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Editor of series: Nedeljko Bogdanović, e-mail: nedbog@filfak.filfak.ni.ac.yu
Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU, Tel: +381 18 547-095, Fax: +381 18 547-950
http:// ni.ac.yu/Facta

SHELLEY'S FIRST MAJOR LYRICS AND *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

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Ratomir Ristić

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Yugoslavia

Abstract. *The paper reconsiders Shelley's first remarkable lyric achievements, "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude", "A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", and "Mont Blanc", which preceded and led to his great period and the publication of the lyric drama Prometheus Unbound, unanimously acclaimed as his masterpiece. The three poems and the drama are discussed here with an attempt to unravel those qualities of Shelley's mind, which created images that both fascinate and elude a complete grasp, a mind that moved freely in the realm of abstract ideas, which still carry us away as profoundly human and real. The relevance of Shelley's revolutionary idealism at the end of the millenium deserves, it appears to me, more respect, or, at least, more critical attention than any of the Great Romantics.*

> …I will be wise
> And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
> Such power, for I grow weary to behold
> The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
> Without reproach or check."
>
> Dedication to Mary (for The Revolt of Islam)

> "The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,
> The child of grace and genius
>
> Alastor

The first quotation, taken from Dedication, speaks of the poet's decision, made very early (at Eton, when he was a schoolboy of 12 or 13), to dedicate his life to the lasting

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struggle against all kinds of tyranny and oppression; the second, taken from *Alastor*, Shelley's first remarkable poetic achievement, is obviously a self-portrait. To the common reader Shelley, the high-minded idealist, is primarily known as the author of a number of magnificent longer and shorter lyrics with which he occupies a very high position in English poetry, although his reputation has never been fixed and secure. After a serious decline in the first half of the 20th century due to the hostility of the New Critics and especially the prominent critic T. S. Eliot's verdict that Shelley is a poet of adolescence by whom he "was intoxicated at the age of fifteen" and later found him almost "unreadable" (1933), the last decades of our century have witnessed a reconsideration and reinterpretation of Shelley's work in all its fecundity and variety. Even in 1956 Isabel Quigly writes that "Shelley lives on outside his verse, and continues to attract or repel, as he did when he was alive." Recent generations of critics and scholars have realized that the complexity of his thought and symbolism, the fluidity of his lines as well as the abstractedness of his ideas, together with his idealism and utopianism, deserve a better understanding which demands a close reading of Shelley's entire reading and writing. Thus, T.S.Eliot's verdict has become a thing of the past.

In his lifetime Shelley was savagely attacked, especially from conservative angles, for his unconventional life, for his radical political views and a passion for reform. As a republican and atheist he was an easy target for all reactionary heads. To those who knew him at second hand he was a "vile wretch", "a man weak in genius and character." Even the benevolent and warm-hearted Charles Lamb said once: "No one was ever the wiser or better for reading Shelley." Byron, who knew him better than anyone else, wrote to the publisher John Marray: "You were all brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the best and least selfish man I ever knew. I never knew anyone who was not a beast in comparison." Wordsworth, commenting on Shelley's art in handling various metrical and stanzaic patterns, recognized that "Shelley is one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship and style." Symptomatically, Wordsworth uses the word artist, not poet. Shelley himself was a Wordsworthian at the start, but was later repelled by the older poet's conservatism and religious orthodoxy. He grew disappointed and the disillusionment found its outlet first in the fine sonnet "To Wordsworth" and then in the bitter satire *Peter Bell the Third*. As a lover of nature he remained a Wordsworthian to the last, but his love inspired him to write a completely different kind of poetry. Unlike the other five Great Romantics, with the exception of Blake, with whom otherwise he had a lot in common, Shelley lacked an audience; like the two other younger Romantics, Byron and Keats, he died young and abroad, after years of restless existence.

Those who have closely examined both Shelley's work and life agree that in his personality Shelley was charming, very passionate, of a quick intelligence, moving always towards speculation and seeking overall patterns which could make sense of the particulars around him, an idealist but bitterly sensitive to the imperfections in human behaviour, outraged by cruelty and intolerance (A.D.F. Macrae).

J.R. Watson, opening his chapter on Shelley (*English Poetry of The Romantic Period*, 1985) gives reasons which account for Shelley's poetry being elusive and difficult: "In the first place, it contains a very considerable amount of Shelley's voluminous reading - philosophical, scientific, mythological, religious, and political. Secondly, it frequently attempts to describe that which is beyond description - a depth beyond depth, a height beyond height, a timelessness beyond time, a boundless space, all the features of a universe which we can stretch to imagine but cannot satisfactorily find words to compass.

Thirdly, it is a poetry which moves with great speed; its characteristic effects are not those of logic or fixed clarity, but of a changing sensibility confronting an ever-changing world."

