Shelley's Poetic Thoughts

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To my wife

Preface

A number of books on Shelley have appeared in the last thirty years. This relieves me of the need to justify my interest in a once-neglected poet, but obliges me to explain my behaviour in adding to the already considerable bulk of commentary on Shelley's poems.

Shelley's recent critics may be divided, in a rough and ready manner, into three groups. The business of the first has been to demonstrate the coherence and precision of Shelley's thought as it is revealed in the poems and prose writings. Shelley's knowledge of science, first brought to notice by Whitehead's outlandish suggestion that Shelley had he lived might have proved a Newton among chemists, has been discussed by Carl Grabo, by Peter Butter, by Desmond King-Hele and by G. M. Matthews;[1] his philosophical thought by Grabo, by C. E. Pulos, by J. A. Notopolous, by Neville Rogers, and by Earl Wasserman;[2] and his political thought has been the special concern of K. N. Cameron.[3] Shelley's symbolism, and his myth-making and myth-adapting have also been given close attention. Yeats began this line of inquiry, and it has been pursued by Peter Butter, by Neville Rogers and by Harold Bloom. E. B. Hungerford, Earl Wasserman and Stuart Curran take a more historical interest in Shelley's manipulation of existing mythologies.[4] The third critical approach is to examine the relationship between Shelley's life and his work. This approach is pursued by Newman White in the standard biography of Shelley, by Richard Holmes in his more recent biography, and by a number of critics: Carlos Baker, K. N. Cameron, A. M. D. Hughes, Desmond King-Hele, James Rieger and Judith Chernaik.[5]

The poems have been discussed in relation to their thought, in relation to their symbolism and mythology, and in relation to the man who wrote them. There are good reasons why these approaches should have been pursued. The demonstration that

Shelley's thought is precise, coherent, and embraces both problems of philosophy and hard political realities is an appropriate response to Matthew Arnold's characterisation of Shelley as an ineffectual butterfly, and to the habit of reading Shelley's verse as though it were a meaningless rhapsody. That Shelley often understands natural phenomena with a scientific precision is a refutation of Leavis's charge that the weakness of Shelley's verse derives from the weakness of his grasp upon the actual. When Yeats, Butter and Bloom describe Shelley's technique of symbolism, and his capacity for myth-making, they establish him as one in a line of English poets stretching from Spenser to Yeats himself. The study of the relationship between the life and the works was also necessary if only because criticism of Shelley's poetry has often confined itself to the kind of vulgar, biographical interpretation that does equal violence to the life and to the poems.

Useful work has been done: from most of the critics who have done it I have learned, and to some of them, especially Earl Wasserman, I am deeply indebted. It is not a criticism of, but rather a compliment to, the existing work that my own approach is somewhat different. The concern of most of Shelley's critics has been with the inner meaning of the poems, with, to borrow a metaphor from linguistics, a deep structure of which the individual poem is only one transformation. The reader is led through the individual poem to a larger unity, whether it be a system of thought, a central myth or body of symbols, or a presiding personality. There is a tendency, though certainly not a uniform one,[6] for the study of the individual poem to be a means through which the critic's argument is pursued, rather than the end at which the argument arrives. As a consequence comparatively little attention has been paid to the superficial matters that distinguish one poem from another. Little is said about genres, verse forms, about details of style. Not much is said to elucidate what Wordsworth could be supposed to have meant when he said of Shelley that, though he reprehended many of his principles, yet he was a better artist than any of his contemporaries.

