VINTAGE

BEING SHELLEY

ANN WROE

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About the Book

Four questions consumed Shelley and coloured everything he wrote. Who, or what, was he? What was his purpose? Where had he come from? And where was he going? He sought the answers in order to free and empower not only himself, but the whole human race. His revolution would shatter the earth's illusions, shock men and women with new visions, find true Love and Liberty and take everyone with him.

Ann Wroe's book takes the life of one of England's greatest poets and turns it inside out, bringing us the life of the poet, rather than the man. The result is a journey that is as passionate and exhilarating as it is astonishing. This is Shelley as he has never been seen before.

About the Author

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P. B. Shelley
Sketched from life
by E. E. Williams
Pisa. Nov.r 27
1821

List of Illustrations

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ANN WROE

Being Shelley

The Poet’s Search for Himself

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS an experiment. It is an attempt to write the life of a poet from the inside out: that is, from the perspective of the creative spirit struggling to discover its true nature. It is a book about Shelley the poet, rather than Shelley the man. The distinction was one he himself was sure of. 'The poet & the man', he wrote in 1821, 'are two different natures; though they exist together they may be unconscious of each other, & incapable of deciding on each other's powers & effects by any reflex act.'[1]

The man who was Shelley is not neglected. He was the dragging shadow with which the soul had to live. But the usual priorities of biography are reversed. Rather than writing the life of a man into which poetry erupts occasionally, my hope is to reconstruct the world of a poet into which earthly life keeps intruding. This, I believe, is how things were for Shelley. The lives of great writers and thinkers are not principally a succession of ordinary events in the day-to-day world. They live, and often move, elsewhere.

Sheer astonishment at Shelley's poems made me write this book; astonishment, and regret that his spiritual force seems to have been largely forgotten. In the twentieth century his biography was rewritten to recover, rightly, his political radicalism. As a result he has been brought severely to earth, as if this is the only way to make him strong, sharp and relevant to us. But if the life of the spirit is man's most vital resource and means of change – as Shelley believed it is – he has truly revolutionary things to suggest to us. To dwell on his metaphysics does not blunt his challenge or still his urgency at all.

My sources have been almost entirely Shelley's own words: in poetry, prose, letters, recorded conversations,

and especially his notebooks, preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Huntingdon Library in San Marino, California. Of the mountain of literary criticism on Shelley I have read what seems best. But his is the only mind whose labyrinths I want to explore – through his confident, flowing essays, his scratched-out, stumbling efforts to describe his visions, and also in his pauses.

This book does not proceed chronologically. It takes seriously Shelley's statement that a poet 'participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not'.[2] Its narrative track is the poet's quest for truth through the steadily rarefying elements of earth, water, air and fire. It is an adventure story of Shelley's search to discover, in his words, 'whence I came, and where I am, and why'.[3]

These questions enthralled and obsessed him. Everything Shelley proposed and pursued had its basis in his search for the meaning of life and the truth of his being. His friends and lovers – Byron, Mary, Leigh Hunt – complained about his devotion to 'mystifying metaphysics' and wished he could be weaned away from it, but Shelley's emphasis made perfect sense.[4] No revolution in the moral and social order could take place until he, and all men and women, knew themselves for what they were and could unlock the true power they possessed.

Some readers may complain, as Shelley's friends did when they read his works, that this book is not about 'real life'. I would disagree. And, more to the point, so would he.

Prelude: The voyage out

IN THE MORNING he set sail. The high sun beat on the water, and the wind was soft. A push from the shore set him rocking across the shallows, above his own shadow on the rippled sand. The keel dipped, and the ink on it began to blur and run. But it did not yet ship water, and he was safe.

The whole craft juddered, from stem to stern, as it breasted the continuous waves that formed and swelled before him. His ballast, a halfpenny piece, held him steady; beneath it lay the hull, porous and slowly softening, inscribed with the words *Your most Obt. Servant.* He was not most obedient, but bold and exploring. He bucked and circled, skimming the surface of the dim tremendous deep.