These words are an answer to those readers and critics who found, or still find, Shelley a poet of feelings, intellectually and emotionally immature, and his imagery incoherent, yet admit, though reluctantly, that he excelled in "craftsmanship" and that his lyrics are beyond criticism. They, in fact, show a lack of response to the width and intensity of both Shelley's subject and style as well as the range of experience. Starting from his unworldliness they accuse him of ungrounded optimism and idealism, forgetting his passion for justice and human-heartedness which was with him throughout his life despite his ill health, domestic sorrow, public indifference and critical malignity. Unable, as they declare, to see Shelley's work from Shelley's life, which they find abhorrent (T.S. Eliot is one of them), what they cannot see is that Shelley was "very human in his passions, his errors, his failures, and his achievements" (Noyes). And what is more important, adds Noyes, he had "the poet's penetrative, many-sided mind and soaring imagination."

Every reader of Shelley ought to bear in mind not only the facts of the poet's life but also that the Romantic age was a time of turmoil, political and social injustice and inequality, oppression and corruption, religious and political intolerance, and above all, poverty of the exploited masses. That was a time when the old ways of thought in religion, in morals, in behaviour and in art were being questioned and Shelley responded passionately, thinking of himself as "a Promethean light-bringer whose business was to destroy tyrannies and establish liberty." After *The Necessity of Atheism* his life was almost completely dominated by his passion to reform society.

We have already mentioned that Shelley was a voracious reader with a power to deal with abstract ideas and to relate his thoughts and feelings to the external world and events. His exploration of the interaction between the ideal and the material world made some Shelley scholars read his poems emphasising the influence of Plato and the Neoplatonists. Plato (428-347 B.C.), with his view that "the temporal world is a poor imitation of the real world of perfect eternal forms" and a belief in a "greater reality than that which is present to the senses" must have attracted Shelley. He must have also been attracted to Bishop George Berkeley's (1685-1753) view that "the world is known to men as it is seen (or shaped) by their minds." Such a view represented a downright rejection of John Locke's (1632-1704) theory that the world through a man's senses impresses itself on the mind. If Locke was an influence when Shelley worked on *Queen Mab*, Berkeley led him to Plato. Recent studies, however, show that the influence of Plato is slight in comparison with that of David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish philosopher who, with his skeptical arguments, exposed the false teachings of both Locke and Berkeley.

The other two men, the French thinkers and writers, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Voltaire (1694-1778), the former with his claim that man is by nature good but is corrupted by civilisation, the latter with his indictment of hypocrisy, superstition and intolerance, must have occupied Shelley's thoughts, informing his own attitudes towards the social nature of man. Rousseau's elevation of the world of nature and spontaneous feelings was another element of his theory that appealed to Shelley as it did to other romantic poets. In the British radical political thinkers Tom Paine (1737-1809) and William Godwin (1756-1836), more than in anyone else, Shelley found a firm support for his revolutionary ideas to which he remained true to the last.

After the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, which ended with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (1815), along with the Industrial revolution which had been causing fundamental changes in British society, transforming both the face of the countryside and the way of life of the British people from the second half of the 18th century onwards, England offered "fertile soil for political agitation."

When we speak of the Romantic Movement we usually speak in terms of a revolution in poetry which had been "brewing" from the middle of the 18th century. The Romantics, by assuming the role of the poet as prophet, guide and seer, tried to appeal directly to the reader's imagination. They saw themselves as "part of a revolutionary struggle to remake the world of stale conventions and unexamined authority." By defying orthodoxy, conventions, and all kinds of tyranny, always guided by love, with his masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound* and a number of great longer and shorter lyrics, written in an immense variety of verse forms and a considerably enriched language of poetry, Shelley established himself as a major poet and one of the greatest lyric poets England has had.

* * *

It was with *Alastor* that Shelley began emerging as a great artist. The poem was written when he was only 23, ostracised by society for his desertion of Harriet for Mary, and experiencing a failure of his hopes that life with Mary "would bring unimaginable delight." He also believed that he was dying of consumption. In such circumstances he wrote a poem of "pure idealism" as an imaginative record of his moods and experiences. The title was suggested by his friend Thomas Love Peacock, who translated the Greek word Alastor as "an evil genius." Mary found "avenging fury" as a more appropriate translation.

Mary Shelley, who left us invaluable notes and accounts of many of his poems, in the note to Alastor says: "none of Shelley's poems is more characteristic than this. The solemn spirit that reigns throughout, the worship of the majesty of nature, the broodings of a poet's heart in solitude - the mingling of the exulting joy which the various aspects of the visible universe inspire with the sad struggling pangs which human passion imparts - give a touching interest to the whole… the versification sustains the solemn spirit which breathes throughout: it is peculiarly melodious. The poem ought rather to be considered didactic than narrative: it was the outpouring of his own emotions, embodied in the purest form he could conceive, painted in the ideal hues which his brilliant imagination inspired, and softened by the recent anticipation of death."

In the preface to the poem Shelley explains that *Alastor* "may be considered allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind." The poem is allegorical in the sense that its plot is actually the journey of a youth, the Poet who, led forth by imagination enjoys "the magnificence and the beauty of the external world" and "drinks deep out of the fountains of knowledge, but when he reaches the stage when these objects cease to suffice, he images to himself the being whom he loves." The youth, Shelley's Poet, uniting in himself "the intellectual faculties, the imagination and the functions of sense," attaches them all to his vision and goes on to seek in vain "for a prototype of his conception. His desires are not satisfied and he, blasted by disappointment, descends to an untimely grave."

