

**Shelley, Dr. Leavis and «The  
Ode to the West Wind».**

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"I will sing hymns as I am inspired to sing, but I will sing intelligently too."

1st Corinthians XIV, 15 (NEW ENGLISH BIBLE)

It was, of course, F. R. Leavis who effected the dislodging of Shelley from his revered pinnacle as 'England's greatest lyric poet'. Others had queried his poetic powers before, but no critic had written such a devastating and comprehensive indictment; and the force and precision of much of Leavis's approach is unanswerable. No one would now, for instance, attempt to defend *The Cenci*. And a whole series of Shelley's characteristic 'faults' —and they are not trivial— are laid bare.

Yet Leavis's approach to the *Ode to the West Wind*, (as a central feature of his essay) is open to question, no less than a certain curious selectivity in illustration of other works, besides, in more than one passage, peculiarities of tone.

One might risk the vulgarity of parodying Dr. Leavis's style, and state that one may have been long familiar with his essay on Shelley in *Revaluation*, and on the *Ode to the West Wind* in particular, without having asked the obvious questions. For the force of Leavis's criticism is simple and unequivocal.

Shelley stands condemned on the basis of his supposed poetic theory as expressed in his *A Defence of Poetry*. Which leads to the assertion that "The 'poetical

faculty', we are left no room for doubting, can, of its very nature, have nothing to do with any discipline... demands that active intelligence shall be, as it were, switched off".

Yet even supposing this were a tenable conclusion from Shelley's essay, would it necessarily be true that the poet's practice corresponded to his theory? The notorious discrepancy between Wordsworth's proclaimed proclivities regarding poetic diction and his own poetry might at once arouse suspicion about any such approach. Lawrence's adage 'Never trust the writer, trust the tale' comes to mind.

In any event, Shelley's *Defence* is both erratic and contradictory. But surely a critic whose insistence on accuracy and precision is so admirably and characteristically stamped on his work might have taken into account a crucial paragraph on the first page of Shelley's *Defence*:

"Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to everchanging melody. *But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them.*" (My italics.)

For while the first sentence of the quotation seems to support Leavis's assertion that Shelley "hands poetry over" as it were to automatic writing or whatever, the second categorically insists on the "principle within the human being... which acts otherwise" and in effect orchestrates the promptings of spontaneous inspiration. And that principle, it is clear, is the human intelligence. Or poetic faculty of the kind Coleridge defines as secondary imagination, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create". And surely what Shelley intended by his first

sentence was that inspiration comes as a consequence of experience, and from a source beyond the self, which we cannot call up at will. As Keats put it: "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all". In fact, it may be said that the *Defence* proves precisely the contrary of Leavis's contention.

For the moment, then, having queried the validity of Leavis's taking Shelley's theory as gospel for his argument, and noted the extraordinary failure to refer to the passage quoted above on the very first page of Shelley's *Defence*, the third question that arises is whether *in practice* Leavis's claims in relation to the Ode are valid. Turning first to the question of Shelley's ideas, Leavis quotes T. S. Eliot:

"I can only regret that Shelley did not live to put his poetic gifts, which were certainly of the first order, at the service of more tenable beliefs — which need not have been, for my purposes, beliefs acceptable to me."

And one can only endorse Leavis's comment that "It does... seem worth endeavouring to make finally plain that... it is strictly the 'poetry' one is criticising".

But the curious fact is that Leavis says very little about the "beliefs" or ideas in this poem which he takes as representative. Though in general he accepts Eliot's criticism that in thought Shelley was immature, naïve. And of course a poet who "demands that active intelligence shall be, as it were switched off" is presumably hardly to be taken seriously as a thinker. That is the tenour of the argument.

Leavis's contention that thought and feeling are divorced in Shelley is not a new one. J. S. Mill, in *Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties*, 1833 (revised 1859), produces Shelley as an example of the kind of poetic excellence he believes is paramount:

"The wholes which Imagination constructs... will be indebted to some dominant feeling, not as in other natures to a dominant thought for their unity... In Wordsworth the poetry is almost always the mere setting of a thought... has little even of the appearance of spontaneousness... Shelley is the very reverse of all this... unity of feeling being to him the harmonizing principle which a central idea is to minds of another class..."

