

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

"Shelley's Spiritual Quest"

Author: Ann Wroe

Source: Temenos Academy Review 14 (2011)

pp. 265-285

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © Ann Wroe, 2011

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity
in the United Kingdom

www.temenosacademy.org

Shelley's Spiritual Search*

ANN WROE

I never supposed I would write a book on Shelley. I never studied him and barely read him, at school or afterwards. But in the summer of 2002, in a garden in Sussex, I was suddenly knocked off my feet by these lines from 'Ode to the West Wind':

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O, uncontrollable!¹

I needed no more persuading. All I knew was that it was suddenly hard to breathe. That very wind seemed to be sweeping through me, practically grabbing me off the garden chair. I was used to the sober, observant company of Wordsworth and the shambling philosopher-presence of Coleridge; those older Romantics had been my reading for some years. But Shelley was provoking me in a way that was urgent and even violent. And I could not tell where it was leading.

That very day, as a matter of urgency, I bought a battered second-hand collection of his poems; and from that moment I carried it with me everywhere. I was on holiday, and every poem was given the backdrop of the huge blue sky and the sea. Perhaps that was the trouble; for when, having journeyed through those vast, roiling, fire-shivered Shelleyan landscapes, I tried to resume ordinary life again, I would find those visions stretching and shining as far as I could see. Shelley once said that the poet could take the reader's mind, dilate it, expand it, and make it burst through its circumference to mingle in sympathy with the universal mind of which it was a part.² He had felt Homer and

* This is the text of a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 25 September 2008.

1. 'Ode to the West Wind', 43–7.

2. *A Defence of Poetry*; in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) (hereafter *Major Works*), p. 679.

Dante do this to him, as he read them by the glow of the fire or in the yellowish light thrown down by stained-glass windows; he did the same to me. He inspired me, or dragged me, into visions and states of being I had not imagined. And when I determined, as I soon did, to write his life, it was this life I meant. His real life.

However else Shelley is viewed these days, it is not as a spiritual companion or guide. Much work has been done to dismantle any remaining traces of the fey 'angel-poet' of the Victorians. He has been replaced by a political radical, a fervent atheist and a promoter of sexual licence. In many ways, I rejoice that the ineffectual angel has gone. But I deeply regret that Shelley's mysticism, and his sheer spiritual force, have been thrown out with that bathwater. The Shelley I encountered was as challenging, fiery and strong a spirit as any I have met. And his message is as vital as any I have heard. The modern world does him a terrible injustice, and does mankind a great disservice, by so compulsively grounding him.

The earthly life of Shelley is quickly told: his birth in 1792 into the Sussex gentry, his schooling at Eton and Oxford, his two rocky marriages and several hopeless infatuations, his exile in Italy in 1818 and his death there by drowning, in a freak storm, in 1822. His was a brief, wild life, full of failure and frustration and, by many standards, bad behaviour. But that trail of destruction and regret is not the point of him, however much biographers may wish to emphasize it now. The point is the poetry—which, though it was often provoked by the French Revolution, or the Greek War of Independence, or the political repressions of Regency England, is about the yearnings and the potential of the human spirit at any time and in any place. Shelley lays out the ideals and the longings, all the strivings to remember and improve, of the consciously imprisoned soul. Wordsworth may have written, in his great Immortality ode, about the shadows of the prison house closing round us. But it is Shelley, alone of the Romantics, who rattles the bars and cries to be let loose into absolute Freedom and absolute Love.

His mysticism is the more poignant, too, because it is so often hidden; because it goes along with so much rationalist defiance, so much arguing and struggling, and so much professed uncertainty that the truths and beauties he sees are real, and can be depended on. A revealing little exchange was recorded by his sailor-friend Edward Trelawny in 1822—a year after the writing of *Adonais*, in which Shelley saw in vision the survival of the dead Keats in 'the loveliness/ Which once he

made more lovely',³ and among the eternal stars. Trelawny asks Shelley, 'Do you believe in the immortality of the spirit?' Shelley snaps back, 'Certainly not; how can I? We know nothing; we have no evidence; we cannot express our inmost thoughts. They are incomprehensible even to ourselves.'⁴ He refuses the easy path of faith; that is the path of established religion, and he loathes it. With Shelley all is questioning, and all is hope.

He is also a spiritual adventurer to the very edge, and, if possible, beyond the edge. He knows he must die to get the answer to his questions, but death fascinates him, making him curious rather than afraid. Is death just a form of sleep? He drifts into that as innocently and thoughtlessly as a child, sliding from his chair to the floor or almost into the fire.⁵ Will death, he wonders, be like one of his waking dreams? And what will happen to him next?