In the second paragraph Shelley tells us that "the Poet's self- centred seclusion was

avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin. The same destiny also awaits those meaner spirits who, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge and loving nothing on this earth…, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief… they're morally dead… those who love not their fellow-beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave." The preface ends with a quotation from Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*:

> The good die first
> And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust
> Burn to the socket

Echoes of Wordsworth are heard throughout the poem, but it also contains numerous autobiographical elements.

The first fifty lines are an invocation not of the muse but of "Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood," which is Promethean in manner but continues in a tone which is recognisably Wordsworthian:

> If our great mother has imbued my soul
> With aught of natural piety to feel
> Your love, and recompense the book with mine;
> …….
> Mother of this unfathomable world!
> Favour my solemn song, for I have loved
> Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched
> Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
> And my heart ever gazes on the depth
> Of thy deep mysteries.

The reader, acquainted with Wordsworth, readily notices Shelley's tribute and debt to the older poet. Shelley, fascinated by the beauty of the external world, is even more delighted by the puzzling mysteries he would like to penetrate. Interestingly it is his "heart" and not eye that gazes, which is a device peculiar to the Romantics - there is no division between sense experiences, as the effect is the same. What the eye sees finds its physical manifestation in the heart; and what has not passed through the heart can neither be understood nor have any value. Expecting that his love will be requited to help him write his "solemn song", he concludes the invocation echoing Wordsworth from *Tintern Abbey:*

> I wait thy breath, great parent, that my strain
> May modulate with murmurs of the air,
> And motions of the forests and the sea,
> And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
> Of night and day, and the deep heart of man

This is Shelley's statement of mystical, yet ennobling Pantheism. There is a parallelism between Shelley's and Wordsworth's poems. In Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (of which *The Ruined Cottage* is the introductory chapter), the Wanderer tells us the story

of Margaret, who dies destroyed by despair and "excess of hope." In Shelley's *Alastor* there is the narrator-poet who tells us the story of a lovely youth, the Poet who, led by his aspirations, wanders across the world and meets untimely death. Unlike Shelley's Poet, Wordsworth's Wanderer, after having acquired a kind of serenity, lives on.

Alastor is a story of a youth, gentle, brave, and generous, who lived, died, and sang in solitude. Nurtured by solemn vision in his infancy, he led a wandering life. Guided by his imagination he "travels" through the past, meditating on "memorials" and gazing

> … till meaning on his vacant mind
> Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
> The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

He wanders on through Arabia and Persia till he reaches the Vale of Cashmere where he has a rest, stretches his "languid" limbs, falls asleep and

> … A vision on his sleep
> There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
> Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veilèd maid
> ……
> Her voice was like the voice of his own soul…
> And lofty hopes of divine liberty
> Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy
> Herself a poet.

The veilèd maiden talks to him in a dream of knowledge and truth and virtue. When he awakens he finds himself in love with this dream vision, the creation of his mind. Now all alone in the midst of nature he, "driven by the bright shadow of that lovely dream/beneath the cold glare of the desolate night," begins his pursuit of the vision's prototype in the ideal world. The rest of the poem, almost two thirds, is taken up with his vain search for that vision with which he wishes to unite, but consumed by passionate desires he ages rapidly and dies, his aspiration unfulfilled.

Critics usually interpret various episodes on the poet's journey as allegories, attaching to them more or less traditional meanings, or disclosing numerous autobiographical elements such as Shelley's love of boating, his passionate pursuit of learning, his reverence of the past, his deep sensitiveness to noble ideas, his tendency towards self-centred seclusion, his hopeless search for an idealised companion, his intense search for knowledge, his fearlessness in seeking truth, etc. The reading of the poem as Shelley's attempt to project his own experience, as if he were writing a parable of "such a man as he himself, sensitive and idealistic, who withdraws from the harsh conflicts of life and loses himself in the pursuit of an ideal, unattainable in earthly form", seems consistent with Shelley's character. The longings of the self-centred poet's heart remain unsatisfied, the avenging fury, *Alastor*, destroys him yet his destiny is superior to that of "meaner spirits" that he mentions in the Preface.

Whatever our interpretation of the Poet's voyage, Shelley's poem is a powerful statement about a quest and love of beauty, which is never satisfied. The poem may appear diffuse to some readers, yet no reader stays indifferent to the magnificent descriptions of the sublime landscapes reminiscent of the Swiss mountains the poet had

visited the previous year. In the concluding lines, quoting again from Wordsworth (*Immortality Ode*), Shelley, or Shelley's Poet, distances himself from the older poet:

> … Art and eloquence,
> And all the shows o' the world are frail and vain
> To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
> It is a woe too "deep for tears", when all
> Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
> Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
> Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
> The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
> But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
> Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
> Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

For Abrams "both Preface and Poem explore alternative and conflicting possibilities in what Shelley calls 'doubtful knowledge' - matters that are humanly essential but in which no certainty is humanly possible." With *Alastor* Shelley wrote his vision of internalised quest and established the form which served as a paradigm for many poems: Keats' *Endymion*, Byron's *Manfred*, Browning's *Pauline*, Yeats' *The Wanderings of Oisin* and many others.