Wind filled every part of him, though invisibly. The pinched white peaks of his sails were swollen and crinkled with the pressing air. At the stern the wind was a rough god, buffeting him. The whole world was motion and breath; stirring his hair, playing over his skin, blowing in every nerve and vein of him, a shell of woven paper intrepidly and madly on the sea.[1]

Time could not touch him. On land perhaps an hour passed, as impatient friends waited for the game to end. On the water he essayed a full Odyssey, or a voyage of the Argonauts that might stretch out for years. He passed Charybdis and the isle of the Sirens, dipping dangerously close. Sea monsters rose with the plop of a trout, and the wide concentric ripples rocked and disoriented him. Glittering wavelets almost swallowed him in the dazzle of the sunlight they reflected. At all times the contest went on

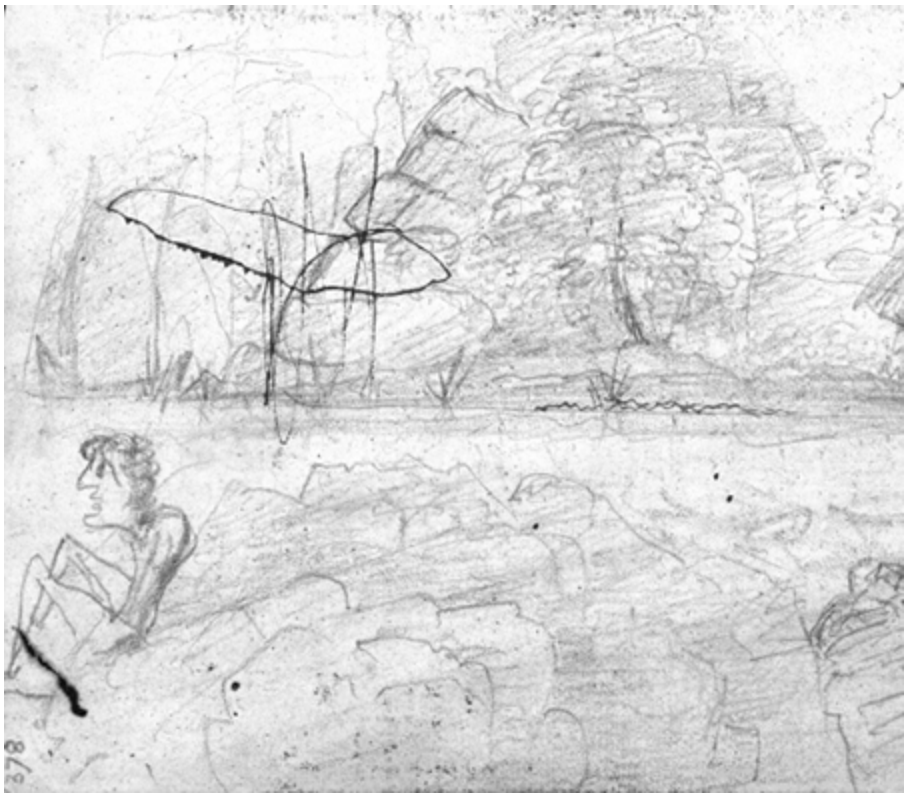
between his desire and the wind’s control, at variance or at one, as long as his substance lasted.

To the casual eye he was on shore, a tall, stooped young man with tangled hair and yet more boats in his pockets. He was, as his friend Hogg once said, the Demiurgus of Plato’s *Timaeus*, constantly creating both men and the lower gods, equipping them with star-souls and setting them afloat. The remark made him laugh like the giant he seemed to be, filling the horizon of his little fleet with cataclysmic splashings. Yet in reality he was out on the huge sea adventuring, one of them.

The end was still unknown. After years the tiny boat might reach the other side, all obstacles triumphantly circumnavigated, to be swept up joyfully in the Demiurgus’s arms and crammed inside his jacket. Or the wind would take him, twirl him and overset him. Water would soak his body, and with a rapturous rush of cold he would go down into the unimagined depths.

His vanishing would be so swift and silent that scarcely anyone would notice. The evening would draw in; supper would beckon; passers-by would saunter past, lighting their pipes as the last rays of sun faded across the water. His body would go on falling through the blue deep, softly, like paper. He had once told a small boy, watching with him, that this would be his favourite of all deaths.[2]

Earth



1

Substance

IN LATER LIFE, Charles MacFarlane recalled the moment more or less exactly. He was standing in the Royal Bourbon Museum in Naples in February 1819, admiring a statue assumed to be of Agrippina, when someone at his shoulder murmured words. The remark had something to do with the statue's gracefulness, little enough in itself, though it seemed 'that sort of commonplace which is not heard from the vulgar'. MacFarlane remembered rather the voice, soft and strangely touching. The speaker was a gentleman of twenty-five or twenty-six, English, thin, with a delicate and negligent, even wild, appearance. They had not been introduced.