In one of his most beautiful poems he invokes Night, which may bring him sleep or bring him death; he will take either. Night, for him, is the bringer of what is true. He knows that earth-light is false: that even the sun of noon is garish and fake, and that dawn, as he writes in his last, great, unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*, is a rainbow-scarved deception.⁶ Here, despite all Nature's beauty, 'nothing is, but all things seem/And we the shadows of the dream'.⁷ But out of Night the true light—the sun beyond the sun, or the Morning Star—can emerge and shine.

Swiftly walk o'er the western wave,
 Spirit of Night!
 Out of the misty eastern cave,
 Where, all the long and lone daylight,
 Thou wovest dreams of joy and fear,
 Which make thee terrible and dear, –
 Swift be thy flight!

3. *Adonais* 379–80.

4. Edward John Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author*, 2 vols (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1878), 1.92.

5. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), 1.77.

6. *The Triumph of Life*, 358.

7. *The Sensitive Plant*, Conclusion, 11–12.

Wrap thy form in a mantle grey,
 Star-inwrought!
 Blind with thine hair the eyes of Day,
 Kiss her until she be wearied out,
 Then wander o'er city, and sea, and land,
 Touching all with thine opiate wand –
 Come, long-sought!⁸

Shelley, of course, was a Platonist. Indeed, he was such a devoted one that he even tried to steer his yacht, the *Don Juan*, with the 'Dialogues' in one hand—perfectly easy, he said, as the one activity was mental, and the other mechanical.⁹ His Platonism always had a distinctly Shelleyan twist, especially with his veiled female idealizations of Beauty and of Love. But he had no illusions about the world of becoming, or about himself. He knew he was, as he put it, 'a spirit trapped in flesh and blood'.¹⁰ His body, his background, his past, the daily facts of his existence, had almost no importance to him. 'Facts', he once said, 'are not what we want to know.'¹¹ 'A story of particular facts'—his words again—'is as a mirror that obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful.'¹² What was beautiful was the spirit within, unconfined by dry words or propositions. What was beautiful (and he came closest to it when he was out on the water in a boat, going as fast as wind and tide would let him) was to suspend time, to stop thought, and to be for just that moment in touch with eternity. Then he knew peace.

But if he could not manage that condition—and perhaps he never could until he died, in a turmoil of wind and water—he could still voyage in higher states of consciousness, and bring those visions to others. Indeed, this is often the only universe Shelley sees. He is the least realistic of all the Romantics; and, at the same time, the closest to Reality as mystics would understand it. Put Shelley in a landscape, and you are more likely to get a wild idealism of it, or an abstraction from it, than any description you could recognize if you went there. On the banks of the Thames, for example, where he wrote *The Revolt of Islam*,

8. 'To Night', 1–14.

9. Trelawny, *Records*, 1.68–70.

10. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), II.434.

11. *Ibid.*, II.277.

12. *A Defence of Poetry; Major Works*, p. 680.

the trees shoot fire; the river flows in silver whirlpools, and its banks are overgrown with unearthly, 'starbright' flowers.¹³ Shelley constantly sees flowers as stars: daisies as 'pearled Arcturi of the earth',¹⁴ hawthorn blossom shining like galaxies in the woods. Unlike Wordsworth, he isn't thrilled by their simple beauty. He acknowledges it, is moved by it, but he has to find other layers of meaning and being. Nature to him is a 'painted veil', a 'slow stain', a 'contagion', on a greater Beauty and a brighter, eternal light.¹⁵ The world he describes, therefore, is hardly ever as it is, but as it might be—or, more strongly, as it could be.

And we sail on, away, afar,
Without a course, without a star,
But, by the instinct of sweet music driven;
Til through Elysian garden islets
By thee, most beautiful of pilots,
Where never mortal pinnacle glided,
The boat of my desire is guided:
Realms where the air we breathe is love,
Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,
Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above.¹⁶

One place in particular Shelley returns to again and again: a landscape of mountains and forests and lawns, of rivers winding through chasms and the wide, shining sea. None of his other dwelling places, in Pisa, or Marlow, or by Lake Geneva, was any more real to him than this. He knows the woods there, full of grassy paths and the song of nightingales; he has gazed into the pools there, bright as 'elemental diamond'; he has slept in ivy-tangled caves and listened to the sea.¹⁷ Most of all he has noticed the light, that electric, aethereal light, golden and blue, which he thinks of as the illumination coming from the Evening Star; and again and again in one very late notebook, as he struggles to describe the exact quality of a purer light eclipsed by daylight, he

13. *The Revolt of Islam* XII. 4605–11, 4747–55.

14. 'The Question', 10–11.

15. 'Sonnet: Lift not the Painted Veil', 1–2; *Adonais* 356, 362–3.

16. *Prometheus Unbound* II.v.88–97.

17. *Epipsychidion* 416–548; 'Lines Written among the Euganean Hills', 335–69.

writes, then deletes, variants of 'sweet evening beams'.¹⁸ In *Epipsychidion* he calls this place 'the wreck of Paradise'.¹⁹ In fact, it seems clear that this is the Eden he remembers, the ante-natal state of bliss.