During his second visit to Switzerland Shelley emerged from despondency. The unearthly beauty of the Swiss mountains and probably a new reading of Plato and Wordsworth led to a spiritual rebirth. The two 'Swiss' poems, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc* were the result of the new idealism that "exalted him."

Hymn to Intellectual Beauty is a bit shorter than *Mont Blanc* and artistically more accomplished. It consists of seven strophes, each made of twelve lines of unequal length, that follow a strict pattern. The poem may be called descriptive but it essentially deals with Shelley's endeavour to answer the crucial questions of man's existence. "Intellectual" is here used in the meaning of "beyond the senses", so that "Intellectual Beauty," as Abrams puts it, is "beyond access by sense experience."

The first strophe simply states the presence of

> 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, -

which makes everything "dear, and yet dearer for its mystery."

That unseen power, in the second stanza, becomes

> 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 vale of tears, vacant and desolate?

The second stanza brings forth the questions to which Shelley is unable to supply satisfying answers. Atheism and "frail spells" offer only doubt, chance and mutability, but only the Spirit of Beauty's light gives "grace and truth to life's unquiet dream." Even love, hope and self-esteem are inconstant and uncertain. However, man would be mortal if the Spirit of Beauty kept with his "glorious train firm state within his heart."

In the fifth and sixth stanzas the poet tells us that he in his youth, dedicated his powers to unravel the mystery which gives the world and life occasional grace and splendour. He has witnesses:

> They know that never joy illumed my brow
> Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
> This world from its dark slavery
> That thou - O awful loveliness
> Wouldst give whatever these words cannot express.

Now that he has passed his noon of life, he prays that the unseen power, the Spirit of Beauty, may supply the answer to his onward life:

> It's 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.

"Fear" here means "hold in reverence" (Bloom). Shelley the lover of humanity is no lesser worshipper of beauty. For George Ridenour (20th C.Views) *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* "is an attempt to account for, or to give an adequate account of, moments of joy and satisfaction which, by comparison with the ordinary level of life, seem to be of a different order, 'supernatural' or 'superhuman.'"

Mont Blanc, the other "Swiss" poem, composed and published in the same year with *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1816,17), unlike its sister poem, is written in blank verse and is a bit longer (144 lines), grouped in five verse paragraphs. Blank verse, however melodious, is very hard to follow, due to the long sentences and complicated syntax which make this magnificent and difficult poem to an ordinary reader even more difficult. Its images, let alone its meaning, can be grasped only after several readings. Shelley himself left us in his letters from Switzerland some valuable records concerning its composition: "it was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe; and, as an undisciplined overflowing of the soul, rests its claim to a probation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang." In a letter to Peacock Shelley wrote: "the immensity of these aerial summits excited… a sentiment of ecstatic wonder… it all pressed home to our regard and to our imagination… Nature was the poet whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest… One would think that Mont Blanc was a living being and that the frozen blood forever circulated through his stony veins." As the subtitle, 'lines written in the vale of Chamouni', says the poem was inspired by the view of Mont Blanc and its surrounding peaks and valleys during his lingering in the valley of the river Arve that flows through the valley of Chamonix.

Surprisingly, the Ravine of Arve is first addressed in the first line of the second section and Mont Blanc is held back until line 61. The first section, consisting of only 11 lines, however abstract and general, through the statements that appear paradoxical, states the poet's concern to explore the relationship between the human mind and external reality:

> The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
> Now dark - now glittering - now reflecting gloom -
> Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
> The source of human thought its tribute brings
> Of waters, -…

The universe of things is everlasting yet it flows through the mind and it is in the mind that it proves its existence. Thing-thought relationship is established; the image of flow with "a feeble brook", standing for the individual human mind is fully realised. The perceived reality, as a portion of the manifestation of the universal mind, is not given any concrete form but contains the stuff out of which the "edifice" will be built. Human thought has its source in "secret springs" high up in the mountain, over whose rocks "a vast river ceaselessly bursts and raves". Thus, human thought and the vast river dominate the scene, which announces the dramatic character of the poem. When we say dramatic we do not overlook its lyrical virtues but simply imply that Shelley's philosophic endeavour to understand "the universe of things takes precedence over lyricism and description".

