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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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of Crowds**

David P.
Goldman:
**It's the Culture,
Stupid**

Helen
Andrews:
**The Age of
Entitlement**

Amy L.
Wax:
**Ruth Bader
Ginsburg**

Ken
Masugi:
**Clarence
Thomas**



James
Hankins:
**Hyper-
partisanship**

David
Azerrad:
**Sex &
Identity**

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EVERLASTING YOUTH



DURING HIS BRIEF TIME ON EARTH Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) lived and wrote spiritually ablaze, as a Romantic poet was expected to do. Like his good friend Lord Byron, he comported himself just as he chose, scandalizing respectable people with his militant atheism, ardent republicanism, and faithful adherence to his professed belief in free love.

His poetic gift was protean. Renowned above all for his flights of lyric sublimity, he could be as ravishingly melancholy as John Keats and as tenderly exultant as William Wordsworth. This is the Shelley commonly studied today, the author of “To a Skylark,” “Ode to the West Wind,” and “When the Lamp Is Shattered.”

Yet his verse could be flagrantly unlovely in the service of his political hatreds, which were many and fierce. He raged like William Blake, with a similar caustic terseness, about the lack of justice and simple decency

in society’s highest reaches and lowest depths. And like Blake he believed that the foulness of the highest was responsible for the foulness of the lowest. Priests, kings, and government ministers Shelley flayed, hanged, and quartered on general principle. Certain fellow poets he summarily executed for specific spiritual crimes against humanity. He was unable to forgive Wordsworth and Coleridge for their abandoning all democratic hope in the face of the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror, the bloody rise and fall of Napoleon, and the Bourbon Restoration. This baleful, sardonic aspect to Shelley’s nature, however, never extinguished his confidence in human perfectibility.

His political sentiments—savage indignation on one end and millenarian hope on the other—eventually bent toward prudent, gradual reform; and toward the end of his life he became reasonable about politics. It was as an incendiary, however, that he was known

during his lifetime. He was so notorious that persons protective of their honor thought it best not to know of him at all. As his invaluable biographer Richard Holmes laments in *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974), “At the time of his death his reputation was almost literally unspeakable in England, an object to be torn apart between the conservative and radical reviews, but not on the whole to be mentioned in polite London society.”

Filial Outrage

THE RAMPAGING DISDAIN FOR CONVENTIONAL mores that got him ostracized started early, as it often does, and persisted well into his too-brief adulthood. His birth entitled him to the most desirable perquisites that polite society had to offer. The son of a Sussex baronet, he stood to inherit high rank along with vast wealth, and to be virtually guaranteed the seat in Parliament



that his father occupied. The life he chose instead proved to be one of exile and obscurity.

At Oxford, when he was supposed to be deep in Euclid and Aristotle, Shelley was wolfing down what Holmes calls a rich diet of “sceptics and radicals: David Hume and Gibbon, Voltaire and Condorcet, Paine and Franklin, Rousseau, Godwin and even the political economist Adam Smith.” The political palaver of the day drew him inexorably in, and he became conversant with the issues bound to rile the mind of a born maverick.

The association with that venerable university would not last long. With his closest Oxford friend and comrade in political adventure, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, the 19-year-old Shelley published a 1,000-word pamphlet in which both men professed to disprove the existence of God and invited all comers to prove them wrong. Drawing upon Hume’s and John Locke’s epistemological arguments, *The Necessity of Atheism* contended that there was no cogent demonstration of divine reality, whether by evidence of the senses, reason, or the testimony of those claiming to have been “eye-witnesses of miracles”: “the mind *cannot* believe in the existence of a God,” Shelley and Hogg concluded, and Shelley was especially proud of the capstone to the polemic: “Q.E.D.” Full of himself, he sent copies to the bishops of the Church of England and the masters of the Oxford colleges.

Although published anonymously, the pamphlet’s authorship was an open secret, and retribution fell swift and sure upon the offenders. First, a Fellow of University College ordered the bookseller to burn all remaining copies. Then Shelley was hauled before a tribunal of the Master and Fellows. When the inquisitors asked if he was the author, he refused to answer. They expelled him not for atheism, then, but for, in their words, “contumacy in refusing to answer certain questions put to [him].”