This then will be, I hope in no sense other than I intend, a superficial book on Shelley, a book centrally concerned with Shelley's handling of language and poetic forms. But it would be foolish to attempt a purely formal appreciation of Shelley's

poems for the poems resist such an approach. The best of them force the reader to understand Shelley's manner of saying by reference to what is said, and to understand what is said by reference to Shelley's manner of saying it. Coleridge distinguishes between 'poetic thoughts' and 'thoughts translated into the language of poetry'. Coleridge's phrase 'poetic thoughts' carries a useful ambiguity: it means both 'thoughts within poetry' and 'thoughts about poetry'. The phrase suggests the subject and the thesis of this book. It is not a book about Shelley's thought detached from the poems, neither is it about Shelley's poems devoid of the thought: it is a book about 'poetic thoughts'. It argues that Shelley's poems are successful only when his thought within the poem reveals itself through thought about the poem.

There is still no complete edition of Shelley's work, the authority of which has been generally accepted. I have therefore used the most widely available texts of the poems and prose; *Shelley's Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corrected by G. M. Matthews (London, 1970), and *Shelley's Prose: The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, edited by D. L. Clark (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1954). I have made two exceptions to this. The poem entitled in Hutchinson *The Revolt of Islam* is a censored version of a poem originally entitled *Laon and Cythna*. Neville Rogers prints a text of the original poem, and I have corrected Hutchinson's text by reference to his.[7] The text of *The Triumph of Life* given by Hutchinson is impossibly bad, and I have therefore used G. M. Matthews's edition of the poem published in *Studia Neophilologica*, 32 (1960), pp. 271–309. Parts of chapters 1 and 2 are revised versions of articles that have appeared in the *Keats-Shelley Journal* and in *Essays in Criticism*. I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to re-print them.

I have incurred many debts in writing this book. I am aware that my debts to Shelley's earlier critics are only inadequately acknowledged in the notes, but I see no help for it. The most important debts one is conscious of only generally. In my discussion of eighteenth-century ideas about language I am indebted to C. K. Ogden's *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* and to S. K. Land's *From Signs to Propositions*. My understanding of the function of genre has been largely shaped by Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, and my understanding of poetic influence by

W. J. Bate's *The Burden of the Past*. I owe more personal debts to my teachers Emrys Jones and John Buxton, and to my colleagues Ingrid Swanson, Peter Butter, Robert Cummings and Philip Drew.

Richard Cronin

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1 Language and Genre

Language

Words and Ideas

In September 1800 Coleridge wrote to William Godwin recommending him to write a book on language that would 'destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things: elevating as it were Words into Things and living Things too'.[1] It is a pity that Godwin never pursued the suggestion, for Coleridge was, in effect, asking him to express systematically an attitude to language that, Coleridge believed, distinguished the poetry written by himself and Wordsworth from the poetry of the eighteenth century.

In the autumn of 1800 Coleridge was in a state of intellectual excitement provoked by his belief that he had extricated himself from the confines of Hartleian materialism by recognising the mind as an active rather than a passive principle. His liberation from the similarly restrictive confines of eighteenth-century aesthetics had come earlier, in 1789. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge describes how, when still a schoolboy, he had taken the first step in his education as a poet by realising the deficiencies of the school of Pope. The poetry of that school, he came to think, was 'characterised not so much by poetic thoughts as by thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry', and could be defined as 'translations of prose thoughts into poetic language'.[2] There is an evident correspondence between the 'old antithesis of Words and Things' that in 1800 Coleridge called upon Godwin to overthrow, and the antithesis between thought and language that he detected and regretted in the most characteristic poetry of the eighteenth century, a correspondence even more evident if one remembers that in the terminology of John Locke, the great progenitor of eighteenth-century thought, a 'thing' is classed as an 'idea'.

In Book 3 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke established a linguistic model that dominated the discussion of language throughout the eighteenth century. Locke discusses language in order to dispense with it. His attempt is to distinguish genuine philosophical dispute from disputes about words of the kind that he imagined the scholastics to have confused with philosophical argument. The means he adopts is to insist resolutely on 'the old antithesis between Words and Things'. This is the principle that distinguishes his own work from that of the scholastic philosophers, and the vantage-point from which he can ridicule all disputes that seem to him merely verbal. To use a word that does not signify a specific idea is to talk nonsense; to argue about words rather than about the ideas they signify is to be monkishly absurd.