The second section opens with an address to the Ravine "dark and deep" through which the River Arve rushes. The scene is awe-inspiring, with the power in the form of the River which takes its source in the glaciers on the mountain. The objective description of the scene in which everything is in motion is interrupted by yet another address: "Dizzy Ravine", which introduces a personal note and the rest of the section concerns the effects of that external world upon the poet's mind, through which " a legion of wild thoughts" flows exactly as the wild streams flow down the mountain to form that immense power, the River Arve. Through his reflection on the mind which "passively renders and receives fast influencings" and "floats above the darkness" of the Arve, he becomes aware of the continuous interchange between his mind and the external world which leads to the identification of the two, reached in the realisation that the breast that feeds all life and thought is "there", where the source of the river is, the dwelling place of the Power. In a word, he intuits there is no boundary between the world of things and the world of thoughts. The word Power, which is to become a recurrent term, emerges as the key to our understanding of the poem. The origin of the river is unknowable, its "secret throne" remains inaccessible but the Power that assumes the experienceable form of the river comes down to both the poet and the reader. The abstractedness of the first stanza in this way is closer to the reader's sensory experience of the objective world while the poet gets to know that the interchange between the internal and the external takes place in "the still cave of the witch Poesy." His mind is both shaped by the world of reality and is an instrument that shapes that reality, not as anything static, but as a process, an act, or "the act of searching."

In the third section, which begins with Shelley's speculation on the way how the

conscious mind is fed from outside itself, he enters 'the region of death and dreams', but when Mont Blanc appears 'still, sunny, and serene', as the source of power, he goes on to depict the Mountain of 'unearthly forms', of frozen floods and unfathomable deeps, the desert peopled by the storms alone and where 'The wilderness has a mysterious tongue/Which teaches awful doubt…' Shelley's scepticism about man's place in relation to the absolute power of the mountain and the wilderness becomes here evident.The lines that conclude the third section:

> Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
> Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
> By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
> Interpret, or make felt, or deeply felt.

are interpreted by some critics as referring to Godwin (wise), Wordsworth(great) and Coleridge(good), while Shelley as sceptical visionary stands apart from all three.

The fourth verse paragraph, like the previous one opens with the poet's speculation on natural phenomena. He comes to his central concern. After a detailed observance of Mont Blanc, which has already emerged as the symbol of that power, the poet resumes his theme by further considering its nature:

> Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,
> Remote, serene, and inaccessible!
> And *this,* the naked countenance of earth,
> On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains
> Teach the adverting mind.

By dwelling apart and remote, that power shows its entire indifference to man, by being inaccessible it remains a mystery, yet it teaches an attentive and observant mind. The higher areas of the mountain are inhospitable to man, but lower down the glaciers turn into streams that finally unite into a big river. The last lines of the section echo Coleridge's *Kubla Khan:*

> …Below, vast caves
> Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,
> Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling
> Meet in the Vale, and one Majestic River,
> The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever
> Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,
> Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

The powerful energy, at first destructive, devastating and uncontrollable, becomes at the end a life-giving force.

The fifth section brings before us yet another magnificent view of Mont Blanc, standing further on as an inscrutable extremity on which 'winds contend silently'. Solitude and silence strike the final note as the words that give the poem roundness and help us grasp its meaning, despite the poem's stubborn resistance to categorical interpretation. After a direct address to Mont Blanc, Shelley takes us back to the first lines of the poem,

to provide at least a clue to our understanding:

> …the secret strength of things
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy?

These lines make us agree with all those readers and critics who see in them Shelley's assertion, although in the form of rhetorical question, that "if the human imagination could not create something out of 'silence and solitude', then the power apparent in Mont Blanc and all the large forces of the external world would be meaningless to man."

The years 1818, 1819 and 1820 were the most fruitful period in Shelley's life. It took him more than a year (Autumn 1818 till Winter 1820) to write his masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound,* a lyric drama on a grand scale, whose germs we can trace back in his youthful and immature poem *Queen Mab* (1813), which N. Frye calls " an essay in versified scientism, celebrating the superseding of religion by a more rational and secular attitude." The experience with handling ideas expanded in *The Revolt of Islam* (1816), and abstract and elusive images of the lyrics we have just discussed, proved a good preparation for a work into which Shelley poured all "his passions, beliefs, and enthusiasms."(Noyes). Shelley himself had a very high opinion of the poem, saying in a letter that "It is a drama, with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted; and I think the execution is better than any of my former attempts."

In her notes to *Prometheus Unbound* Mary Shelley gives an account of the conditions under which the drama was composed: "The first aspect of Italy enchanted Shelley; it seemed a garden of delight placed beneath a clearer and brighter heaven than any he had lived under before… The poetical spirit within him speedily revived with all the power." In his wanderings the Greek tragedians were his constant companions, but it was Aeschylus that filled him with delight and wonder and he decided to use his *Prometheus Bound* as the basis for his own myth. In Aeschylus's tragedy, the first and only play of the trilogy which has come down to us well preserved, the Titan Prometheus (the name means foresighted, imagination), the regenerator and benefactor of mankind, suffers unrelentent tortures for having stolen fire from heaven. He is condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Caucasus, and a vulture is sent to tear his liver. The defiant and immortal Titan will neither bow to the tyrannical oppressor Zeus nor reveal the secret that Zeus's son from his marriage with Thetis will dethrone him. The surviving fragments of the second play in the sequence, *Prometheus Unbound,* indicate that Aeschylus reconciles Zeus and Prometheus. Shelley was dissatisfied with such an outcome and wrote a drama in which Prometheus does not yield to Jupiter (the Roman name of Zeus), but ceases to hate him. This is the decisive moment. By removing the curse (to be prideful and to hate his enemy), he himself undergoes a process of transformation and regeneration. Supported by Ione and Panthea, the incarnations of hope and faith, he endures all the sufferings. Jupiter is dethroned by Demogorgon and Prometheus, set free by Hercules, is reunited with Asia, herself the embodiment of Love, with whom he is in love, and from whom Jupiter had separated him. Love triumpths over hatred and tyranny, and now mankind can enter the phase of peace and freedom, in which "thrones, altars,