Shelley complained to his father in a letter three days afterward of “the late violent tyrannical proceedings of Oxford.” Sir Timothy Shelley warned that if his son did not return home and submit to the supervision of godly preceptors, he would disown him. Shelley replied that he was willing to renounce his claim to the family property and would rest content with an annuity of £2,000. Eventually, he would receive a more generous bequest from his grandfather that permitted a life of greater comfort.

Outrage would become standard filial procedure. In London Shelley met the 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook, a schoolmate of his sisters, who was feeling the weight of fatherly oppression herself. Passionate talk that turned frequently to considerations of suicide led to something oddly like love. He resisted

the pull toward a permanent respectable tie: the prospect of wedded bliss was sheer horror. To Hogg he wrote in May 1811, “Yet *marriage* is hateful, detestable—a kind of ineffable sickening disgust seizes my mind when I think of this most despotic most unrequired fetter which prejudice has forged to confine its energies.” To Harriet he proselytized for atheism and free love, but she wasn’t having any: when in August Shelley suggested they run away together, she refused; and in the end it was hateful detestable marriage he proposed.

They eloped to Edinburgh, where Hogg joined them. Harriet’s sister Eliza soon joined the posse. Shelley saw this contented ménage as the potential core of a community of refined spirits who would dwell apart from the common herd and prepare the ground for social transfiguration. His father saw things differently, and Shelley had to howl loud and long to get the money Sir Timothy had agreed to give him.

In his most
ambitious poems
Shelley damns the
past and the present
and flings every which
way the largesse
of an impossibly
golden future.

Six weeks after the wedding Shelley’s belief in free love and communal sharing was put to the test when he was away for several days and the infatuated Hogg made a serious play for Harriet, which she refused in consternation. Shelley assured his friend there was nothing to forgive and extolled the wisdom of “the Godwinian plan,” the philosopher William Godwin’s promotion of what has come to be called “open marriage.” But Harriet was “prejudiced,” Shelley lamented, and not nearly as reasonable as her husband, and Hogg was left behind when the Shelleys moved on from York to the Lake District; the best of friends would not see each other for a year.

Poetry and Political Activism

IN JANUARY 1812 THE IMPRESSIONABLE young man wrote to Godwin and initiated a friendship that would redirect the course of his life in a way unimaginable at the time. Yet he remained resolutely himself even

as he solicited the great man’s sage counsel. Godwin attempted to steer Shelley toward the sublime disinterestedness of the philosophic life and away from hotheaded political controversy and precipitate action. But Shelley had ideas of his own and he was in a hurry.

Poetry and political activism were already of a piece. Shelley made his first poetic splash that year with the ballad “The Devil’s Walk,” in which Beelzebub, dressed in his Sunday finery like the gentleman he is, goes to and fro upon the streets of London, calling upon his mortal subordinates in church and court. The poem was published as a broadside to be affixed to walls and displayed in working class meeting halls—a tactic the author learned from Tom Paine. When Shelley scalds “a brainless King” and his “[m]any Imps in attendance,” it is not with subtle wit:

Ah! ah! thought Satan, the pasture is
good,
My Cattle will here thrive better than
others;
They dine on news of human blood,
They sup on the groans of the dying
and dead,
And supperless never will go to bed;
Which will make them fat as their
brothers.

In the end, however, “His sulphurous Majesty” returns to Hell, the Kings and Conquerors and Ruffians who have served him on earth are bereft, and Reason is free to exercise its beneficent power. The poem runs what will be Shelley’s characteristic emotional course through desolation to consolation. Rarely does he give up hope that all will be made well.

Evidently having learned little from experience, Shelley counted upon his readership’s being as amenable to his version of sweet Reason as he was. The oppressed and barely literate masses were the target audience of his “Address to the Irish People,” which he handed out to passersby in the Dublin streets in February, and his beatific vision of a world without rich or poor sought to arouse the multitude to virtuous exertions toward nothing less than perfection:

There would be no pomp and no parade,
but that which the rich now keep
to themselves, would then be distributed
among the people. None would be in
magnificence, but the superfluities
then taken from the rich would be
sufficient, when spread abroad, to
make everyone comfortable. —No
lover would then be false to his
mistress, no mistress would desert her

