers derive pleasure and new strength. This, even in Shelley's little song-stanza, is Metaphor; remove it, and only "pretty description" is left. The fixed mind knows nothing—the mind in motion may know the truth.

Without Metaphor, "poetry" is nothing but virtual reality, pretty images for which a reader or listener may agree to forget the desire for truth; it is Aristotle's *Poetics*. Wordsworth's method of poetic composition specifically denied the use and value of Metaphor, like every English poet since Hobbes. Thus, when Wordsworth, in his fourth stanza, wants to change the narrator's state of mind from joy to sadness, the poem is suspended, and virtual reality enters. "While joyfully observing Nature, the thought of the uncertainty of my future prospects suddenly struck me; at the idea that I might become poor and wretched like other poets, I fell into dejection. How lucky, then, to meet an old Man who *was wretched*, yet remained cheerful."

Acknowledge, that there is nothing more than this in Wordsworth's stanzas four to eight (nor is there anything different, in the eleven stanzas we have omitted before the final two). This quality—of stanzas of pretty or "passionate" imagery, alternating with sections of didactic explanations and "moral" preaching—is the characteristic quality of the Hobbesian Enlightenment, of Dryden, Pope, and later, all the Romantic poets. (*Today we can hear "rap" stars following the same formula: "passionate" obscenities, alternating with "moral" lecturing.*) Wordsworth's poem ends with its state of mind absolutely unchanged from that of its beginning—except, that to the sense of a pleasant, permanent natural order at the beginning, Wordsworth has added the sense of a pleasant, permanent *social* order, in which change and uncertainty are undesirable. And that is just the kind of moral effect he wanted. That is Romanticism.

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,  
The Old-man's shape, and speech—all troubled me:  
In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace  
About the weary moors continually,  
Wandering about alone and silently.  
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,  
He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.

And soon with this he other matter blended,  
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanor kind,  
But stately in the main; and when he ended,  
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find  
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.  
"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;  
I'll think of the Leech-Gatherer on the lonely moor!"

By contrast, see how the mind of Shakespeare's King Lear *is moved to reach out, and change*, when he meets a "poor beggar" in the storm on the heath:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.

This too is Metaphor; mental change is necessary for the formation of any truthful idea, as Socrates said, from the perception of "like things and unlike things" at the same time. Now, from the recollection of Shelley's song, "Rarely, rarely comest thou," move to one of his great symphonies on the same theme—the power of *agapē* to move the mind and change the world. The "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" states from its opening line its theme, the power of change, inconstancy, transformation. All "images" of the poem are subordinate to this power of change, which is its subject from the first stanza.

Proceeding through the stanzas, this power of transformation is itself repeatedly transformed: from the mere mutability of physical appearances ("nothing endures but change itself"); to the inconstancy of human fortunes; to the changes in human understanding; to the power of human inspiration to change physical reality; to the transformation of the human condition itself. Through the "Hymn," Shelley invokes the transformation of the mere power of change—Metaphor—into the power of perfection, which is Beauty. So, it is an epitome of Shelley's extraordinary life's work.

## NOTES

1. See my "John Keats vs. the Enlightenment," *Fidelio*, Fall 1996 (Vol. V, No. 3), and "John Dryden's Attack on Shakespeare: The Origin of 'Sing-Song' Recitation in English Poetry," *Fidelio*, Fall 1997 (Vol. VI, No. 3). For a general report on the epistemological implications of Venice's Thomas Hobbes, see Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "How Hobbes' Mathematics Misshaped Modern History," *Fidelio*, Spring 1996 (Vol. V, No. 1).
2. Reported by E.J. Trelawney, in *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (1858) (Williamstown, Mass: Corner House, 1975), p. 27.
3. E.g., Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "How To Rebuild the Democratic Party in this Time of Crisis: LaRouche Meets with Civil Rights Leaders in Birmingham, Alabama," *The New Federalist*, June 17, 1996 (Vol. X, No. 23).
4. I have detailed this in "John Dryden's Attack on Shakespeare," *op. cit.*
5. Mark Calney, *Robert Burns and the Ideas of the American Revolution: An Historical Perspective for the Development of Scotland* (Glasgow: Scots for Peace and Freedom, N.D.).a



## Hymn to Intellectual Beauty (1816)

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
Floats though unseen among us,—visiting  
This various world with as inconstant wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower,—  
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain  
shower,

It visits with inconstant glance  
Each human heart and countenance;  
Like hues and harmonies of evening,—  
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—  
Like memory of music fled,—  
Like aught that for its grace may be  
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

2.