And although Leavis sees as a vice what Mill takes for supreme poetic virtue, it is questionable whether either of them is right in their assertions vis-à-vis the *Ode. T. S. Eliot's* charge of untenable beliefs and naïvete might seem to be supported by the conclusion of the *Ode to the West Wind*: if the climax of the poem to which the whole has been building up, "The trumpet of a prophecy" is merely "O Wind, If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" then the prophet's message is lamentable banality. The sort of conclusion fostered by the ponderous commentaries (post-mortem) on Shelley by his wife Mary in her note on *Prometheus Unbound*:

"Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none... That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil... was the cardinal point of his system..."

A comment that might with greater veracity be applied to the system of her father, William Godwin, whose *Political Justice*, it is true, Shelley read and re-read, even after Godwin had already lost faith in his doctrine that:

"Man being... a creature whose actions flow from the simplest principles, who is governed by the apprehension of his understanding, nothing further is requisite but the improvement of his reasoning faculty to make him virtuous and happy."

But while it is true that the very young Shelley, the Shelley of *Queen Mab*, had been intoxicated by Godwinian philosophy (no less than the young Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey had been and as many of the leading minds behind modern British Socialism (1) were subsequently to be), by the time of the *Ode to the West Wind* Shelley's purpose was to reconcile the conflicting elements of Godwinian and Platonic philosophy: the materialist claim that consciousness and will are due to material agency with the belief that all knowledge does not come from the senses or from "necessity". Shelley is searching for a motive for Godwin's "altruism". He finds it in a semi-religious, semi-Platonic conception of Nature. In *Queen Mab* he had adopted the Godwinian conception of Nature as law or Necessity. Now he identifies it with the spirit of love and creation, which he associates with the Platonic One, unifying the many. "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one". Shelley the atheist now believes in divine inspiration.

Leavis states "...it need not be irrelevant to refer, in discussing his poetry, to Plato, Godwin, and other thinkers. But there is nothing grasped in the poetry—". Nevertheless he takes the question of ideas no further.

Yet the apparently facile conclusion of the *Ode* is dispelled as soon as one begins to interpret the poem's symbolism, which incidentally disposes of Leavis's claim— in a passage headed *Shelley and "Othello"*, that what we get with Shelley is "characteristically insistence, elaboration and explicitness instead of concrete realization".

The central question in the poet's mind is whether the wind, which symbolizes, amongst other connotations, the spirit of Nature, acting on the material elements of crea-

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(1) William Morris and George Bernard Shaw, among others.

tion —on earth, air, and sea— as agent of destruction and renewal, may not act in an analogous way on humanity (2). But the storm symbolizes the crisis in (post-French Revolutionary) society, and the “pestilence-stricken multitudes” the suffering masses. (Under the dominion of reaction not only in government, but, with the emergence of Burke’s *Reflecitons on the Revolution in France*, in political theory). Yet poets, “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” offer no inspired leadership. Shelley surely had in mind

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(2) As the creations of Nature are subject to a cyclical rhythm, may not humanity and human civilization also rise and fall only to rise again?

Shelley, we know from the *Defence*, views the decay of civilization as being due to the eclipse of the poetic spirit.

“It is an error to impute the ignorance of the dark ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have contained sprang from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition.”

At a time of social distress in England involving starvation, growing chasms between rich and poor, and, even after Rockingham’s reforms, gross corruption in government, Shelley sees the perpetrators of this misery as those who believe in Benthamite economics. And those who believe in the supremacy of reason in the line of Godwinian enlightenment:

“Undoubtedly the promoters of utility, in this limited sense, have their appointed office in society. Their exertions are of the highest value, so long as they confine their administration of the inferior powers of our nature within the limits due to the superior ones. But whilst the sceptic destroys gross superstitions, let him spare to deface, as some of the French writers have defaced, the eternal truths charactered upon the imagination of men. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines labour, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want...

We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception...”.