Falling in together, they wandered from statue to statue for the rest of the afternoon. His new escort talked avidly of Beauty, Justice, the Venus di Medici ('all over a goddess!'), love of the Ideal and the astonishments of modern archaeology. At the end he shook MacFarlane's hand, thanked him heartily, and disappeared.[1] MacFarlane realised that he still had no idea who his 'unknown friend' had been. No name had been proffered, no visiting card. Instead he was left with fragments of deep thought, like leaves from a private notebook.

His mysterious companion had a past. You could learn from his acquaintances that he was Percy Bysshe Shelley, born at Field Place, Horsham, Sussex, in 1792, the first son of Timothy Shelley, landowner, sometime MP for New Shoreham and, since 1815, a baronet. The family was large: Shelley had four younger sisters and a brother 14 years his junior. He had been schooled at Syon House Academy and Eton, where he excelled in Latin composition; and at University College, Oxford, where after one term, in

March 1811, he had been expelled with his best friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, for writing a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism.* He had eloped the next August, aged nineteen, with a schoolgirl of sixteen, Harriet Westbrook; and then, that marriage having failed, had run off in 1814 with the almost-as-young Mary Godwin, daughter of William Godwin, the philosopher, and Mary Wollstonecraft, a champion of the rights of women. With Mary and her sixteen-year-old step-half-sister, Jane (later Claire) Clairmont, he had journeyed for six weeks through France and Germany in a sort of *ménage à trois*, and had set up a household with the girls on returning. As a result of this extraordinary behaviour his father had severed all connection with him, leaving Shelley for a time almost destitute; and despite his eventual marriage to Mary Godwin, the Lord Chancellor in 1817 had deprived him, on the double grounds of immorality and atheism, of the two infant children of his first marriage.

From boyhood he had written poems, as well as political tracts and the odd romantic novel. According to taste these were tedious, blasphemous or immoral, though a few saw beauty and genius in them. For a while, fearing that he had Jacobin tendencies and meant to revolutionise England in the style seen so recently in France, the government watched him, but most of his writings proved too obscure to be subversive. Disheartened and discredited, and convinced (for he had never retracted either his atheism or his singular notions of morality) that his two children by Mary Godwin would also be taken from him, he had left England in March 1818 for Italy. And there he seemed likely to remain.

MacFarlane later learned a little of this, including Shelley’s name, from mutual friends who formally introduced them. On a subsequent day they drove out in a carriage as far as Pompeii, hurtling crazily along to the

ruins and back, and visited a macaroni factory where his companion, like a schoolboy, exulted in the giant levers that pressed out the pasta and, as he left, gave his small change to beggars. Of his life, condition and history he continued to provide no details. Much of the afternoon was spent sitting by the sea on curious lava rocks, watching until sunset the tranquil waves breaking on the sand, in the sort of enforced intimacy in which English gentlemen may sometimes feel induced to talk of schooldays or love affairs. In all that time, Shelley said nothing. MacFarlane, looking at his sad, lined face, concluded that he should not break the silence.

Shelley's past seemed hateful to him. For most of his life he looked passionately forward, taking, as his friend Hogg observed at Oxford, 'no pleasure in the retrospect'.[2] He read history occasionally, but out of duty rather than pleasure; his historical dramas were aberrations in his career. The 'record of crimes & miseries' that men had left on earth was testimony merely to the worst of human nature.[3] Facts, Shelley wrote, in poetry or history or in the lives of men, 'are not what we want to know'.[4] Sometimes he used the word 'cered' of memories, to imply that he had coated them, like corpses, with impermeable wax.