judgment-seats, and prisons" are things of the past.

That is the end of the third Act, which is the actual end of the drama, to which Shelley added the glorious fourth act to celebrate the forthcoming constructive reform of society based on love. Countless scholarly interpretations of this "large and intricate imaginative structure that involves premises about human nature and the springs of morality and creativity" (Abrams) testify to its complexity which appeals to every lover of Shelley's poetry by far more than on one level of meaning. Bearing in mind that Shelley had dedicated his life to the cause of reform one ought to be very cautious when Shelley warns his readers in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that " …it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct reinforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence!" Any serious and intelligent reader responds not only to what is explicit but equally to what is implied, and an interpreter delights in making explicit what he finds implicit. To him *Prometheus Unbound* is a synthesis of Plato's philosophy, which Shelley followed in his metaphysics, the ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, Shelley's scientific speculations and Christian ethics, which seem to pervade the drama from beginning to end. That Shelley was the man of his time one must not forget either. Shelley's hero, says Bloom, is a "Romantic Prometheus." A detailed analysis of the play would take pages; we must confine ourselves to a few notes, which one will hopefully find useful in his own reading of the poem.

Mary Shelley's notes appear precious. She remarks that "Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none." This belief actually derived from his theory that "…evil is not inherent in the system of creation, but an accident that might be expelled…That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature…" This made Shelley choose Prometheus for the hero, a victim full of fortitude who, by transforming himself through a process of self-purification, would defeat the tyrannical god, the principle of evil. Mary Shelley finds the lyrics of the drama especially beautiful, adding that "it requires a mind as subtle as his own to understand the mystic meanings scattered throughout the poem." This is the impression shared by all readers. Mary tries to understand Shelley's love "to idealize the real - to gift the mechanism of the material universe with a soul and a voice." Her very high view of the poem reaches its climax in the words "Through the whole poem there reigns a sort of calm and holy spirit of love, it soothes the tortured, and is hope to the expectant, till the prophecy is fulfilled, and love, untainted by any evil, becomes the law of the world…"

All Shelley critics agree that the imagery of this "lyric built" drama is bold and original and that its lyrical splendour is one of the wonders of English poetry. Thirty-six different verse forms have been counted, "all perfectly handled", and the drama has been compared to symphonic music.

In the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley himself gives an account of the writing of the drama. "The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus", he says," is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which in the hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest… Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the

highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends." In the Preface Shelley does not say anything about his admiration (despite his hatred of institutional Christianity) of Christ as a teacher of great spiritual truths, of which there is much evidence in the portrayal of Prometheus, especially in Act I of the play. Act I belongs to Prometheus. We find him chained to the rock hearing the voices from the mountains and visited by The Earth, Ione and Panthea, The Phantasm of Jupiter and The Furies sent by Jupiter to torture him. The words addressed to The Earth

Mother, let not aught
Of that which may be evil, pass again
My lips, or those of aught resembling me

announce the recantation of the curse. He wishes "no living thing to suffer pain", and when he forgives the tyrant he becomes firm in his belief that "Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more" and that Asia, who waits in the far Indian vale will join him soon. With his sufferings, love and readiness to forgive the omnipotent he resembles Jesus Christ. With his defiance he is like Milton's Satan.

Act II is dominated by Asia, The Spirit of Love. In the famous fourth scene Panthea and Asia meet Demogorgon and question him on the nature of God. Demogorgon, whom we may call Necessity and who is the greatest 'difficulty' of the drama, refuses to utter his name. He first says that "he reigns", only to add later that "All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil:/ Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no…/For Jove is the supreme of living things." To Asia's question "Who is the master of the slave?" Demogorgon replies:

If the abysm
Could vomit forth its secret… But a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? What to bid speak
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change? To these
All things are subject but eternal love

The meaning of these lines is quite clear: love is the only power which is beyond all powers and is not subject to Fate and Chance, while the deep truth which Asia wants to know is "imageless" and has no approachable and visible form. In the fifth scene Panthea and Asia converse with The Spirit of the Hour, who has come with his chariot, at the command of Demogorgon, to collect them. The lines that precede the encounter are one of the many marvellous lyrics in the drama:

My coursers are fed with the lightning,
They drink of the whirlwind's stream,
And when the red morning is bright'ning
They bathe in the fresh sunbeam;
They have strength for their swiftness I deem,
Then ascend with me, daughter of Ocean…

The lyric continues in the same vein with a voice in the air singing another lyric in praise of Asia's radiant beauty: "Life of Life! Thy lips enkindle…" Asia is compared to the lamp of Earth whose light clothes dim shapes with brightness and makes the souls she loves "walk upon the winds with lightness." To this Asia replies:

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of the sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Behind a helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.
It seems to float ever, for ever,
Upon that many-winding river,
Between mountains, woods, abysses,
A paradise of wilderness!