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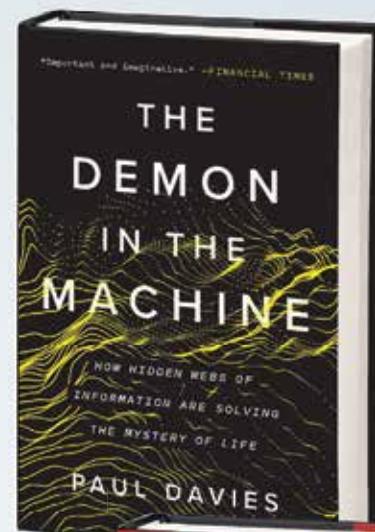
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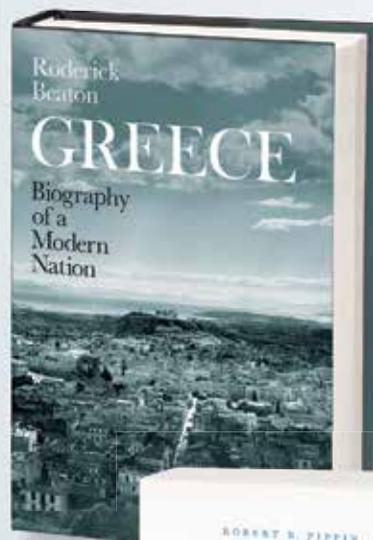
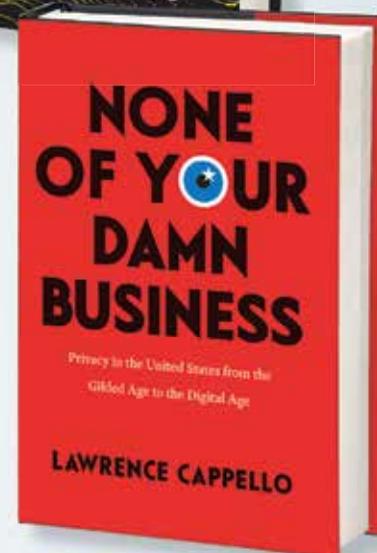
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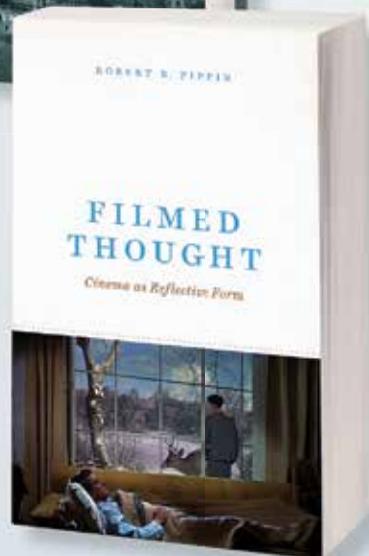
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lover. No friend would play false, no rents, no debts, no taxes, no frauds of any kind would disturb the general happiness: good as they would be, wise as they would be, they would be daily getting better and wiser.... Vice and misery, pomp and poverty, power and obedience, would then be banished altogether. It is for such a state as this, Irishmen, that I exhort you to prepare.

Men longing to be made whole had first to renounce all thought of violent rebellion. For the vision of "universal emancipation" to be realized, only cool heads and muscular moral effort were required. "Mildness, sobriety, and reason are the effectual methods of forwarding the ends of liberty and happiness.... Before Government is done away with, we must reform ourselves. It is this work which I would earnestly recommend to you, O Irishmen, REFORM YOURSELVES."

Shelley could not understand why the Dublin poor showed no more enthusiasm for his preaching than had the eminences of Oxford.

More Sorrow than Joy

AT 21 SHELLEY HAD THE RESPONSIBILITIES of manhood—a wife and an infant daughter—and not enough money to take care of them; they brought him small joy, and less by the day. By 22 he had cast both off in favor of another 16-year-old lovely, Mary Godwin, the daughter of his esteemed mentor and the late Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. He informed Harriet she had never aroused in him the passion that Mary did, and that was that. He lit out for the continent with his new conquest, and with her stepsister Jane Clairmont, who would rename herself Claire—just one was never enough. They made it as far as Lake Lucerne a month later before turning back. In London again, Shelley was hounded by the bailiffs for failing to pay his debts. Harriet meanwhile tried to pry him loose from Mary, while Shelley wanted his pregnant wife to join the entourage as his chaste bosom friend. When she responded with legal action, he ripped into her for "mean and despicable selfishness" and her enslavement to "the vilest superstitions": "You are plainly lost to me forever."