He tries to pause in Eden; but while on earth, he cannot do so. Besides it is his nature, always, to keep moving and exploring. Shelley compulsively takes journeys, far within himself or far beyond, to the heights or to the depths—which he knows are the same place.²⁰ He writes often, of course, about boats, which he loved. But rather than describing his little green and white punt on the Arno, or his sleek and dangerous yacht *Don Juan*, the vessel he returns to constantly is his astral body: a gossamer boat, a moonbeam boat, the lightest possible, 'one curved shell of hollow pearl/Almost translucent with the light divine' of the soul within it.²¹ In these he takes naturally and constantly to water, or to the mental or metaphysical equivalent of water; and there, in the realm of sleep and dreams, he finds phantoms that fascinate him, because in them something of the heaviness of existence has already begun to dissolve. He calls them 'Intelligences', messengers of a sort, and draws them in his notebooks with strange, wavering outlines, like images viewed underwater.

But most of all he longs—like 'a butterfly, whose million hues/The dazzled eye of wonder views'—to burst from his earthly chrysalis and escape.²² Whenever he can, he takes to the air and views the Earth from there. He knows that, like the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*, experience of Beauty will make his wings grow. I have no doubt that he was with the skylark—*was* the skylark—rising and falling above the Italian meadows, trying to throw off the tug of the earth, loving, 'but he knows not what', as Plato said, when he wrote these lines:

Higher still and higher,
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;

18. *Peter Bell the Third and the Triumph of Life*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 1 (New York & London: Garland 1986), f. 40r.

19. *Epipsychidion* 423.

20. See *Epipsychidion* draft in Bodleian Shelley Manuscript (hereafter BSM) d. 1, f. 102r rev.; cited from *Facsimile of Bodleian MS Shelley d.1*, ed. E. B. Murray, The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 4, 2 parts (New York & London: Garland, 1988).

21. *The Revolt of Islam* 1.323–7, XII.4630–1.

22. *The Retrospect, Cwm Elan 1812*, 126–7.

The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.²³

And here he is in rapture, flying on his poet's wings, in his great 'Ode To Liberty':

My soul spurned the chains of its dismay,
And, in the rapid plumes of song
Clothed itself, sublime and strong;
As a young eagle soars the morning clouds among,
Hovering in verse o'er its accustomed prey;
Till from its station in the Heaven of fame
The Spirit's whirlwind rapt it, and the ray
Of the remotest sphere of living flame
Which paves the void was from behind it flung,
As foam from a ship's swiftness, when there came
A voice out of the deep: I will record the same.²⁴

This constant movement of aspiration, this longing to escape and surpass, is to me the defining quality of Shelley. Like all great spirits, he knows he does not belong, not merely in society but in the world at large. He finds his language misunderstood, 'like one in a distant and savage land',²⁵ and talks of being a novice on the earth, as if he has fallen there from some other place.²⁶ Here is a typical notebook fragment, not attached to anything in particular:

I would not be, that which another is –
I would not be equal below above
Anything human. I would make my bliss

23. 'To A Skylark', 6–15. 24. 'Ode to Liberty', 5–15.

25. *On Love, Major Works*, p. 631. 26. *Letters*, i.220.

A solitude! . . .
 And though my form might move
 Like a [vain cloud] through a wilderness
 Of mountains, o'er this world; I am not of
 Its shadows or its sunbeams – ²⁷

When did it begin—this wandering, this restlessness, and this desire? When did Shelley begin to sense what he truly was? It happened young—when perhaps, as he too surmised, memories of a higher state had not yet faded. As a child, he wrote later, he felt that his nature was ‘dissolved into the surrounding universe’, and the universe absorbed into his being.²⁸ There were no distinctions then, no limitations: he was one with all creation and, he already sensed, at once the centre and circumference of all he saw. To the child, he wrote,

every thing familiar seems to be
 Wonderful, and the immortality
 Of the great world, which all things must inherit
 Is felt as one with the awakening spirit
 Unconscious of itself, & of the strange
 Distinctions, which in its proceeding change
 It feels and knows, and mourns, as if each were
 A desolation²⁹

Again, those ‘strange/Distinctions’, those ‘particular facts’ closed in and separated him from the boundless universe of consciousness in which he felt he rightly belonged. But in solitude and quiet, he could recover it. There was then, he wrote, ‘in the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air . . . a secret correspondence with our heart’.³⁰

27. BSM e. 8, p. 112; cited from *Shelley's Pisan Winter Notebooks, 1820–21. A Facsimile of Shelley MSS adds e. 8*, ed. Carlene A. Adamson, The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 6 (New York & London: Garland, 1992); square brackets represent deletions.

28. *On Life, Major Works*, p. 635.

