

# The Open Court

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Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELE

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From the Curran Portrait

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## SHELLEY—AFTER ONE HUNDRED YEARS

BY J. V. NASH

THE fact that Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in the year 1792, during the height of the French Revolution, furnishes a key to much of his philosophy. It was more than a coincidence that in this same year Thomas Paine published his *Rights of Man*, fled England to avoid arrest, and reached Paris, where he took a seat in the Revolutionary Convention as a delegate for Calais. There he was soon to begin writing his *Age of Reason*. Both of these books, the one political and the other religious, no doubt exercised a marked influence upon young Shelley's restless spirit.

The seeds of revolt, too, scattered in the air by the winds of the Revolution, crossed the channel and at an early date fell upon fertile ground in the soul of Shelley, for he was by nature highly imaginative, receptive to novel ideas, and rebellious toward all forms of outer authority and tradition. The radicalism let loose by the Revolution impregnated his mind during the most susceptible years of youth, when it was in the most plastic state. These influences greatly strengthened the natural bent of his character. The motto of the Revolution—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—became his social creed.

Already at Eton School, which he entered at the age of twelve, he had acquired a reputation as a radical. He was dubbed an *Atheist*, a title which he adopted and gloried in. When he went up to Oxford in 1810, he fell in with congenial companions who encouraged and applauded his revolutionary tendencies. While at Oxford, Shelley published anonymously a pamphlet "On the Necessity of Atheism," attacking the Bible and Revelation, copies of which he sent to all the leading bishops and officials, challenging them to a discussion of the subject.

This pamphlet naturally horrified those into whose hands it fell, and the college authorities quickly identified Shelley as the author. The story is told that he was called into the presence of the principal



of his college, who, in stern tones, delivered an ultimatum to the rash young iconoclast: "Mr. Shelley," said he, "unless you provide yourself with a God of some kind before Monday morning I must ask you to leave Oxford." Monday morning came, but Shelley had no deity to display to the outraged principal; so he left Oxford.

Shelley's defiance of authority and convention we see exhibited in his private life as well as in his writings. The former, the details of which it is impossible to go into here, was a continued protest against the long-established conventionalities and tabus of the social system into which he was born. Among the most spirited of his prose writings is his defense of freedom of the press, in the letter to Lord Ellenborough, a terrific philippic denouncing the imprisonment of the bookseller Eaton, who had been thrown into jail for selling copies of Paine's *Age of Reason*.

"Whence," he asks, "is any right derived, but that which power confers, for persecution? Do you think to convert Mr. Eaton to your religion by embittering his existence? You might force him by torture to profess your tenets, but he could not believe them, except you should make them credible, which perhaps exceeds your power. Do you think to please the God you worship by this exhibition of your zeal? If so, the demon to whom some nations offer human hecatombs is less barbarous than the deity of civilized society. . . . When the Apostles went abroad to convert the nations, were they enjoined to stab and poison all who disbelieved the divinity of Christ's mission?"

"The time," he went on to say, "is rapidly approaching—I hope that you, my Lord, may live to behold its arrival—when the Mahometan, the Jew, the Christian, the Deist, and the Atheist will live together in one community, equally sharing the benefits which arise from its association, and united in the bonds of charity and brotherly love."

In his poetry, Shelley catches more truly than any other poet the spirit of the new age which was ushered in by the French Revolution,—the era of free inquiry and untrammelled criticism which has continued down to our own day. He was the incarnation of the Romantic spirit. As the herald of the modern world of thought, such a distinguished literary critic as W. M. Rossetti ranks Shelley higher than Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, or even Victor Hugo, who he thinks comes next to Shelley in this respect. He says that Shelley excels all the others in his idealism, in the music of his poetry, and in the force of his message—its grip upon the reader, its passion, and the permanence of its impression.

In 1817 Shelley published *The Revolt of Islam*. In this work

he displays a passionate devotion to mankind, crushed under the weight of custom, oppression, and superstition, and he preaches a bloodless revolution.

Two years later, when only twenty-seven, he produced his great masterpiece, *Prometheus Unbound*, which was written amid the ruins of ancient Rome. In Prometheus he represents the human mind bound to a deity which it has itself created, and to which it has given up its own sovereign powers. This god of heaven chains and torments Prometheus and enslaves mankind. Prometheus protests against the tyranny of the heavenly oppressor, and finally Jupiter is annihilated by Demogorgon (Eternity). Prometheus is unbound, rejoins his companion, Nature, and goes on to progress and perfection.