A few stories only he told frequently and with zest. One was of stabbing a boy in the hand with a knife (sometimes a fork) at Eton, pinning him viciously to his desk on some noble and desperate impulse; another was a fight, related at the highest pitch of horror, with an intruder in Wales who had tried to murder him. Neither may have been true. 'His imagination', one friend recalled, 'often presented past events to him as they might have been, not as they were.'[5] Hogg's view was less poetic and more blunt: 'He was altogether incapable of rendering an account of any transaction whatsoever, according to the strict and precise truth, and the bare naked realities of actual life.'[6] Again,

imagination was to blame. Indulgently, two of Shelley's sisters remembered his boyhood account of a visit to some ladies in the village, their conversation, his wanderings in their garden along a winding turf bank and a filbert walk, when he had never been there.[7]

In 1814, when they eloped and fled to France, Shelley and Mary Godwin began a joint journal. Very quickly his entries dwindled, then stopped. The few he made gave the doings of 'S.' in the third person, at one remove from himself. In 1816, Mary tried to persuade him to write a story based on his early life; he started, but could not keep it up, any more than he could follow her desire to put more human interest in his poems. Whatever he had been since birth he endeavoured to leave behind. He could not help it that his mother had a miniature of him, sweet and bright-eyed, with three rows of buttons on his best jacket; or that his four younger sisters were full of stories of him, the adored and bullying elder brother, with his terrifying tales and his rough garden games. His friend Edward Trelawny once told him that he had met two of his sisters at an evening party. Shelley, after giving him a hard, cold stare, walked away from him and out of the room.[8]

His writings gave few more clues. Experiences of boyhood made a line here and there: shells found on the beach, a breathless run in the night woods, hard-boiled eggs and radishes stowed in his pockets, and a walk at school beside a mossy fence with a boy he thought 'exquisitely beautiful', their arms round each other's shoulders.[9] But such memories were no sooner found than they were suppressed again. All that mattered to him of his childhood he seemed to commit to a notebook in 1820, in several strongly underlined verses of the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha:

I myself also am a mortal man, like to all, & the offspring of him that was first made of the Earth.[10]

And in my mothers womb was fashioned to be flesh in the time of ten months, being compacted in blood, of the seed of man and the pleasure that came with sleep.

And when I was born I drew in the common air, & fell upon the earth which is of like nature, & the first voice which I uttered was crying, as all others do

I was nursed in swaddling clothes & that with cares.

For there is no King that had any other beginning of birth.[11]

* * *

His own beginning was as a Sussex boy. He had been pushed into existence in a first-floor bedroom at Field Place near Horsham, a red-brick Tudor house with Georgian attachments nestled in a snug dip of copses and lawns. There was no view, save of near slopes or outbuildings; his child's world was circumscribed and close as a womb. A Sussex nurse with a flat, burring accent rocked him in her arms. He was embraced by Established Anglicanism in the nearby church at Warnham, crouched among yews and tombs. His ancestors lay there under slabs of black stone engraved with three whelk shells, the family arms, or were commemorated on marble plaques in the small, drab Shelley chapel, where those of his family who cared to could say their prayers.

Until the age of ten he was schooled in Warnham vicarage, a country education, though reams of Latin verses rang already in his head. He could put on rustic clothes and act the yokel for fun, toting a truss of hay on his shoulder and riding in farmers' carts. Around him and

into St Leonard’s Forest stretched Shelley fields, farms and stands of timber that would one day be his.

Here and there in his poems he placed Sussex touches: shadows outracing the wind on the long grass slopes of the Downs, a dog herding sheep to the corner of a field, spiders’ webs in hayrick and hedge, bats beating against the wired window of a dairy. Grey moths fluttered out of heaps of new-mown, still-moving grass; over the woods, a flock of rooks rose at the crack of a farmer’s gun. Small clouds in the sky were ‘crudded’, like a dish of curds, or scattered out quietly like sheep grazing. Several poems carried memories of water and flowers observed at Warnham pond through a grille of reeds, branches and his own small fingers locked against the sun. A nightingale’s song, too, might suddenly catch him,

> And now to the hushed ear it floats
> Like field smells known in infancy,
> Then failing, soothes the air again.