To Locke's example can be traced the impatience common to many British empiricists, even Hume, with all verbal disputes. But by the end of the eighteenth century there was an increasing willingness to accept that philosophical questions inevitably engaged questions about language, and that the two could scarcely be disentangled. Philosophy either reached its conclusions in defiance of language, in which case the philosopher might lament the lack of, or try to construct, a language compatible with his conclusions, or it would seek answers to its questions from within language, answers inherent in the structure of ordinary language. Godwin announced his doctrine of necessity, and then lamented that it was impossible for a man speaking or writing English to adhere to that doctrine,[3] and Jeremy Bentham seriously considered the construction of a new language free from the defects of ordinary English. Horne Tooke, on the other hand, sought to prove the truth of materialism by demonstrating that all abstract nouns were originally words which described sensible experience. Philosophy for Godwin or Bentham was a project undertaken in defiance of language, but for Horne Tooke philosophy ought to be reduced to a study of language. Locke's *Essay* ought, Tooke claims, to have been entitled 'A *Grammaticall* Essay on *Words* or *Language*',[4] a suggestion that would surely have outraged Locke himself. But for both groups the study of language became a vital concern, for both shared a belief much stronger than Locke's that the processes of language and the processes of thought are intimately connected.

Godwin, Bentham and Tooke in their different ways all share

the interest in language that had developed increasingly during the latter half of the eighteenth century. In particular a new interest had developed in the origin of language, a problem studied by Adam Smith in Britain, by Condillac in France, and by Herder in Germany. The speculations of each of these thinkers tended to integrate thought with its expression, to challenge 'the old antithesis of Words and Things'. Advances in thought might be considered inevitably to precipitate advances in language; or the development of thought and language might be conceived as indistinguishable; or development of thought might be considered an effect of development in language.[5]

Locke distinguished words from ideas, but by the end of the eighteenth century the two were collapsing together, and, as Coleridge's letter to Godwin indicates, the poets were alive to these developments. Pope could write:

> True wit is nature to advantage dress'd:
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

This is a neoclassical commonplace but the priority of thought over expression and the distinction between the two were notions sanctioned not only by the classical rhetoricians, but by Locke and the modern philosophers.[6] Contrast Pope's couplet with Shelley's celebration in *Prometheus Unbound* of Prometheus's gift to man of language:

> He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
> Which is the measure of the universe. (II, iv, 72–3)

One of Shelley's reviewers complained that this was to put the cart before the horse,[7] but the reviewer was exposing his ignorance of the new theorists of language. Shelley might have cited some of the most impressive thinkers of the later eighteenth century as his authorities. Condillac writes 'les progrès de l'esprit humain dépendent presque entièrement de l'addresse avec laquelle nous nous servons du langage'.[8] Bentham insists that 'the correction, extension and improvement of thought' is 'and that to a prodigious degree, a consequence' of 'speech'.[9]

If speech created thought, then, in a real sense, we create the world through speaking it:

> Language is a perpetual Orphic song
> Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng
> Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were. (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV, 415–17)

The chaotic stream of impressions which is our consciousness achieves meaning only through the order that language imposes on it. The primal act of creation, as Genesis records, was the utterance of a sentence: 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light'. In speaking a sentence God transformed chaos into an ordered universe. This is the true sense in which the Word is God.

