

THAT POWERFUL ATTRACTION:
SHELLEY AND THE POWER FLOWING THROUGH THE NATURAL WORLD

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LOVE. SACRED SEXUALITY, TRANSCENDENT, IMMORTAL, CARNAL LOVE, that's the power Shelley sees flowing through the natural world. "What is Love?" he writes, "Ask him who lives, what is life; ask him who adores, what is God" (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 503).

Shelley has become infamous for signing his name with the appellation, "atheist" while traveling in Switzerland in the summer of 1816. Much is made of this declaration by twenty-first century readers who live in a global culture where Christianity is surrounded by other great religions, and all religions have apparently given way intellectually to science—so much so, that within academia, literary criticism that upholds mysticism or claims ontological grounds for spiritual dimensions, tends to be looked upon as simplistic and naive. This is certainly a much different environment than the one Shelley was challenging at Oxford in 1811.

Indeed, in Shelley's day, the word *atheist* had specific, radically political implications. It was, among other things, a code word pointing toward republicanism and support of the French Revolutionary struggle. These overtones are not part of our current associations. Today atheism signals the rational materialism of the prevailing scientific paradigm and our inherent cultural investment in Newtonian precepts. It suggests a universe in which consciousness is born of matter, and dependent upon it for existence, a mathematical universe, a linear reality. This is not to imply that materialism wasn't also part of Shelley's meaning when he penned the word; it was. When, as an undergraduate at Oxford, Shelley wrote *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811)—a pamphlet he widely distributed (and one for which he was ultimately sent down on a technicality)—he was most certainly flirting with materialism as an explanation for reality. It's clear, however, that he later considered his explorations in that direction both juvenile and wrong-headed. As Cameron points out, Shelley's mature views on "mind, matter, and perception—his epistemology" repudiates materialism (582). In his essay, *On Life*, written between 1819 and 1820, Shelley writes:

The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, its fatal consequences in morals, and their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism. This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk, and dispense them from thinking. But I was discontented with such a view of things as it afforded; man is a being of high aspirations "looking both before and after," whose "thoughts wander through eternity," disclaim alliance with transience and decay, incapable of imaging to himself annihilation, existing but in the future and the past, being, not what he is, but what he has been, and shall be. (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 506)

Materialism reduced reality and existence in ways that Shelley—who called himself a Pantheist (Wu 819)—found too narrow and confining. Shelley returned again and again to the question of existence. He was struck and disturbed by our apparent duality, our physical presence that perishes, and our more nebulous essence, consciousness, or soul, that perhaps, does not.

Whatever may be his [humanity's] true and final destination, there is a *spirit within* him at enmity with change and extinction. This is the character of life and being. (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 506)

Although Shelley seems hesitant to reduce to language cosmology wherein this "spirit within" has ontological residence, he seems equally hesitant to dismiss the possibility. His resistance is to Christian doctrine. At every turn he is openly hostile toward Christianity's autocratic God who ruled over creation with king-like authority. Clearly he sees such a god as a creation of man, and not as an ontological essence. So too, Christianity's definition of God as Love, did not satisfy. It was tainted with political implications and overtones, employed to control, justify and foster Christianity's stronghold on humanity, used in tandem with the mythology of "The Fall," to justify a characterization of flesh and carnal love as evil. As Wu points out:

In truth, Percy's attitude to God was more complex than the word "atheist" suggests. It is not surprising that the concept was inimical to someone so opposed to an established Church, not merely complicit, but deeply implicated, in the social and political oppression prevalent in England at the time. On the other hand, he was tremendously attracted to the pantheist life force in *Tintern Abbey*, and could not resist pleading the existence of a similar "Power" in his poetry. However, he stopped well short of believing in a benevolent deity capable of intervening in human affairs. (820)

Wu goes on to say Shelley's position on God was clearly laid out in *Mont Blanc*, where Shelley wrote, "The wilderness has a mysterious tongue which teaches awful doubt"—*awful* meaning, Wu suggests, "awe-inspiring skepticism" (847). In other words, although Shelley may have doubted the existence of a benevolent power, he seemed somewhat more inclined to entertain the idea of the Sublime—positing the existence of a Power so awe-inspiring in its amoral omnipotence that it appears to the human mind as "sometimes frighteningly destructive" (820), in its transcendence of human definitions of good and evil.