At times he thought himself a countryman. In 1811, on his first marriage to Harriet Westbrook, he described himself in the register as ‘farmer, Sussex’. He told friends that he meant to manage his estates efficiently. When he later satirised the placid working folk of England he made them Sussex pigs in low-thatched sties, munching on rutabaga and red oats, while the government sharpened its knives to flay their bristled hides and make sausages from their spilling blood and guts.[12]

In his first conversation with Hogg at Oxford (late, cold, the fire burning down), Shelley glowed with enthusiasm for agricultural chemistry.[13] Breathlessly, he expatiated on the mystery of how some lands were fertile, others barren, when a spadeful of soil from one appeared the same as the other; on how food, so readily reduced to carbon, might be made from new, surprising substances; and on how, if water

could be manufactured, the deserts of Africa might be transformed into ‘rich meadows and vast fields of maize and rice’. Later he read eagerly the lectures of Humphry Davy, the greatest chemist of the day, who believed that almost all soil could be made better. (‘Manure is useful’, Shelley noted, ‘and may be converted into organised bodies . . . Chemistry a correct instrument for agricultural improvement.’)[14]

Pages of an 1819 pocketbook were also filled with notes on the yield per acre of potatoes and rutabaga, the chow of the pigs; to feed people on these would be more economical and more moral, he had concluded, than feeding them on meat.[15] The regenerated earth Shelley dreamed of was covered with wheatfields, an image so captivating to him that he applied it also to the ‘pastured’ sea, newly reclaimed from Chaos:

> like plains of corn
> Swayed by the summer air.

At the deepest level, earth and himself were not so different. Their substance was shared. All matter, as he knew from his eager reading of Lucretius at school, was made of minute, permanent, primordial atoms, ‘first-beginnings’ of ‘single solidness’. These moved in a void, struck by random blows of Fate until they aggregated as minerals, or grasses, or inky-fingered boys. Water and air were made of far finer *primordia*, and aether, or subtle fire, of the smallest atoms there could be. But all were composed of the same ‘fixed seeds’, hard and indestructible, eternally gathering and dispersing. Shelley told classmates that he was never so delighted as to discover that there were no such chemical elements as earth, air, water and fire.[16] As Lucretius put it, the same elements, changed only a little in their relations and

combinations, made up both *lignis* . . . *et ignis*, trees and flame. And Shelley, such as he was.[17]

Evidently, the seeds and their structures could never be seen with his naked eye. Yet as closely as was feasible, he stared at things. He got right down beside the plate to study pink fatty slabs of bacon or the jutting crag of a teacake. Pressed against fir trees, he inspected and licked the oozy runnels of resin. He read with his face only inches from the page, and watched tiny insects in the palm of his hand with fervent dedication.

Some friends thought he was short-sighted, with his large and slightly protuberant eyes. Mary in Italy ordered a gold-rimmed spyglass with a number 10 lens for myopia, perhaps for him. Yet Trelawny thought all his faculties 'marvellously acute', and Shelley himself sometimes complained not of dim vision but the reverse. Under 'unnatural and keen excitement', he once explained, 'I find the very blades of grass & the boughs of distant trees present themselves to me with microscopical distinctness.'[18] Each object, somehow, had 'being clearer than its own could be'. Yet after that clarity and intensity he would take for hours to the sofa, lethargic and miserable without knowing why.

His senses, supposedly, were the ultimate and only source of knowledge about the world. So taught Locke, Hume, Helvetius and a whole procession of later, mostly French, philosophers. Shelley had no other reference point on which he could depend; what he could neither see nor feel, he could not trust. To negate, as the immaterialists did, 'that actual world to which our senses introduce us' seemed absurd.[19] The earth into which he had fallen crying – real, tangible and beautiful as it seemed – thrust itself at him, demanding to be believed.

One of his most treasured possessions, from boyhood onwards, was a solar microscope in a heavy mahogany box

that projected, on a sheet or a wall, giant images of the animalculae that wriggled in vinegar, or the overlapping plates of a fly's wing, or the mites entombed in cheese. In 1812, at the age of nineteen, he declared this instrument essential for his studies in 'a branch of philosophy'.[20] As he viewed his specimens, lining them up in the shaft of light thrown through a window-shutter, he was taking apart the tiny bits of a solidly material universe: entangling his swift wings in atoms, as he wrote of Lucretius later.[21] And he himself was nothing else. Laid under a lens, he too would swarm and flicker as the *primordia* moved in him.

He believed with Erasmus Darwin, whose books on science and Nature he also devoured as a schoolboy, that the minute worlds he saw suffered and felt as he did. All Nature was animated and, with even bigger and better microscopes, would doubtless be shown to be 'but a mass of organized animation'.[22] In *Queen Mab*, his first visionary poem of a perfected world, written in 1812, the Fairy Queen herself also saw to the hidden pulse of microscopic things.