The examination of details of this charming lyric would do harm to its gracefulness. It will suffice to join imaginatively the soul in love on its journey - nothing could be more exciting and more romantic. The boat, "by the instinct of music driven", and guided by Asia's desire enters

Realms where the air we breathe is love,
Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,
Harmonizing the earth with what we feel above.

All is harmony and all is one experience!

Act II with its music and the interaction of thought and melody anticipates the hymnical fourth Act, so that the third Act with its language is a striking contrast to the lyricism of the previous act. With a language totally unlyrical Jupiter summons the "congragated powers of heaven" to rejoice in his omnipotence. Nevertheless, he admits

… alone
The soul of man, like unextinguished fire,
Yet burns towards heaven with fierce reproach, and doubt,
And lamentation, and reluctant prayer,…

His high-flown speech is interrupted by the appearance of Demogorgon, who presents himself as Eternity, dethrones him and takes him into darkness:

Descend and follow me down the abyss.
I am the child, as thou wert Saturn's child
Mightier than thee: and we must dwell together
Henceforth in darkness. Lift thy lightnings not-
The tyranny of heaven none may retain,…

The act of dethronement itself is very brief. Although it is the climax of the drama in

the technical sense, Shelley found no reason to exploit and dramatize it. Apollo (the sun god and god of poetry) and Ocean, Asia's father, appear on 'the stage' to discuss the event. The rest of Act III belongs to the great third scene when Hercules, Ione, The Earth, the Spirits, Asia and Panthea, borne in the car with the Spirit of the Hour come to Caucasus. Hercules unbinds Prometheus and he can now be reunited with Asia. The speeches that follow, especially that of the Earth, Prometheus's mother, reaffirm the sense of life through love and creativity. The Spirit of the Hour's prophetic voice announces a forthcoming process of overall rebirth and regeneration of the world in which there is no room for oppression:

> The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
> Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
> Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
> Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man
> Passionless? - no, yet, free from guilt or pain,
> Which were, for his will made or suffering them,
> Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
> From chance, and death, and mutability,
> The clogs of that which else might oversoar
> The loftiest star of unascended heaven,
> Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

The last seven lines, however, indicate that "chance and death, and mutability", being limitations entirely human, do not allow man to reach the impossible. Yet, as J.R.Watson puts it, they "illustrate very well the power of *Prometheus Unbound* to combine the human and earthly with the superhuman and the infinite."

Act IV belongs to various choruses, semichoruses and unseen spirits. Now that Prometheus has achieved his end, Jupiter has been overthrown, it is the right time for joy. The Chorus of Spirits sings of promise:

> And our singing shall build
> In the void's loose field
> A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
> We will take our plan
> From the new world of man,
> And our world shall be called Promethean.

The Chorus of Hours and Spirits takes over the song and sets out to scatter it:

> Wherever we fly we lead along
> In leashes, like starbeams, soft yet strong,
> The clouds that are heavy with love's sweet rain.

However, the central part of this act is taken up with an exchange between the Earth and the Moon, through which Shelley gives expression to joy, trying the impossible - through the union of image and music to express something that is beyond expression.

They address one another as brother and sister. The Earth's voice full of "boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness" penetrates the Moon's frozen frame and a "spirit from his heart bursts forth." The Earth continues her song of pure joy and universal love dedicated to man:

> Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,
> Whose nature is its own divine control,
> Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea;
> Familiar acts are beautiful through love;
> …….
> Love rules, though waves which dare not overwhelm,
> Forcing life's wildest shores to own its sovereign sway.

Panthea intervenes with the announcement of Demogorgon's reappearance in the closing scene after the Earth and the Moon have finished their hymn on the harmony that awaits man in his union with nature. Demogorgon' s final speech is a "triumphant finale":

> Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,
> These are the seals of that most firm assurance
> Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
> And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
> Mother of many acts and hours, should free
> The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
> These are the spells by which to reassume
> An empire o'er the distangled doom.
>
> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker that death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
> From his own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
> This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
> Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
> This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

No reader can object to the generally objected view that "the final stanza not only sums up the major themes of the drama but also makes it clear that it is a continuing struggle of love and forbearance and hope"(J.R.Watson). For Maurice Bowra Demogorgon's speech contains "hints that not only is there no end to evil but that evil is even necessary to create goodness, and the highest goodness lies in an unending struggle." Carlos Baker in his notorious essay "The Heart of Cosmos: Prometheus Unbound", seeing *Prometheus Unbound* as a drama of the mind, interprets the concluding two stanzas in this way: "If the forces of moral good can reassume their former dominance through a degeneration in the strength of that mind…But as long as gentleness, wisdom, virtue, and endurance remain in man, he will always have weapons with which to combat moral evil." He concludes that Shelley's drama "provides poetic

affirmation for his belief in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods."