29. BSM c. 4, f. 11r–v; cited from *Miscellaneous Poetry, Prose and Translations from Bodleian MSS Shelley adds c. 4*, ed. E. B. Murray, The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 21. (New York & London: Garland, 1995); also *Shelley's Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. Geoffrey Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) (hereafter *Poetical Works*), p. 429.

30. *On Love, Major Works*, p. 632.

In a fragment of very late poetry, from 1822, he seemed to describe that childhood state again. He found himself lying by a Sussex pond in the heat of noon, while the 'fire-tailed stars of the world of his brain' flashed behind his drowsing eyes. The universe was *inside*.³¹ He boasted to William Godwin in 1812 that he had read Paracelsus as a boy;³² if he had, he never again referred to him. But he had drawn a sense from somewhere of himself as the microcosm of the macrocosm. In *The Revolt of Islam*, the secret caverns of the mind are filled with the treasures of the earth;³³ in *Alastor*, his poem of his own search for the ideal, his mind is domed with the stars.³⁴

But the most striking epiphany of his boyhood—indeed, of his life—seems to have come when he was 16, in 1809. One May morning, outside a classroom at Eton, he glimpsed—and felt—something so extraordinary that from that moment, in paroxysms of joy and tears, he devoted his life to it. He was touched then by the 'shadow', or the radiance, of otherworldly Beauty, suddenly recognized or remembered from a higher state. From that moment on, he felt impelled to seek and find that beauty in everything he saw—and, much more problematically, in every young woman he met. It became his one desire. And his struggle to recover it became his real life.

What he saw that morning he could never describe explicitly. It was beyond description. It took seven years for him to give it a name, the spirit of Intellectual Beauty, which sounds as if it must have been borrowed from Plotinus; but we do not know that he ever read that chapter of the *Enneads*, or looked in that work at all. Here is the beginning of his 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'.

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
 Floats though unseen amongst 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;

31. *Shelley's 1821–1822 Huntington Notebook. A Facsimile of Huntington MS. HM 2111*, ed. Mary A. Quinn, *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics* 7 (New York & London: Garland, 1996) (hereafter *Huntington Notebook*), ff. 8v rev., 10v rev.

32. *Letters*, 1.303. 33. *The Revolt of Islam* VII.3102, XII.4769–70. 34. *Alastor* 90–94.

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.³⁵

Yet once described, even once sensed, that 'awful LOVELINESS'³⁶ has already gone. What Shelley is describing is its absence, and the keenness of his desire. To paraphrase Plato in the *Symposium*, which he himself translated perhaps better, and with deeper understanding, than anyone before or since, 'Love seeks the Beauty it lacks'. And must seek it always.

The awful shadow of some unknown Power. That 'Power unknown' is invoked several times by Shelley, most notably in his 'Ode to Liberty'.³⁷ But it is juxtaposed there, as it always is, with some mysterious inner source of power. The spirit of Intellectual Beauty seems beyond him, intimated in trees and sky and moonlight; yet it is also, always, within himself. He has only to discover and acknowledge it. 'Man were immortal and omnipotent,' he writes,

Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
 Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.³⁸

Shelley understands at this point that he himself can control, from his deep centre, the world he sees, and can do so with limitless, all-encompassing power, because he is divine. It is the same understanding that informs *Mont Blanc*, written the same year: his mind makes the landscape, and the power immanent in the mountain is his own. Similarly, the transcendent Beauty he longs for is also the Soul of his own soul, '*Epipsychidion*', as he calls it later: what Rūmī called the Beloved. And this is both within him and without him.

That is the first paradox revealed by Shelley's extraordinary encounter in the schoolyard. And the second is equally profound and fascinating. Shelley in fact wrote about it fairly close to the time, in a short and complex poem that was untitled, but has the first line, 'I will kneel at

35. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 1–12. 36. *Ibid.*, 71.

37. 'Ode to Liberty', 231–3: 'Till human thoughts might kneel alone,/Each before the judgement-throne/Of its own aweless soul, or of the Power unknown!'

38. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 39–41.

thine altar'. Not an action we naturally associate with wild atheist Shelley. It ends with this thought: 'Thine, thine is the bond that alone binds the free'.³⁹

The 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' sheds some light on this. Shelley had 'bound himself' to the unknown Power—a power whose closest definition was, quite simply, Love. He was in bondage. Yet this was 'that sweet bondage which is Freedom's self'.⁴⁰ Far from struggling against this restriction, as he did against every other fetter on his life, whether father or teachers or government or marriage, he found that by simple surrender to it his own inner power became limitless, and the spark within his heart was set ablaze. It is this constant paradox that informs his great 'Ode to the West Wind'. By offering himself meekly to the Spirit that roars through existence—a Rudra-Shiva figure of tangled locks and manic dancing, beauty and terror, the 'Destroyer and Preserver'⁴¹—he will be filled with infinite force. And he—and the Wind—will change everything.