Only a year earlier he had dedicated his first long poem, "Queen Mab; A Philosophical Poem; With Notes," to Harriet. In it, he expressed cold fury at the waste of talent and life-force that industrial wage slavery causes,

identifying Adam Smith's laissez-faire capitalism among the roots of modern suffering:

The harmony and happiness of man
Yields to the wealth of nations; that
which lifts
His nature to the heaven of its pride,
Is bartered for the poison of his soul.

Yet as is customary with Shelley, this jeremiad is also a prophecy of eventual human fulfillment, and the vision of the coming perfection makes the current tribulation endurable. His true god shall replace the false, and mankind rejoice in the saving radiance of an austere rationality:

Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power,
Necessity! thou mother of the world!
Unlike the God of human error, thou
Requir'st no prayers or praises; the
caprice
Of man's weak will belongs no more to
thee
Than do the changeful passions of his
breast
To thy unvarying harmony.

The fundamental Shelley, spouting fire with one breath and intimating bliss with another, is already fully formed in this poem. During the few years left him the poet would develop in artfulness but remain essentially unchanged in power of mind.

Those few years were personally momentous. In the summer of 1816 Shelley met Byron in Geneva. Claire Clairmont, who had had a fling with the world's most famous rake and was pregnant with his daughter, made the introductions. The two great poets became friends, with the abrasions common enough when great artists meet. As Holmes tells the tale, Byron complained to someone else that Shelley had forced Wordsworth's verse upon him "even to nausea," and Shelley wrote to Thomas Love Peacock that "Lord Byron is an exceedingly interesting person, and as such it is to be regretted that he is a slave to the vilest and most vulgar prejudices, and as mad as the winds." Still, their friendship was lasting and traveled well, renewing itself in various Italian cities over the years—though Shelley was disturbed by Byron's indifference to Claire and his neglect of their daughter, Allegra, who died at five years old in the convent to which her father had consigned her.

The women in Shelley's life brought him, and themselves, more sorrow than joy. In October 1816 Fanny Godwin, Mary's half-sister, killed herself with an opium overdose, and William Godwin believed she did so from un-

requited love for Shelley. A month later, Harriet, the wife he had abandoned who was now pregnant by another man, drowned herself in a London park. After the scandal broke Shelley was really not wanted in England anymore. He married Mary, and the couple wandered storm-tossed through Italy. She bore him three children, all of whom died. He likely fathered a child off the record with Claire, his sister-in-law, and that child died as well.

New World Order

EVEN MARY'S LITERARY TRIUMPH WAS a source of pain: she scored a smashing success with her novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, while his poem *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), by which he set great store, went universally ignored.

In it, Shelley translates the archaic mythical past of Aeschylean drama into a prophecy of the glorious future, and promotes the modern mythology of the revolution that will heal all wounds. One takes him more seriously in the outcries against patent political wrongs that he utters in 1819 and 1820 than in his ecstatic impossibilities. His most authoritative tone is one of plainspoken address to a populace that understands only plain speaking and needs to be fortified in its struggle against injustice, as in "A Song: Men of England."

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

Against those who impede the progress of justice he launches a frontal assault. One can hardly be more forthright in loathing or more brazen in contempt than Shelley is in "Lines Written during the Castlereagh Administration":

Corpses are cold in the tomb;
Stones on the pavement are dumb;
Abortions are dead in the womb,
And their mothers look pale—like the
death-white shore
Of Albion, free no more.

Castlereagh, the Tory leader in the House of Commons, is a favorite object of scorn. In "The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester," news of the so-called Peterloo Massacre of August 16, 1819, in which cavalry charged a peaceful, illegal working class demonstration of 60,000 people and killed 11 of them, telepathically reaches Shelley asleep in Italy and prompts a poetic vision.



I met Murder on the way—
He had a mask like Castlereagh—
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two
He tossed them human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Yet while he demonstrates the poetic possibilities of the furious screed, he does not enlarge them; at its best, as in his sonnet “England in 1819,” this poetry is still only agitprop, though admittedly the very finest of its kind.