For Pope then the poet's task was only to express gracefully pre-established and generally accepted thoughts. But for Shelley a poet's speech, not by a loose metaphor but as matter of fact, was an act of divine creation. He quoted approvingly 'the bold and true word of Tasso': *'non c'è in mondo chi merita nome di creatore, che Dio ed il Poeta'*.[10]

The new attitude to language encouraged, as Shelley's quotation from Tasso indicates, a restoration of poetry to the status claimed for it by the poets of the Renaissance. The Romantic poets made claims for their profession more extravagant than any put forward by Pope. And yet their confidence was precarious. When in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley describes language as an Orphic song his tone is celebratory, but he is describing a redeemed world which, we must imagine, is given meaning by a redeemed language. That the English of the early nineteenth century was not such a language is a major theme in the work of the greatest British philosopher contemporary with the Romantics, Jeremy Bentham. If speech created thought then the limits of thought are defined by the limits of language. The grammar and vocabulary of the language are also the grammar and vocabulary of the mind. For Bentham this situation was a cause not for celebration but for dismay.

Bentham's attack on language is massive and far-reaching. It leads him quite naturally into an attack on poetry, for poetry is the most purely verbal of all human activities. Language, according to Bentham, is a pernicious instrument because it accredits real existence to 'fictions'. It allows its speaker to assert propositions which cannot be validated because they refer to

nothing outside themselves. The poet is a worthless individual because he upholds the fictitious in language:

> Between poetry and truth there is a natural opposition: false morals, fictitious nature. The poet always stands in need of something false. When he pretends to lay his foundations on truth, the ornament of his superstructure is fictitious: his business consists in stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices. Truth, exactitude of every kind, is fatal to poetry.[11]

Given that the Romantic poets were fond of making extravagant claims for the value of poetry, the extent to which they assimilated Bentham's attack is surprising. A Benthamite distrust of the fictitious and irrational in poetry was an aspect of the despair to which Wordsworth was reduced by his flirtation with radical philosophers.

> Then I said,
> Go to the Poets: they will speak to thee
> More perfectly of purer creatures, yet
> If Reason be nobility in man,
> Can aught be more ignoble than the man
> Whom they describe, would fasten if they may
> Upon our love by sympathies of truth.[12]

Wordsworth recovered from this scepticism, but it is apparent in Byron when he writes: 'I hate things all fiction . . . and pure invention is but the talent of a liar'.[13] It encouraged a peculiarly schizoid notion of the status of the poet. Shelley, the author of what to the modern reader seems an intemperate celebration of the importance of poetry, could also write: 'I consider poetry very subordinate to moral and political science'.[14]

Bentham was interested in the emotive power of language; how it misleads, confuses, and encourages acceptance of a range of conventional values. It perpetuates moral conventions by imposing a moral value on a word like 'lust', which, Bentham claims, ought only to signify a motive.[15] Latent in language is a rhetoric which works covertly to secure approval for established social institutions:

> Amongst the instruments of delusion employed for reconciling the people to the dominion of the one and the few, is the device of employing for the designations of persons, and classes of persons, instead of the ordinary and appropriate denominations, the names of so many abstract, fictitious entities, contrived for the purpose.[16]

He offers such examples as the habit of referring to the king as 'the crown', the effect of which is that 'in the stead of the more or less obnoxious individual or individuals, the object presented is a creature of the fancy, by the idea of which, as in poetry, the imagination is tickled'.[17]

Bentham's analysis concludes inevitably in an attack on poetry, because the obstructions to clear thought that he describes result from the affective power of words, the poet's great resource. He charges language with covertly marshalling support for established morality, and the established institutions which impose it. He asserts a connection between language and conservatism. And Shelley agreed. In *Laon and Cythna* the evil god rules with the aid of Fear, Hatred and Tyranny:

> His spirit is their power, and they, his slaves,
> In air, and light, and thought, and language dwell . . . (388–9)

Language is one of the means by which the evil god maintains his power, and in *Laon and Cythna* the dominion of the evil god is closely associated with the power of those two conservative institutions, the monarchy and the church. In *Swellfoot the Tyrant* a chorus of priests speak of: 'emperors, kings, and priests, and lords/Who rule by viziers, sceptres, bank-notes, words . . .' (II, ii, 7–8). I do not believe that this means only that the officers rule by written and spoken orders, nor only that they control the press, but that they control language; that language, because it is a conservative force, is one of the means by which established authority maintains its power.