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!⁴²

Shelley always leaves himself open to this force. His surrender is apparent in the rough drafts of his poems. He thought it vital to leave 'a vacancy', as he called it:⁴³ to keep spaces open for inspiration and motion to work in a line, just as he could feel the spirit working and moving in the pores of his own body. You can also find, all through his notebooks, little pauses and doodles of leaves and clouds that show him waiting, suspending thought, for the moment when the divine breath will blow over him (his image, again), like the wind in the strings of a lyre.

39. Untitled: 'I will kneel at thine altar'; in *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), Poem 42, line 14.

40. *Queen Mab* ix.76. 41. 'Ode to the West Wind', 14. 42. *Ibid.*, 57–62.

43. *On Life; Major Works*, p. 635.

This apparent passivity, this sense of dissolution in a greater whole, is sometimes held against Shelley, as if it demonstrates weakness and self-pity. And certainly it often sounds that way. Shelley portrays himself as the breaking wave, or the earthworm dragging painfully through the grass, or the dissolving, drifting cloud:

I faint, I perish with my love! I grow
 Frail as a cloud whose splendours pale
 Under the evening's ever-changing glow:
 I die like mist upon the gale,
 And like a wave under the calm I fail.⁴⁴

He knows, however, that this apparent weakness means the very opposite: the possibility of violent, transforming power. By entering the life of other things—'becoming what he contemplates', in a phrase he borrows from Tom Paine—Shelley gets closer, as he believes, to understanding his own potential. And he also dissolves into other forms or elements because he wishes to lose his own limitations: because he wants to transmit, not resist, Beauty and Love. 'Such strength is in meekness', he wrote in *Prometheus Unbound*⁴⁵—the same strength that, in *The Mask of Anarchy*, can overthrow armies and tyrants. We might note, too, that the 'weakness' and 'desolation' of the ghost-poet in *Adonais*, who is himself, are mere ghostly wrappings round 'Power', and round Love.⁴⁶ The spark is already in him. He waits for the fire.

Shelley knew that nothing could summon this power to him. 'A man', he wrote,

cannot say, 'I will compose poetry'. The greatest poet even cannot say it, for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.⁴⁷

This is surely one of the most beautiful pieces of prose Shelley ever wrote. For him the colour and perfume and beauty of the rose, those

44. Fragment: 'I faint, I perish with my love'; *Poetical Works*, p. 660.

45. *Prometheus Unbound* II.iii.94. 46. *Adonais* 280–86.

47. *A Defence of Poetry*, *Major Works*, pp. 696–7.

most evanescent qualities as they seem to be, shadow forth the everlasting soul of the flower. His soul kindles at the divine touch. But after this comes a still lovelier passage that describes the moment of inspiration. It is, Shelley writes, 'the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only as on the wrinkled sand which paves it'.⁴⁸

He called this 'visitations of the divinity in man'.⁴⁹ The phrase is perhaps deliberately ambiguous. Divinity both comes from beyond, and dwells within. And Shelley longs to discover this indwelling power: to see it, feel it, understand it, and thereby to understand himself.

His first explicit mention of it seems to appear in a poem written in 1811 or 1812, when he was eighteen or nineteen, called 'A Sabbath Walk'.⁵⁰ He is striding through the mountains of mid-Wales. Deliberately and defiantly, though it is Sunday, he has no intention of going to church. He is already long convinced that the only God he should kneel to, despite the clanging bells he can hear across the valley, is the one that seems to make of his own heart 'a temple for its purity': the source somehow of all that is wise and good, the necessary end of his devotion, within himself. He calls it Truth, sometimes; sometimes Justice, or Conscience, or Liberty. It is from here, he knows later, that he draws his 'idealisms of moral excellence . . . dreams of what ought to be, or may be', to set before his readers.⁵¹ And in 1822, his last year, he told his friend Leigh Hunt that this deep, hidden source was 'the god of my own heart'.⁵²

He yearned to grasp it. Nothing fascinated and drew him so much as this internal focus of Beauty and Power, so deeply buried under the dross and unhappiness, the 'chaos', as he often calls it, of his human life. His wife Mary pictured him seeking obsessively, plumbing the depths of himself, until the intensity of these meditations 'thrilled him with pain'.⁵³ He had done so years before he met her; he would do so until his death, so that even that sailing accident in the Gulf of Spezia in 1822 can come to seem just another episode in the long, compulsive search.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 697. 49. *Ibid.*, p. 698. 50. *The Esdaile Notebook*, Poem 2.

51. *Letters*, II.96. 52. *Ibid.*, II.394.

53. *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), I.xvii.