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate  
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?  
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
This dim vast rule of tears, vacant and desolate?  
Ask why the sunlight not for ever  
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river,  
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,  
Why fear and dream and death and birth  
Cast on the daylight of this earth  
Such gloom,—why man has such a scope  
For love and hate, despondency and hope?

3.

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
To sage or poet these responses given—  
Therefore, the names of Demon, Ghost and Heaven,  
Remain the records of their vain endeavor,  
Frail spells,—whose uttered charm might not avail to  
sever,  
From all we hear and all we see,  
Doubt, chance, and mutability.  
The light alone—like mist o'er mountains driven,  
Or music by the night-wind sent  
Through strings of some still instrument,  
Or moonlight on a midnight stream,  
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

4.

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart  
And come, for some uncertain moments lent.  
Man were immortal, and omnipotent,  
Did'st thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train, firm state within his heart.  
Thou messenger of sympathies,

That wax and wane in lovers' eyes—  
Thou—that to human thought art nourishment,  
Like darkness to a dying flame!  
Depart not as thy shadow came,  
Depart not—lest the grave should be,  
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

5.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.  
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;  
I was not heard—I saw them not—  
When musing deeply on the lot  
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
All vital things that wake to bring  
News of birds and blossoming,—  
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!

6.

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers  
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?  
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
Each from his voiceless grave: they have, in visioned  
bowers  
Of studious zeal or love's delight,  
Outwatched with me the envious night—  
They know that never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou would'st free  
This world from its dark slavery,  
That thou—O awful LOVELINESS,  
Would'st give what'er these words cannot express.

7.

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
When noon is past—there is a harmony  
In autumn, and a luster in its sky,  
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!  
Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
Of nature on my passive youth  
Descended, to my onward life supply  
Its calm—to one who worships thee,  
And every form containing thee,  
Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind  
To fear himself, and love all human kind.

# Shelley In America

In Britain, continued obscurity (except for the radical Chartist press) buried Shelley's poetry even more deeply than Keats', for decades after their deaths. But in America, their influence soared beyond that of Byron, Wordsworth, *et al.*, from the 1829 appearance of a general edition of Keats', Shelley's, and Coleridge's poetry. Only by Harvard University's influential *North American Review* were the Romantics lionized, especially Byron and Coleridge.

Edgar Allan Poe played an important role, from his first awareness, in 1830, of this "Galignani Edition." Poe had difficulty with the conception of Shelley and Keats, that Beauty—Metaphor—was also the most rigorous Truth. But he knew their method to be superior. Finally in 1848, Poe wrote in the Preface to his essay "Eureka":

I offer this book of truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth, constituting it true.

Poe fought the *North American Review*, and fought "wars" with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the leading American Romantic poet. In one such critique of Longfellow, published in 1842 and then included in Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*, he is speaking as if in Shelley's voice in *Defence of Poetry*:

Poetry is the imaginative, the inventive, the creative. . . . Its first element is the thirst for supernal BEAUTY—a beauty which is not afforded the soul by any existing collocation of earth's forms—a beauty which, perhaps, no possible combination of these forms would fully produce. . . .

He who shall merely sing, with whatever rapture, in however harmonious strains, or with however vivid a truth of imitation, of the sights and sounds which greet him. . . . has yet failed to prove his divine title. There is still a longing unsatisfied, which he has been impotent to fulfill. This burning thirst belongs to the *immortal essence* in man's nature. . . . It is not the mere appreciation of beauty before us, but the striving to reach the beauty above, a forethought of the loveliness to come. (*Graham's Literary Magazine*, 1842) [Emphasis in original]

Poe successively studied phases of Shelley's and Keats' work, eulogized both, while treating Byron with contempt. Other critics in Poe's circle followed suit, especially in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, of which Poe was editor. In an 1845 review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, Poe wrote:

If ever mortal "wreaked his thoughts upon expression," it

was Shelley. If ever poet sang (as a bird sings) impulsively, earnestly, with utter abandonment, to himself solely, and for the mere joy of his own song, that poet was the author of "The Sensitive Plant." Of art—beyond that which is the inalienable instinct of genius—he had little or disdained all. (*Broadway Journal*, May 1845)

Poe understood and praised Shelley's method in this way: that "in these exquisite lines, the faculty of comparison [images—PG] is but little exercised—that of ideality in a wonderful degree." And of Keats, he wrote, "He is the sole British poet who has never erred in his themes. Beauty is always his aim."