Shelley’s theme is identical to that in Dickens’s *Hard Times*: a work greatly admired by Leavis.



his contemporaries: Byron, on the one hand, taking refuge in cynism (3), Keats in Art. Indeed it was Keats who wrote to Shelley:

"A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be God. An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration' selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and load every rift of your subject with ore."

begging Shelley to abjure the role of poet as "legislator of the world" and opt instead for "poesy", the world evoked in the third part of the Ode:

"his summer dreams

The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,  
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,  
Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,  
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
So sweet the sense faints picturing them!

The heavy sensuousness of the verse is so strongly reminiscent as to suggest pastiche of Keats, no less than the escapism to the antique world, to dream, and to the intoxicating world of the senses.

Shelley's fear is that with the failure of imaginative writers the creative spirit may be extinguished in society (and thus his cyclical view of civilization invalidated or

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(3) "...gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age... the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age... But mankind appear to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a *slow, gradual*, silent change. (My italics). Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*.

recovery at best long delayed) and is equally conscious of his own weakness, as a representative poet, of his failure in inspiration and in communication. The wind clearly symbolizes not only the unconstrained freedom and ideal medium of communication that the poet longs for, but also that inspiration that is the benevolent power of the spirit of Nature.

Yet here, in accordance with the theory expressed in that crucial paragraph in the *Defence*, the implication is clear that no mere 'material agency' (in the sense of Godwinian Necessity) will act to transform mankind as with the elements; but mankind being free-willed and "acting otherwise than in the lyre", an awakening of the human spirit must be provoked and an interrelation between material and spiritual achieved.

If the creative spirit can be re-awakened, if it is only in eclipse, "an unextinguished hearth", and the "wingèd seeds" as human ideals are merely dormant in the "dreaming earth", then there is hope that in the future the minds of poets can take inspiration and re-shape it for the general good of humanity. Society may then act in accord with the cosmic powers, the antithesis of which is suggested by the storm — which also evokes the pain and the struggle which will be the price of the re-creation of the spirit.

If this interpretation of the Ode is valid, the *Ode to the West Wind* is no more a poem that "demands that active intelligence shall be, as it were switched off" than it represents a divorce between thought and feeling; nor is it thematically naïve or Utopian dreaming (4). It likewise

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(4) Shelley's emphasis on the possibility of a "slow, gradual" change in society is his Preface to *The Revolt of Islam* has already been noted. His proposals for political change in his *Philosophical View of Reform* (1819), were the type of reforms which the British Parliament enacted in the next 150 years: universal suffrage, women's rights, etc.

disposes both of the charge of narcissism and of Shelley's being "his own hero", once it is realized that he emerges in the poem as a representative poet: and as one who sees himself as having failed (5). Quite the reverse is in fact the case in this poem: for Shelley has succeeded in the supreme aim of the poet, proclaimed in the *Defence*: (rejecting the Keatsian blandishments)

"A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination."

The fact is that it is Leavis who has not 'grasped' the essence of the poem, because he will not see it symbolic-

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(5) This is borne out by the second draft of the Ode: (again, my italics)

*And what art thou presumptuous who profanest  
The wreath to mighty Poets only due  
Even whilst, like a forgotten name thou wanest  
Touch not those leaves which for the eternal few  
Who wander o'er the Paradise of fame  
In sacred dedication ever grew —  
One of the crowd thou art, — without a name  
Ah friend 'tis the false laurel which I wear  
And though it seem like it is not the same  
As that which bound Milton's immortal hair  
Its dew is poison, and the hopes which quicken  
Under its chilling shade, though seeming fair  
Are flowers which die almost before they sicken  
And that I walk thus proudly crowned withal  
Is that I know it may be thunderstricken  
And this is my distinction, if I fall  
I shall not creep out of the vital day  
To common dust nor wear a common pall  
But as my hopes were fire, so my decay  
Shall be as ashes covering them. Oh, Earth  
Oh friends, if when my — has ebb'd away  
One spark be unextinguished of that hearth  
Kindled in*

Second drafting of *Ode to the West Wind*

ally. Indeed, he could not be more wrong about Shelley's alleged reliance on passive inspiration, for as has been argued, the central theme of the *Ode to the West Wind* is the necessity of re-awakening of active, vital imagination.