Shelley himself did not call these meditations. As far as he describes them, they are active ‘adventurings’, following streams of thought to their source, exploring labyrinth after labyrinth of the caves of the mind, sailing over ‘trackless’ oceans in those astral vessels of gossamer, moonlight and pearl. He emerged sometimes from these searches wild and terrified; sometimes quite subdued; and sometimes with extraordinary things. In *Queen Mab*, for example, he talks of ‘perfection’s germ’ within himself,⁵⁴ which is also that ‘god of my own heart’. The imagery is striking, closer to the Hindu sacred writings than anything we know he read. To this, perhaps, from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*:

There is a Spirit that is in my heart, smaller than a grain of rice, or a grain of barley, or a grain of mustard seed, or a grain of canary seed, or the kernel of a grain of canary seed. This is the Spirit that is in my heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than Heaven itself, greater than all these worlds.⁵⁵

In *Prometheus Unbound*, having plunged ‘through the veil and the bar/ Of things which seem and are’, he glimpsed one diamond shining ‘On the dark wealth of mines’.⁵⁶ How tantalizingly close that seems to Rūmī’s prayer, ‘O diamond in my darkest mine!’⁵⁷ Although Shelley never read Rūmī, as far as we know, he shares with him completely the idea of the heart—the deepest part of himself—as a mirror of divine Light and divine Love.

Here is how he tried to describe it in 1815 or so—having scribbled down first that mere words were completely ‘ineffectual’, and ‘no help’ to him.⁵⁸ He was writing an essay about Love. This, then, is Love: the Beloved.

54. *Queen Mab* v.147.

55. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14; trans. Juan Mascaró, *The Upanishads* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965 and subsequent reprintings).

56. *Prometheus Unbound* 11.iii.59–60, 86–7.

57. ‘Water and Wine’; trans. Camille Helminski in *The Rumi Collection: An Anthology of Translations of Mevlāna Jalāluddīn Rumi*, ed. Kabir Helminski (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), p. 135.

58. BSM e. 11, p. 7; cited from *The Julian and Maddalo’ Draft Notebook: Bodleian MSS Shelley adds e. 11*, ed. Steven E. Jones, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 15* (New York & London: Garland, 1990).

We see—dimly see—within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being but an assemblage of the minutest particulars of which our nature is composed . . . a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity & brightness . . .⁵⁹

When Shelley was reading his favourite Greek playwrights—Aeschylus especially—he sensed this self delineated in them, a being stripped of all but ‘that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires and would become’.⁶⁰ He saw its harmonious and lovely shape in the pure white forms of Greek statuary. And he sought its reflection in every possible piece of water, from rain-puddles to the sea. He was sure that reflections were a purer form of reality, a fixed and eternal form, and that to dive down into the blue inverted sky among the inverted trees would not be to die, but to wake up and live. He walked in that spirit with his love Jane Williams in the spring of 1822, gazing into the forest pools near Pisa.

We paused beside the pools that lie
 Under the forest bough, —
 Each seemed as 'twere a little sky
 Gulfed in a world below;
 A firmament of purple light
 Which in the dark earth lay,
 More boundless than the depth of night,
 And purer than the day —
 In which the lovely forests grew,
 As in the upper air,
 More perfect both in shape and hue
 Than any spreading there.⁶¹

More than this, Shelley never tires of the image of water reflecting fire: the original Platonic or Hermetic image, of course, of the soul glimps-

59. *On Love*, *Major Works*, p. 632.

60. *A Defence of Poetry*, *Major Works*, p. 684.

61. ‘To Jane: The Recollection’, 53–64.

ing its reflection in the watery chaos of existence and falling from heaven to unite with it, to be embodied in it. It almost seems that he prefers to describe the moon and the stars as seen in water, rather than the sky.⁶² And he also seems increasingly transfixed in his last year by the image of the star falling, and the notion of the music of heaven drawing it up again, out of the water, out of the dark. He tries several times in his last notebook to write such a poem, as if it has the urgency of his own story.⁶³

As for the interior search, he could always try to go still further and still deeper, towards that 'embodied Ray/Of the great [spirit] Brightness' that he so loved.⁶⁴ While he was drafting his 'Ode to Liberty' in 1821 that 'embodiment' seemed to take the form of an angel crowned with rays, with its wings folded over its eyes; but the lines were in confusion and Shelley ended by deleting them.⁶⁵ A little further on, he tried again:

Within [the temple] cavern of [the mind of man] man's
 inmost [trackless] spirit
 Is throned [an Idol] so intensely fair
 That the adventurous thoughts which wander near it
 Worship – and as they kneel, [like votaries,] wear
 The splendour of its presence – & the light
 Penetrates their dreamlike frame
 Till they become [charged with the] strength of flame . . .
 They forever change & pass but it remains the same.⁶⁶

That, I believe, was the closest he came; or almost the closest. For we also have the extraordinary evidence of his poem *Epipsychidion* of 1821, his rapturous metaphysical retelling of his journey through, and to, Love. It famously mentions all his best-known amours and is dedicated to Teresa Emilia Viviani, the latest of them. But the essential

62. E.g. *Prometheus Unbound* II.i.17–23; *Queen Mab* IV.24–5; BSM e. 1, f. 7v; cited from *The 'Prometheus Unbound' Notebooks: A Facsimile of Bodleian MSS Shelley e. 1, e. 2, and e. 3*, ed. Neil Fraistat, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts* 9 (New York & London: Garland, 1991).