The age in which Shelley lived furnished much fuel, certainly, for the fire of his denunciation. As Mather says:

“He hated shams with ‘the hate of hates,’ and his eye was as quick to discern, and his heart to despise, as his tongue was to scathe them. Looking at the religion of his age, he saw its hypocrisies: priests whose lives traversed their creed, and professors who damned others for disbelieving what they themselves believed in only by rote. Looking at the political life of his age, he saw its corruptness and cruelty; statesmen who retained power by lies and craft, and used it for their own selfish ends. Looking at the social life of his age, he saw its artificiality and insincerity: men and women, married by law, hating one another, and, while true to the bond of the altar, false, awfully false to the bond of devotion and love. All this maddened Shelley, and prompted him to the utterance of much which stung and embittered the smug insincerity of his age.”

And so, it is not surprising to find Shelley denouncing the established religion of his day in such fiery lines as these:

“They have three words—God, Hell, and Heaven.  
A vengeful, pitiless, and almighty fiend,  
Whose mercy is a nickname for his rage  
Of tameless tigers hungering for blood;  
Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,  
Where poisonous and undying worms prolong  
Eternal misery to those hapless slaves  
Whose life has been a penance for its crimes;  
And heaven, a meed for those who dare belie  
Their human nature, quake, believe, and cringe  
Before the mockeries of earthly power.”

And then he cries:

“Religion! . . . prolific fiend,  
Who peopled earth with demons, hell with men,  
And heaven with slaves!”

Far in advance of his age, and long before social reform or socialism had become questions of the hour, Shelley attacked the existing economic order:

“Men of England, wherefore plough  
For the lords who lay you low?  
Wherefore weave with toil and care  
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

“Wherefore feed and clothe and save,  
From the cradle to the grave,  
Those ungrateful drones who would  
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?

. . . . .

“The seed ye sow another reaps;  
The wealth ye find another keeps;  
The robes ye weave another wears;  
The arms ye forge another bears.

“Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap;  
Find wealth—let no impostor heap;  
Weave robes—let not the idle wear;  
Forge arms, in your defense to bear.”

Shelley's religion—for he had one—centered round the ideas of humanity, nature, and freedom. Man was his deity, and nature was the bride of man, while the goal he sought was freedom—illimitable freedom for self-realization in every form.

Although he scorned and despised all the established religions of his day, his soul was filled with a deep yearning for the Infinite. “After the revolt of his youth, and when the wild fires had burned down to steady flame, he turned from the chaos and contradiction of the world without to the complex heart in his own breast.”

He looked out upon Nature, and sought to personify her forces, just as did the early Greeks, but with a difference. He has been described as “the Pilgrim of Nature,” forever wandering in search of a secret shrine, in the recesses of some forest, in the ocean depths, or in the heart of some distant star, where beauty found itself perfectly imaged. In the poem “Alastor,” we find expression of this intense spiritual yearning.

“No one can read his poems with any degree of intelligence, without wondering at the strange beings—demigods and personified creatures—with which he fills his world; and no one can read his life without discovering that these demigods and personified creatures were not so much beings in whom he believed, as creations of his ever-changing feelings after someone, or some thing, in whom he would fain believe.”



All through his poetry, in fact, we find ourselves in an enchanted realm, filled with presences suggested by objects of our world, but which have higher and mystic meanings. Take, for instance, the following passages:

“Through the purple night  
I see cars drawn by rainbow-winged steeds  
Which trample the dim winds; in each there stands  
A wild-eyed charioteer urging their flight.  
Some look behind, as fiends pursued them there.  
And yet I see no shapes but the keen stars:  
Others, with burning eyes, lean forth, and drink  
With eager lips the wind of their own speed,  
As if the thing they loved fled on before,  
And now, even now, they clasped it. Their bright locks  
Stream like a comet’s flashing hair; they all  
Sweep onward.

. . . . .

“These are the immortal hours,  
Of whom thou didst demand. One waits for thee.”

The mystic meaning of such passages is not difficult to discern. We see the charioteers of two kinds, some looking backward in dread, and others eagerly looking forward, as they rush onward with burning eyes and hair streaming like a comet’s tail. “There are the immortal hours,”—immortal hours bearing man ever onward to his destiny. The charioteers looking backward are in dread of the evil past, the wicked deeds which would overtake them, while those looking forward symbolize Hope in pursuit of its heavenly prize.