Nor is the poem technically the product of a mind writing with active intelligence switched off. Actually, it is a technical masterpiece. Superbly organized, the Ode is structured in five parts based on Shelley's very skilful adaptation of the sonnet form (in which he is as original as Donne or Hopkins, poets with whom he is contrasted unfavourably by Leavis), each part incorporating 4 stanzas of terza rima and a closing couplet. The terza rima is extraordinarily effective in evoking the rushing "sweeping" movement of the wind (a quality Leavis acknowledges) on account of the concatenation of stanzas mimetic of the theme of unconstrained freedom, the central line of each verse linked to the first of its successor, concluding on a climatic couplet. The organization of material thematically is equally adroit, the first three parts developing symbolically through the central images of leaf, cloud and wave the interaction between the spirit of Nature and the elements, while the first stanza of Part IV acts as résumé of the first three parts and is pivotal to the development of the Ode. Shelley now invokes the necessary interrelation between poets and the spirit of Nature; the first stanza of Part V

"Make me thy lyre..."

(clearly parallel to the crucial passage, unquoted by Leavis, at the outset of the *Defence*) moving the poem thematically to the concluding question.

Technically, then, the poem is the very reverse of one that could "have nothing to do with any discipline": the unmistakable care and artistry in the selection and handling of stanza form, and the organizational power in the

organic development of the whole being outstanding qualities. Architectonic genius is part of the triumph of the Ode. And Leavis's fixing on "the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean" as an image the poet could not see before him is unconvincing to anyone who has observed a storm on the ocean, where sea and sky are locked in inextricable streaks of mist and cloud, perfectly conveyed in the poem. And of course Leavis overlooks the fact that the interlocking of the elements of sea and sky is bound up with the thematic question of the interrelation of matter and spirit.

The truth is, as T. S. Eliot confessed, that Shelley's "poetic gifts... were certainly of the first order", or, as Wordsworth put it "Shelley is one of the best artists of us all —I mean in workmanship of style".

The *Ode to the West Wind* is characteristic of the best of Shelley as Leavis asserts: but it is poetry of an altogether higher plane than Leavis can here rise to. A poem as with, for instance, Hopkins's *The Windhover*, the more one looks into further layers of meaning emerge through symbol. A poem that is true art, not preaching or indulging overtly in the "magnanimity" of which Keats complains and of which Shelley is often crudely guilty. It is precisely the kind of poem where Shelley is supreme; where ideas are developed symbolically, leaving aside the loose structure of the long narrative works, in which human figures emerge as abstracts in black or white and where too many of Leavis's criticism are applicable.

Moreover it must be insisted that Leavis is curiously selective in the essay on Shelley in *Revaluation*: not only in the passages he chooses to quote from the *A Defence of Poetry*, but in, for example, his production of the poem *England* as an illustration of Shelley's handling of the sonnet. Leavis describes

"The contrast between the unusual strength (for

Shelley) of the main body of the sonnet and the pathetic weakness of the final couplet...".

One notes the parenthetical sneer. And wonders why he did not choose a sonnet of the compactness and force of *Ozymandias*, its conclusion powerful on account of the understatement and ironic humour of the piece. (We are reminded of Leavis's reiterated charge of "emphasis and insistence serving instead of realization". And again, "insistence, elaboration and explicitness instead of concrete realization"). Is it that it might not fit in with the tenour of the essay? That one cannot believe of F. R. Leavis. Any more than one can account for the attribution of faults characteristic rather of the worst of Shelley, ignored or exonerated by the critic with regard to his notoriously preferred writers. (D. H. Lawrence, for instance, has most of Shelley's alleged vices). Or for the fact that at times the style and tone of the essay are just this side of jeering.

Leavis states in the Introduction to *Revaluation*

"I think it the business of the critic to perceive for himself, to make the finest and sharpest relevant discriminations, and to state his findings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as possible. Then even if he is wrong he has forwarded the business of criticism he has exposed himself as openly as possible to correction; for what criticism undertakes is the profitable discussion of literature."

That, one can be certain, is the spirit in which Leavis set out to write the essay, including as a central feature the critique of the *Ode to the West Wind*; and as a great critic who has been responsible for a fundamental change of attitude to Shelley he must be answered. But to account for his appraisal of the Ode, and the uncharacteristic inconsistency in the essay, one can only assume that he was, by fits and starts, writing with critical intelligence switched on and off.