63. *Huntington Notebook*, ff. 3r, 7v, 8v.

64. BSM c. 6, pp. 68–9; cited from *The Witch of Atlas Notebook: A Facsimile of Bodleian MSS Shelley adds e. 6*, ed. Carlene A. Adamson, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts* 5 (New York & London: Garland, 1997); cf. *Poetical Works*, pp. 426–7.

65. BSM e. 6, pp. 105–3 rev. 66. *Ibid.*, p. 105 rev.

subject of this poem is none of these young women. It is a work meant for initiates, a 'mystery', as Shelley rightly calls it.⁶⁷ And its theme is his search for the Beloved within himself, a spiritual self-examination that ends in the mystical union and translation of the soul. It ends in 'two meteors of expanding flame':

One hope within two wills, one will beneath
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,
One Heaven, One Hell, one immortality
And one annihilation.⁶⁸

We might compare Rūmī on this:

When a man and a woman become one,
That 'one' is You.
And when that one is obliterated, there You are.⁶⁹

Parallels like this naturally make us wonder whether Shelley knew the eastern spiritual tradition. The answer is no, not directly, as far as we know. His only brush with Hinduism came via Robert Southey's 'Curse of Kehama', which he greatly liked, and a peculiar, rather breathless tale called 'The Missionary' by Mrs Owenson, in which the heroine was a Brahmin priestess. Shelley at nineteen was deeply taken with her, but only apparently as far as making her veiled beauty the prototype for all his own idealizations of Beauty and of Love.⁷⁰ Her beliefs he never mentions. Similarly, he seems never to have encountered Sufism: his closest experience of Persian culture came through *The Thousand and One Nights*, and a little Ḥāfiz. Yet again and again, as we have seen, Sufi metaphors and principles—the divine Breath, the mirror of the heart, the search for the Beloved, the dance of the moth round the flame and its eventual annihilation in Desire—appear in his poems. Perhaps the most striking phrase of all is this one from *Prince Athanase*, a piece of pure Rūmī: 'Thou art the wine whose drunkenness is all/We can desire, O Love!'⁷¹ But then again—as in the case of his reading, or non-reading, of Plotinus and Paracelsus—these

67. *Letters*, II.363. 68. *Epipsychidion* 576, 584–7.

69. From *Mathnawī*, trans. Kabir Helminski in *The Rumi Collection*.

70. *Letters* I.107, 112. 71. Fragment 6, 279–80; *Poetical Works*, p. 165.

similarities should not surprise us. For great spirits know, without the need to borrow; and the truth they know is unchanging.

But we might well ask where Shelley had gone, and what had he discovered, as far as he was concerned. He was an atheist, proudly so, never retracting or apologizing. He could not bear the name of God, deleting it with passionate wriggling lines and crosses when by mistake he wrote it.⁷² Yet he had found divinity within, and he also sought, with the most inexhaustible and infinite desire, the divinity without that it reflected; a God that could not be named only because it could never be bounded or described. The closest he could come was to call it Liberty, or to call it Love. Both are capitalized all through his notebooks. On one page he tests them, trying once more to describe what he is seeing, the indescribable:

In man's spirit thou
In Angels thou art love
Thou – Love
Then – thou art – Liberty⁷³

The effort eventually founders in deletions and empty space. Both are the same inexpressible force, and as far removed from radical politics or extramarital affairs as Eternity is removed from the toils of time. This is the One, the liberating ocean of Love, in which he expects—even hopes—to drown.⁷⁴

This divinity once discovered and acknowledged, it could be used to set men and women free. That interior spark could be kindled into union with the transcendent, until Love and Liberty embraced and overflowed the world. We are used to seeing Shelley now as a political poet; indeed, it sometimes seems to be all the modern world takes him for. But this is why, despite all his practical political pamphlets, the revolution he proclaims is going to take so long. The French Revolution, for him, was an example of how things should not be done, in an

72. E.g. *Peter Bell the Third*, f. 27v.

73. BMS e. 7, pp. 6, 10; cited from *The Hellas Notebook: Bodleian MSS Shelley adds e. 7*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Michael Neth, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 16* (New York & London: Garland, 1994).

74. 'The Sunset', 49 (*Poetical Works*, p. 529); BMS e. 9, p. 317; cited from *Shelley's Devils' Notebook: Bodleian Shelley MSS adds e. 9*, ed. P.M.S. Dawson and Timothy Webb, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts 14* (New York & London: Garland, 1993).

outburst of frustration and revenge.⁷⁵ Real political change could not happen until there had been what he thought of as a revolution in morals: until men and women acknowledged the divine force within themselves, and reached out in loving sympathy to ease the suffering of others and make the world anew.