Speech created thought. Language is constitutive of the reality that it signifies. In Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* this led Shelley to celebrate the ordering power of language, an Orphic song. But this is proper cause for celebration only if language imposes on the chaos of our impressions a redeemed order, and to claim that the ordinary English of Shelley's day imposed such an order

on experience was patently false. Bentham implies, on the contrary, that language seeks to impose on experience an Ahrimanic order, the order sought by the conservative evil god of Shelley's Zoroastrian universe. The effort to be a radical poet, Bentham implies, is an aspiration towards a contradiction in terms. Since poets depend on the affective power of words, and since it is that affective power in which the conservative force of language resides, the radical poet is condemned to protect what he detests.

For Bentham the solution was clear: a new language must be constructed free from the defects of ordinary English. This is not a practicable solution for a poet, and yet Shelley entertained it. When Cythna in *Laon and Cythna* seeks to establish a true moral system in opposition to the corrupt morality of her society, she devises a new language in which to conduct her enquiry:

> And in the sand would I make signs to range
> These woofs, as they were woven, of my thought;
> Clear, elemental shapes, whose smallest change
> A subtler language within language wrought... (3109–12)

For Cythna this is a reasonable solution of the difficulty; for the reader of the poem it is less satisfactory. One of the reasons that Blake chose to invent rather than to inherit his mythology may well have been that in this way he could achieve some of the advantages of an invented language, but this stratagem has not pleased all his readers. If we disregard the extraordinary manoeuvres of Cythna and of Blake, then the pursuit of a new language free from the inherited associations that enrich and obscure ordinary language must remain for the poet an impossible dream. Shelley prays for its fulfilment in *Ode to Liberty*:

> Oh, that the words which make the thoughts obscure
> From which they spring, as clouds of glimmering dew
> From a white lake blot Heaven's blue portraiture,
> Were stripped of their thin masks and various hue
> And frowns and smiles and splendours not their own,
> Till in the nakedness of false and true
> They stand before their Lord, each to receive its due!
> (234–40)

Shelley is thinking of the original purity of the language instituted by Adam when he named the contents of his empire, and dreaming that this language might be restored after a last judgement of words (just as Eden will be restored after a last judgement of men), so that words will be stripped of their accreted associations and walk naked once again within a grammatical paradise. But his use of a fanciful myth suggests that he regards this notion as no more than an idle dream. Nor is it clear whether the primeval purity of the language to which he aspires would leave the writing of poetry possible.

The radical poet then had a choice; to write a poetry that tries to work beneath, and in defiance of, the words of which it is composed, or to achieve an awareness of the conservative force of language and engage in a self-conscious struggle against it. Of the occasions when Shelley made the first choice, when he produced poetry which gives every appearance of its writer having given up language as a bad job, the reader of his collected poems will have unpleasant memories. His successful poems are the results of his making the second choice. Shelley's struggles with language take many forms only one of which I shall discuss at this point.

The first canto of *Laon and Cythna* contains an emblem rather than an example of a characteristic Shelleyan technique. A despondent revolutionary witnesses an aerial combat between an eagle and a snake, which ends when the snake is dropped, wounded, into the sea. The snake swims to shore where it is comforted by a woman, another witness of the battle. She asks the young man to accompany her and the snake on a voyage. His reaction is chivalrous:

> Shall this fair woman all alone,
> Over the sea with that fierce Serpent go?
> His head is on her heart, and who can know
> How soon he may devour his feeble prey? (318–21)

For all that he is a revolutionary, the young man is a conventional thinker. He accepts what he has been taught, that the snake is a noxious, treacherous, evil animal. He agrees to accompany the lady only to protect her from the snake. On the voyage, the lady explains to him the origin of the combat he has witnessed. The eagle's proper form is as a 'blood-red Comet', the snake is