As Mary Shelley points out in her "Notes on the Prometheus Unbound," the question of "evil" was not something Shelley believed "inherent in the system of creation, but an accident that might be expelled" (295). She saw this as one of the few beliefs Shelley held that actually coincided with Christian doctrine, but for the way Shelley forwarded the thought. He was not looking to a savoir to forgive or redeem humanity from its evil. He was anticipating humanity's ultimate ability to rescue itself through directed will. "Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none" (295).

Shelley's belief sprung from a commitment to the Godwinian concept of perfectibility. William Godwin, Shelley's father-in-law, had written extensively on the perfectibility of humankind. In fact, Godwin believed that when perfection of this sort was reached, through what might today be called the evolution of consciousness, humankind, itself, would obtain immortality. In Darwinian terms, he was looking toward a new species, a species that might look back on human beings in much the same way humans look upon their common ancestor with the chimpanzee. He did not have the benefit of

Charles Darwin's insights, but both Godwin and Shelley were deeply influenced by Darwin's uncle, Erasmus Darwin, whose botanical studies anticipate his famous nephew's findings. Mary Shelley believed the subject of perfectibility, and the struggle to obtain it, was significant to Shelley.

The subject he loved best to dwell on, was the image of One warring with the Evil Principle, oppressed not only by it, but all—even the good who were deluded into considering evil a necessary portion of humanity. (295)

She goes on to say that throughout *Prometheus Unbound* "there reigns a sort of calm and holy spirit of love; it soothes the tortured, and is the hope to the expectant, till the prophecy is fulfilled, and Love, untainted by evil, becomes the law of the world" (297).

Thus we return to love. "The English language boasts no more brilliant composition than Plato's Praise of Love translated by Shelley," Mary Shelley tells us (O'Connor *xiv*). Shelley began his translation of Plato's *Symposium* in 1818, his first summer in Italy—in Bagni di Lucca, a hill town just northeast of the ancient walled city of Lucca. It was a pretty village that attracted many English expatriates, and the first place the Shelleys settled after arriving in Italy in the late spring. The *Symposium* was controversial, not only because of its homosexual overtones, but because it explored the connection between the carnal and spiritual dimensions of love, a subject that fascinated Shelley throughout his life. In translating the *Symposium*, O'Connor believes Shelley's "finest accomplishment was to reanimate in English the interplay of the human and divine in erotic love.... Shelley commanded a style expansive enough for the task, earthy as a kiss and solemn as a vow" (*xlili-xliv*).

Shortly after he completed his translation, Shelley wrote a prose fragment entitled, *On Love*, which was likely its introduction (Wu 849n). The essay, among other things, is an attempt to define love.

[Love] is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves. (Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 503)

Shelley is infamous, of course (especially as a cult figure), for his stand on "free love." That is, his belief in the natural place of love and sexuality in human experience. It quickly becomes a complex discussion, because of the antiquated laws surrounding marriage in Shelley's day, something he was not alone in challenging. In fact, not only had William Godwin written about the injustices in contemporary marriage laws, Mary Shelley's mother—the seminal feminist thinker, Mary Wollstonecraft—had as well. Shelley's frustration with marriage, however, went beyond the injustices of the law. As he wrote in *Epipsychicon*, his poetic masterpiece on love, love differs from marriage as "gold from clay" (*Shelley's Prose and Poetry* 397). With love, Shelley insists, "to divide is not to take away" (397).

Butler speaks of "a cult of sexuality," with an unwritten manifesto that she believes was formalized when Shelley was at Marlow, spending time with Peacock, in 1817-18. A

commitment on Shelley's part to challenge the "arbitrary divisions between mind and body, man and environment, man and God," and also, as always, the "institutionalized Christianity that was part of the apparatus of the State" (136). Interestingly this coincides with Byron's publication of the early cantos of *Don Juan*. Different from Shelley's own celebration of human intimacy, but not so different, not really, in that each challenged the accepted orthodoxy of a "whole range of influences, cultural, moral and political" (137).