Shelley's revolution was grounded completely in that spark, small as an atom, within the heart. And his own ultimate alter ego, his ultimate self, was not any earthly hero. He saw himself as the spirit, or the agent, of the Morning Star, the revolutionary bringer of Light—true Light, unobscured by daylight, 'insolent and victorious' Light.⁷⁶ And with that Light comes Love. Love, for him, is a revolution-weapon of truly nuclear power.

Shelley's ambitions for mankind are most impressively expressed at the end of the third act of *Prometheus Unbound*. There he famously presents regenerated man as 'sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed . . ./ Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless, / Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king / Over himself'.⁷⁷ Grand words for socialists and even for anarchists; but they are not the end. Elsewhere in that poem he challenges men and women to go further and further: towards realms that are 'unimagined', 'unimaginable', 'unfathomed', 'unascended', 'imageless'.⁷⁸ This is not politics, but mysticism. And it is also Shelley throwing open the gates to the realm of imagination.

Imagination, for him, is the key to everything. 'A man,' he wrote once, 'to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively . . . the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.'⁷⁹ When centre reached out to circumference, 'this wrong world' would be transfigured by sympathy and by godlike creative force.⁸⁰ This was what he did when he wrote poems. His imagination synthesized, ordered, arranged, created, and stripped away with alchemical power the illusions and veils of Nature. Poetry, he wrote,

turns all things to loveliness . . . it marries exaltation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it

75. *The Revolt of Islam*, Preface, *passim*. 76. *Hellas* 344.

77. *Prometheus Unbound* III.iv.194–7.

78. *Ibid.* III.iii.56; IV.244, 284; III.iv. 203; II.iv.116.

79. *A Defence of Poetry*, *Major Works*, p. 682. 80. 'Letter to Maria Gisborne', 160.

touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes It creates anew the universe⁸¹

In the words of his 'Hymn of Apollo', in which the Sun-god is also his own imagination, 'I am the eye with which the Universe/Beholds itself and knows it is divine'.⁸²

We make our world as it is; our imaginations can remake it. Our divinity, traced to its source, does indeed make us 'immortal and omnipotent'. We become part of the essential motive force of Creation; and, after the death of the body, we are pure Love, and Love is us. That is Shelley's message to us: a message that is necessary, in the deepest sense, to our life.

Yet for him there was no easy assurance in these beauties and truths he had found, or in the imaginative power he so consummately used. They astonished him, as they astonish us. But the poet and the man, as he explained once in a letter, were two different natures; though they existed together, they were often unconscious of each other, and 'incapable of deciding on each other's powers and effects by any reflex act'.⁸³ So while the poet saw these things, the man dragged after, querulous and unconvinced. The man Shelley was much too rigorous a sceptic to rest on received or intuited wisdom. In earth's obscurity, he insisted, he could never be certain, and never at peace.

The inescapable Shelley-image, which he created for himself in *Alastor* and *Adonais* and in countless drawings in his notebooks, is of the lone sailor out on the sea. He is venturing, challenging, searching; and though the Breath blows him 'darkly, fearfully afar',⁸⁴ he is still at the helm. He is the centre of the circumference, of all the currents and constellations. And he knows how to steer this boat. His own desire is guiding it towards the apotheosis he is longing for. Between 'the Power unknown' that impels him and his own 'aweless soul' that answers, he finds no difference. They are equally divine; they are one force. Liberty and Love, sought not with faith but with hope: 'Hope til hope creates/From its own wreck the thing it contemplates'.⁸⁵ Though it seems to me—perhaps I am biased—that there is much more than hope in these lines:

81. *A Defence of Poetry, Major Works*, p. 698. 82. 'Hymn to Apollo', 31–2.

83. *Letters*, II.310. 84. *Adonais* 492. 85. *Prometheus Unbound* IV.573–4.

The Light whose smile kindles the Universe,
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,
 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse
 Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
 Which through the web of being blindly wove
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
 The fire for which all thirst; now beams on me,
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.⁸⁶

Nothing could quench this longing. Mary recalled going with him once to the shore where the Arno met the sea, 'a waste and dreary scene' where the empty sands stretched out into the idly breaking waves.⁸⁷ She found it deadly. He, however, was eager to share this wide barrenness with her. The swelling and failing sea stirred a surge of sympathy in him. As he watched it he felt 'his life beyond his limbs dilated', out across the 'immeasurable world',⁸⁸ until he too was immeasurable; until he tasted

The pleasure of believing what we see
 Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be.⁸⁹

86. *Adonais* 478–86. 87. 'Note on Poems of 1821'; *Poetical Works*, p. 663.

88. 'Marenghi', 130–5. 89. *Julian and Maddalo* 16–17.