In personifying the powers of Nature, it might be thought that Shelley was simply paganizing them—an old trick; but the truth is that Shelley’s personifications are not fleshy men and women like the pagan gods and goddesses but ethereal abstractions in which he imprisoned for the moment his elusive spiritual visions.

In his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” he feels the presence of a great Unseen Power in the world:

“The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
Floats though unseen, among us, visiting  
This various world with his inconsistent wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.”

May there not lie concealed in these lines the possible germ of Francis Thompson’s *Hound of Heaven*?

Many students of Shelley classify him as a pantheist, and the pantheistic note certainly sounds clearly in the long paean of his

verse. But pantheism did not satisfy the inner craving of his nature, any more than did sheer paganism. There is another chord, strung to the minor key of yearning, upon which Apollo's finger now and again trembles. He was searching for a great Spirit with which he fain would have communion, a Spirit which knew his inmost heart, and in which he could see the perfect fulfillment of every ideal and every aspiration.

Shelley, although he died at the early age of thirty, and at the time of his death had but few readers (Stopford Brooke believes that there were scarcely fifty) was destined tremendously to affect the thought, not only of England, but of all English speaking lands. A "Shelley Society" came into being to spread his teachings, and to thousands today his philosophy is a source of true religious inspiration. Already he is ranked by many as second only to Shakespeare among the greatest of our poets.

Even Francis Thompson, orthodox Roman Catholic that he was, must needs ransack the resources of human speech in which to hymn the praises of his poetic deity. His *Essay on Shelley*, is generally conceded to be the most marvelous tribute ever paid by one poet to another. It is one of the extraordinary ironies of history that the Essay should have seen the light of day through the columns of that most papal of Roman Catholic journals, *The Dublin Review*.

As a Catholic, Thompson naturally felt constrained to indite an apologia for his idol's heterodoxy. May not Shelley's yearnings for the Infinite, he asks, have been a blind groping toward the True Faith? Let those answer who can.<sup>1</sup>

In Shelley, Thompson sees an "enchanted child," a child such as the present effete, self-conscious, and blasé age could not engender. "An age that is ceasing to produce child-like children," he laments, "cannot produce a Shelley. For both as poet and man he was essentially a child."

Surely there was never a more truly inspired interpretation of an immortal poet than that which shines forth in these glorious lines of Thompson's "Essay":

"He dabbles his fingers in the dayfall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amidst the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hand. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder, and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances in and out of the gates of heaven; its floor is littered with his broken fancies. He runs wild over the fields of ether. He chases

<sup>1</sup> Father Carroll, in the preface to his Gaelic translation of the Rubaiyat, makes a somewhat similar claim on behalf of Omar. Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll may yet find places in the calendar of saints.

the rolling world. He gets between the feet of the horses of the sun. He stands in the lap of patient Nature, and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred willful fashions, to see how she will look nicest in his song.

"This it was which, in spite of his essentially modern character as a singer, qualified Shelley to be the poet of Prometheus Unbound, for it made him, in the truest sense of the word, a mythological poet. This childlike quality assimilated him to the childlike peoples among whom mythologies have their rise. Those Nature myths which, according to many, are the basis of all mythology, are likewise the very basis of Shelley's poetry. The lark that is the gossip of heaven, the winds that pluck the grey from the beards of the billows, the clouds that are snorted from the sea's broad nostril, all the elemental spirits of Nature, take from his verse perpetual incarnation and reincarnation, pass in a thousand glorious transmigrations through the radiant forms of his imagery."

To Thompson, Shelley was, in a deeper and truer sense than even Wordsworth, "the veritable poet of Nature."

All lifeless and prosaic things were changed to glowing beauty in the magic alembic of his genius.

"The coldest moon of an idea rises haloed through his vaporous imagination. The dimmest-sparked chip of a conception blazes and scintillates in the subtle oxygen of his mind. The most wrinkled Aeson of an abstruseness leaps rosy out of his bubbling genius. In a more intensified signification than it is probable that Shakespeare dreamed of, Shelley gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

Shelley's whole philosophy was at heart a spiritual one. He was the prophet of the free and untrammelled spirit. He demanded that all men and women should have true opportunity for the realization and expression of the highest possibilities of their natures, and to attain this goal they must be released from crippling and paralyzing bonds, whether political, economic, or religious.

Over the gulf of one hundred years, his message comes thrilling to us with all the freshness and vigor of immortal youth,—a challenge to dare, to do, and to become, with faces turned to the Dawn.