Butler also points to Erasmus Darwin, and his influence on Shelley's manifesto. Through his poetry, Darwin "popularized the biologist's understanding of the propagation of the species, and wedded it to ancient mythology" (129). Butler believes Shelley's attraction to ancient mythology was, at least in part, because of the fact that its symbolism pointed toward a universal sex myth. Shelley, she writes, found that the "pagan conceptions contain more abstract truth as well as more humanity than the Christian" (131). "Primitive man perceived the natural world was driven by sex," (Butler 130). Here too, of course, Shelley's ongoing battle with Christian doctrine is immediately obvious. Christianity is passionately invested in the myth of The Fall, and in decrying the sexual misconduct that precipitated it. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise compromises sexual love, placing it in an entirely tenuous relationship with goodness and godliness. Pagan religions were blasphemous, in large part, because of their attitude toward fertility and sexuality, something that anyone who explored Vesuvius and Pompeii, as did Shelley in February 1819, would have quickly discovered. Furthermore, "infidel" anthropologists were circulating materials (for example, Richard Payne Knight's *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*) that paralleled, in their own way, Darwin's botanical insights, and that Shelley had likely read, since his friend Peacock did. (Butler 130-31). "Critics of Christianity's claim to unique revelation," Butler writes, "had picked out the host of rituals and fables from all cultures which appeared to imitate the action of the sun impregnating matter—and thus implied that early man worshipped *the driving force in nature, the principle of life itself*" (129, emphasis mine).

That Shelley was awed by the principle of life is evidenced not only in the "furniture" and subtext of much of his poetry, but specifically in the prose fragment, *On Life*, composed about a year after *On Love*.

Life and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing. The midst of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being. We are struck with admiration at some of its transient modifications, but it is itself the great miracle. (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 505)

That he was in awe of love is also evident everywhere, but certainly most dramatically in *Epipsychidion*. Shelley described it as "an idealized history" of his life and feelings. "If you are anxious, however, to hear what I am and have been," he wrote a male friend, "it will tell you something thereof" (Reiman 391). It is in *Epipsychidion*, that Shelley penned the line referenced earlier, that with love, "to divide is not to take away." The common reading of this line is that it explains, and even justifies, Shelley's belief in unfettered love, justifying the idea that he or any truly loving being can share love in more than one place without diminishing its nature. Rather, sharing increases love's nature—love shared is love increased. Another reading of the line is also in order, however: and

that's to note that Shelley, unbeknownst to himself, is foreshadowing the discoveries of quantum physics and our bewildering attempts to describe the birth of the universe. For there too, one discovers division that does not take away.

Contemporary cosmology suggests that in the first nano-seconds of creation, sub-atomic particles, pairs of opposites science names *matter* and *anti-matter*, were propelled into being in something like an explosion, and that inside that explosion these particles crashed chaotically into each other, causing their annihilation, but—and here's Shelley's intuition of something fundamental about the power of the universe, of existence—the annihilations inexplicably birthed something more, something new—new, viable particles. In other words, these opposites collided, and in that collision created even as they annihilated themselves. They give birth. This is the power, in raw, simplistic terms, that gave existence its foothold and turned the nothing of non-existence into the material universe. This is the inexplicable mystery that's present in sexual creativity, in poetic creativity, and in the awesome creativity of the universe. This is what Shelley named Love, and rightfully so. Love indeed is the power of creation, the power that creates all that is new in the universe.

That Shelley had some inkling of this is present not only in his reference to division, but also in the lines that followed. Shelley's cosmological reach includes a sense that love is not simply the sweetness of lips kissing, but something far more profound, something that is simultaneously a prism (a dividing principle) and mirror (a reflecting factor). He images an infinity of light passing through prisms and bouncing off mirrors, filling the universe with glorious beams. He's the poet describing what science cannot, saying, this then, is the meaning of that commonplace word, that overused word we call *love*.

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.
Love is like understanding, that grows bright,
Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
Imagination! which from the earth and sky,
And from the depths of human fantasy,
As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
The Universe with glorious beams, and kills
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow
Of its reverberating lightning. Narrow
The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,
The life that wears, the spirit that creates
One object, and one form, and builds thereby
A sepulcher for its eternity. (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 379)

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