If one looks for dramatic action in the play he will be disappointed. Frye even says that this is a drama without action, but on one level of meaning there is action: it "symbolizes man's happy reconciliation with the ideal world of love, truth and beauty from which evil has divorced him" (Noyes). The same scholar further adds that for Shelley, the Platonic idealist, "love, beauty and truth exist transcendentally. Evil also exists transcendentally, but can be expelled from the mind through an effort of will…The Furies that torture Prometheus, though externalized in the drama, are the mental disturbances of which he is aware in his own mind." Baker's view of the essential meaning of the drama is almost the same: "The removal of the repressive force which now manacles and tortures the human mind would not only provide an opportunity for the rebirth of the power of love in that mind, but would also enable man to realize his tremendous potential of intellectual might and spiritual pleasure… which has for so long been stiffled by fear, hate, selfishness, and despair." For him *Prometheus Unbound* was "conceived and developed as an ethical and psychological drama" in which Shelley "managed to combine his two most persistent themes, the necessity of social reform and the necessity of societal love, in such a way that they supplement and complement one another." The result was a splendid poem. Harold Bloom asserts its high relevance:

"Though it is very much a poem of Shelley's own revolutionary age, *Prometheus Unbound* transcends the limiting context of any particular time, or rather becomes sharply relevant in any new time-of-troubles. Shelley, always a revolutionary temperament, is not teaching quietism or acceptance. But he shows, in agonizing, deeply inward ways, how difficult the path of regeneration is, and how much both the head and the heart need to purge in themselves if and when regeneration is ever to begin." (*Oxford Anthology*)

Any discussion of *Prometheus Unbound*, however brief and introductory, must at least touch upon the imagery of the poem. In a letter of 1817 Shelley writes of his special interest as a poet

"…to apprehend minute and remote distinctions of feeling, whether relative to external nature or to the living beings which surround us, and to communicate the conceptions which result from considering either the moral or the material universe as a whole."

This is the evidence of the poet's awareness of how difficult it was to communicate abstract ideas, and on this difficulty he also writes in the Preface to the drama:

"The imagery which I have employed will be found, in many instances, 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."

Maurice Bowra in his essay on *Prometheus Unbound* makes a point that "the dramatis personnae belong to no actual world…They are incarnate ideas, but ideas presented in visible shapes, principles made more attractive through the lineaments which Shelley gives to them…" The reader finds no difficulty in identifying principles and ideas with certain names and characters. He readily discovers in Jupiter the incarnation of the principle of evil, a slave to his own omnipotence. Demogorgon remains a mystery. His resounding name seems to have pleased Shelley's auditory imagination. "Eternity", as he calls himself when questioned by Jupiter, does not satisfy us completely. When Necessity is added to it as 'amoral law', his part in the play and his role in the universal order are

definitely made acceptable. Another problem that Shelley had to solve was that of "relating his abstract thoughts to human experience and human feelings." There are moments when his ideas "elude us, at least as real experience." As for feelings they are either intimately related to his ideas or implicit in his abstract notions. The result is not discordance but "a single harmony." Occasional realistic presentation of actual facts only contributes to the picture of "ultimate" reality as the brotherhood of free men which The Spirit of the Hour foretells. The concluding lines of *Prometheus Unbound* are the most explicit poetic rendering of many clear statements Shelley made in his poetry and prose about the revolution that he saw as a long-term process and not a sudden solution to the problems mankind has to cope with. According to Macrae "central to this process is the education of the people towards a fuller understanding of freedom... One of the perennial questions concerning social change is: does reform begin with the structures of society or does reform begin in the minds of individual people? Shelley undoubtedly favoured the second approach." As all great poems, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* will appeal to every new generation of readers as a challenge to be reinterpreted time and over again, as a work relevant to all ages.

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ŠELIJEVA RANA LIRIKA I OSLOBOĐENI PROMETEJI

Ratomir Ristić

Ovaj rad je nastao iz potrebe da se razmotre Šelijeva prva značajna lirska ostvarenja koja su prethodila i vodila do njegovog velikog perioda - objavljivanja lirske drame Oslobodjeni Prometej, jednodušno priznate kao njegovo remekdelo. Pesme i drama su analizirane u pokušaju da se otkriju one vrline Šelijevog duha koji je stvarao pesničke slike koje istovremeno i fasciniraju i izmiču potpunom razumevanju. Taj isti duh se slobodno kretao svetom abstraktnih ideja, koje osvajaju čitaoca kao duboko ljudske i stvarne. Aktuelnost Šelijevog revolucionarnog idealizma na kraju milenijuma obavezuje na više poštovanja, ali i na veću kritičku pažnju koju Šeli pesnik-filozof zaslužuje više nego bilo koji pesnik iz grupe velikih engleskih romantičara.