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying
King,—
Princes, the dregs of their dull race,
who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a
muddy spring,—
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor
know,
But leech-like to their fainting country
cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without
a blow.

Shelley’s most implacable political hatreds and his most ardent political loves both bespeak a mental fever burning out of control. In the 1820 tract *A Philosophical View of Reform*, however, he cools himself down and confines himself to sound democratic feasibility. Against “the insolent and contaminating tyrannies” of Europe, he sets “the successful rebellion of America. America holds forth the victorious example of an immensely populous, and as far as the external arts of life are concerned, a highly civilized community administered according to republican forms.” No king, no hereditary oligarchy, no established Church interfere with the flourishing of “a free, happy, and strong people.” American “political institutions” are the envy of those in the Old World who long for reform. In France, by contrast, the revolutionary rage of a people “rendered brutal, ignorant, servile, and bloody by long slavery” issued in a terrible vengeance, “in itself a mistake, a crime, a calamity.” There freedom and happiness found no lasting hold.

How to secure “a calm yet irresistible progress” toward freedom and equality in England is thus Shelley’s pressing concern. The current condition of the nation is woeful: “the majority of the people of England are destitute and miserable, ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-educated.” They know this only too well, and their knowledge threatens an explosion that would not be unjustified. Yet only by gentle gradations, he argues, can republican virtue be inculcated in a brutalized multitude, and a just regime be firmly established. Demagogues who insist on universal suffrage straightaway put the nation in peril of civil war and make a new order built to last all but impossible.

It is very well to theorize of the perfect society, Shelley goes on, but “our present business is with the difficult and unbending realities of actual life.” However he might want the ideal—and Shelley never stops wanting it—he preaches moderate expectations in this long essay. Popular anger is politically beneficial only so long as it is kept in check and does not swell into internecine violence, which is the ultimate evil in Shelley’s view. To quell the people’s craving for revenge—for requiting suffering with suffering—is the core of his teaching. It is clear that he wants the best for his native country, and for once the best that he promotes is practicable. He is measured and mature here. Wisdom appears to be within reach.

Simple, Impulsive Mind

WISDOM CAME HARD FOR SHELLEY. He lived out his controlling idea of absolute liberty to disastrous personal effect. And that expansive, exhilarating idea defined his poetry, again to his loss. Beauty of the high order he achieved is by no means a slight thing—it is magnificent—but nor is it everything: in a poet who is out to write philosophical poetry, want of intellectual weight is a serious deficiency. In his most ambitious poems Shelley is inclined to damn the past and present in their entirety and to fling every which way the hyper-egalitarian largesse of an impossibly golden future. In an 1856 essay Walter Bagehot penetrates this “simple impulsive mind” of Shelley’s, which is consumed with “[t]he love of liberty” to the point of dispensing with all known law.

It has hardly patience to estimate particular institutions: it wants to begin again—to make a *tabula rasa* of all which men have created or devised; for they seem to have been constructed on a false system, for an object it does not understand. On this *tabula rasa* Shelley’s abstract imagination proceeded to set up arbitrary monstrosities of ‘equality’ and ‘love,’ which never will be realised among the children of men.

What Bagehot describes is an intelligence essentially unformed, however sure of itself it may be. But then Shelley was never to see the far side of 30—he drowned in a sailing accident off the Italian coast at 29. Most of his political writings possess either youth’s dreamy hopefulness or its confident fury, or they blend these passions in wild intoxication. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), T.S. Eliot is largely right when he declares, “The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence—and there is every reason why they should be.” Shelley’s chronically pubescent mind was in thrall to his tempestuous feelings: mature clarity of thought would require the struggle of a lifetime and be a rare accomplishment when he finally arrived at it. That accomplishment remained largely unknown in his lifetime. *A Philosophical View of Reform* did not appear in print until 1920.

“Poets and philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” he averred in that piece, later deleting philosophers from such tribute in his more famous essay “A Defence of Poetry” (published posthumously in 1840). As a self-declared philosophical poet, he was a better poet than he was a philosopher. And he had to subdue certain of his most flamboyant poetic instincts to write sober philosophical prose, as he did in his most intelligent treatment of politics—which happens to be one of the most impressive political tracts by a poet of his stature. What could he have done had he been granted a longer life? What might he have become had he not been doomed to everlasting youth?

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