The first full edition of Shelley's poetry was published in Philadelphia in 1845, edited by G.G. Foster and financed by Horace Greeley. It sold out in eighteen months, and went through four editions before the Civil War. The leading Philadelphia magazine, *American Quarterly Review*, placed Shelley on the level of Dante and Milton; it said that where Byron's poetry demonstrated youth, Shelley's inspired them with the admiration for truth and moral courage. Poe noted that leading American poets imitated Shelley, most notably William Cullen Bryant and James Russell Lowell; the same poets held Schiller and Goethe as ideals (although Poe did not). Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" was especially loved in America; his only long "ballad-like" narrative poem, it presents, metaphorically, human dominion over nature, in a way which recalls Milton's *Paradise Lost*. (The New England "transcendentalist" Ralph Waldo Emerson disliked Shelley's poetry, but acknowledged, "Shelley is wholly unassuming to me, but his power is so manifest over a large class of the best persons . . .")

The three contemporary poets most read and beloved in America in the Nineteenth century were all Classical composers, although of very different philosophical power. First was Schiller himself; John Greenleaf Whittier, "the slave's poet," who trained himself on Robert Burns' poetry; and Frances E.W. Harper, a freed slave whose books of poetry sold an astonishing 60,000 copies between 1845 and 1885. One of Frances Harper's poems will show their simple but Classical quality—irony, and evocation of the human mind's power of creative change.

## Learning To Read

Very soon the Yankee teachers  
Came down and set up school;  
But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,—  
It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide  
Book learning from our eyes;  
Knowledge didn't agree with slavery—  
'T would make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal  
A little from the book,  
And put the words together,  
And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,  
Who took pot liquor fat,  
And greased the pages of his book,  
And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen  
The leaves upon his head,  
He'd have thought them greasy papers,  
And nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,  
Who heard the children spell,  
And picked the words right up by heart,  
And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending  
The Yankee teachers down,  
And they stood right up and helped us,  
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,  
For the precious words it said,  
But when I begun to learn it,  
Folks just shook their heads.

And said, there is no use trying,  
Oh! Chloe, you're too late!  
But as I was rising sixty,  
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped 'til I could read  
The hymns and testament.

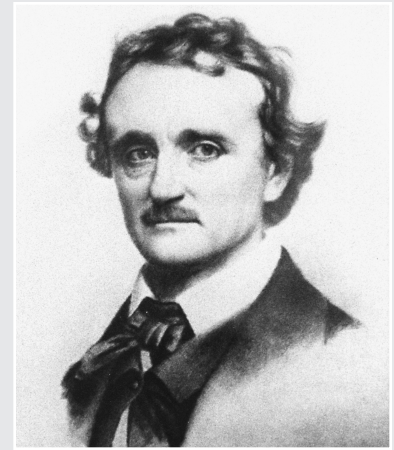
Then I got a little cabin,  
A place to call my own,  
And I felt as independent  
As the queen upon her throne!

After Frances Harper came the extraordinary African-American writers William L. Chesnut, the author of tragedies in novel form, and the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar's poem "The Lesson" immediately evokes Shelley's song, "Rarely, rarely comest thou!" It is the same Socratic dialogue between states of mind: sorrow; creative art in song; joy; and *agapē*.

**The Lesson** (1900)

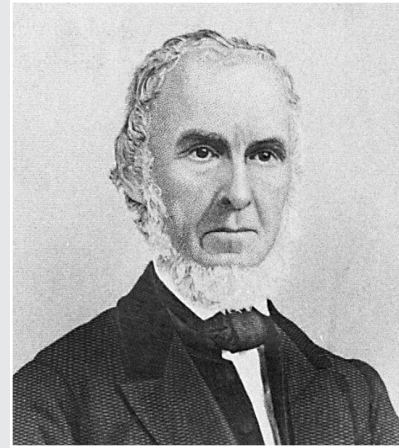
My cot was down by a cypress grove,  
And I sat by my window the whole night long,  
And heard well up, from the deep, dark wood,  
The mockingbird's passionate song.

And I thought of myself so sad and done,  
And my life's cold winter, that knew no spring;



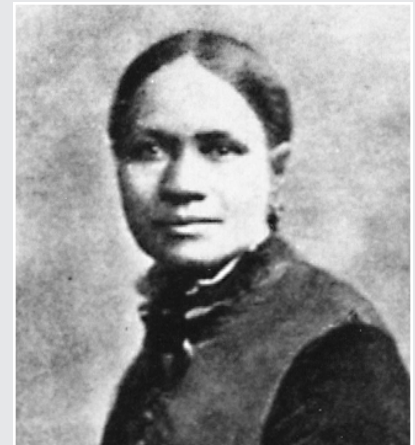
*Edgar Allan  
Poe*

EIRNS/Alan Yue



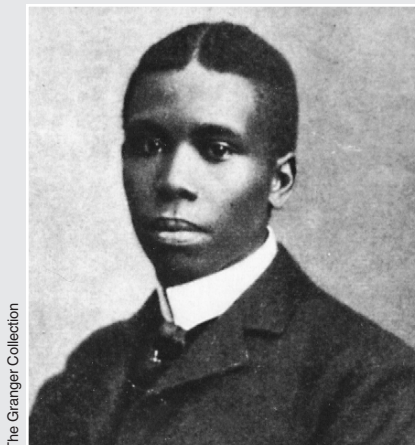
*John Greenleaf  
Whittier*

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



*Frances E.W.  
Harper*

The Granger Collection



*Paul Lawrence  
Dunbar*

The Granger Collection

Of my mind so weary, and sick and wild,  
Of my heart too sad to sing.

But e'en as I listened to the mock-bird's song,  
A thought stole into my saddened heart,  
And I said, I can cheer some other soul  
By a carol's simple art.

For oft from the darkness of hearts and lives,  
Come songs that brim with joy and light,  
As out of the gloom of the cypress grove,  
The mockingbird sings at night.

So I sang a lay for a brother's ear,  
In a strain to soothe his bleeding heart,  
And he smiled at the sound of my voice and lyre,  
Though mine was a feeble art.

But at his smile I smiled in turn,  
And into my soul there came a ray:  
In trying to soothe another's woes,  
My own had passed away.

Robert Frost, born in 1874, may have been the last English-speaking poet capable of composing Classical, metaphorical poetry—although as he lived on, long into the Twentieth century, he rarely did so, adopting the populist Romantic philosophy of Wordsworth's poetry instead. One of Frost's best-known poems is a true metaphor, constructed of paradox—even to the title, as the poem's idea seems to be “the road taken.”

#### **The Road Not Taken** (1914)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And, sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood,  
And looked down one as far as I could,  
To where it bent in the undergrowth—

Then, took the other, just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
As it was grassy, and wanted wear;  
But as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them, really, about the same.

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I'd save the first, for another day!  
But knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted that I would ever be back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh,  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

At the opening, the voice of someone measuring two possible paths: their direction; their “horizon”; which one offers a fairer prospect;

which has been travelled by others? Everywhere, this “measuring” finds ambiguity, small discrepancies: but, is there a real *difference*? We think we hear clear suggestions—but always denied. Finally, this voice admits that its own thought—“It makes no difference; I can undo my choice later”—is untrue. The paradox remains.

Then, abruptly, we hear another voice, as of the conscience, which speaks (as if in surprise) opening the last stanza: “I have to see this choice from the future which these roads are leading to!” And in the last three lines, this “conscience” looks back from the future, on the choice that had to be made, and now sees “all the difference” which was so undetectable before. It springs out all the more strongly, because it was paradoxically not seen, or denied, before. This gives the poem that metaphor of human courage, which stamps it.

Frost went along with the Romantic tide; he had to move to England in 1915 to be published; he wrote scores of populist narrative poems, seeming to seek the most literal, almost “tactile” meanings possible. He wrote, largely, in the mode of Wordsworth's “poetry of plain sensations,” although he had shown his skill at creating its opposite, Classical Metaphor. He chose to hide his devout belief in God, and to allow himself to be portrayed as a “saint of skepticism” after being “discovered” by British critics during World War I. When finally, as Poet Laureate, he recited at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, in addition to his poem “The Gift Outright,” he composed for the occasion Augustan couplets in the style of Pope!



*Poet Laureate Robert Frost recites at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961.*