'I tell thee that those viewless beings,
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
Of the impassive atmosphere,
Think, feel and live like man . . .
And the minutest throb
That through their frame diffuses
The slightest, faintest motion,
Is fixed and indispensable . . .'[23]

From his earliest years of scientific enquiry Shelley pictured Nature as one concurring whole, with an iron chain of Necessity binding the smallest to the mightiest. He himself was in this chain, a mere agglomeration of responding atoms. He did not choose to act well or badly, just as he could not choose whether to believe or disbelieve

in any notion or system put before him. ‘Motive is to voluntary action in the human mind’, he wrote in his notes to *Queen Mab*, ‘what cause is to effect in the material universe.’[24] Liberty, in Hume’s words, was merely ‘a false sensation’. ‘It is impossible to deny,’ he had told a correspondent in 1811, ‘but that the turn which my mind has taken, originated from the conquest of England by William of Normandy.’[25]

What had set this system going in which he moved and lived? Clearly not the Jewish-Christian God, for Hume had abolished all respectable arguments for such a belief, and Pliny had drawn an irresistible picture of ‘God’ as impersonal power, *‘the existing power of existence*’, as Shelley termed it.[26] Until he could ‘REALLY feel’ the being of a God, he explained in 1811, ‘I must be content with the substitute reason.’[27] Whatever unknown power or imperative lay behind the material universe, it was not an organism and had no personal connection with human beings. Prayers were made to it in vain.

The fact that something *was*, as Shelley argued in *The Necessity of Atheism*, did not demand a designer and a cause. The fact that *he* existed did not demand that he had been created, beyond the basic generative act by his father and his mother. If you found a watch lying on the ground, never having seen a watch before, you would not automatically assume (unless you were Shelley’s father or his father’s favourite theologian, Paley) that a Great Designer had made it. It might be merely ‘a thing of Nature’, a combination of matter not encountered before. Any ‘miracle’ was either this, or a plain lie. Besides, a creator would himself need creating, and so on *ad infinitum* and *ad absurdum.*

The universe had probably always existed, and would go on operating eternally, according to the laws of its own

nature. Shelley pressed that argument too into *Queen Mab*, the earliest repository of his atheism and his hopes.

> ‘ . . . let every seed that falls
> In silent eloquence unfold its store
> Of argument; infinity within,
> Infinity without, belie creation . . .’[28]

Nil posse creari/ de nilo, as Lucretius said.[29] Nothing could be made of nothing, or return to nothing. Instead the primordial seeds, following their fixed laws and limitations, constantly grouped into forms, resolved to singleness and merged into new forms again. Shelley’s notion of ‘creation’ was arrangement and organisation of this sort, nothing more. Unending mutability was the nature of existence. Around these forms, in the infinite void – the ‘intense inane’ in his words – free play was allowed to the blows of blind Necessity, or whatever force held sway there. And that was all there was in the world, or in him.

Chance atoms came together: Shelley lived. He would die when by some stroke they dispersed again, into the waiting grave of the Earth around him. In the small space of time intervening he was ‘a mass of electrified clay’.[30] No act or thought or transgression was truly his own, but marked the operation of eternal and immutable laws. Reason told him this was so. A high, remote spirit-voice mocked him as ‘Atom-born!’, and laughed at any presumption to think otherwise.[31]

* * *

Instinctively, though, he hated earth to sully him. On long Sussex walks with his sisters, when the heavy blue-brown Wealden clay had smeared their shoes and stockings, he would carry the little girls home in his arms but forbid their feet to touch his clothes. At Eton he roared with pain when

leather footballs, caked and soaked from the field, were kicked deliberately and hard against the boy who would not play games. Near Oxford once, in the finery of a new blue coat, he became incensed when a farmyard mastiff forced him into cow dung and deep black mud. ‘Clogs’ and ‘clods’ of earth jammed the fine mechanism of thinking minds, his own and others’. ‘Filth’ was almost the strongest word in his lexicon, a spasm of horror.

Earth was not his element, either in its substance or its society. He did not belong. The point was made in a notebook fragment of 1821:

> I would not be, that which another is—
> I would not be equal below above
> Anything human. I would make my bliss
> A solitude! . . .[32]
> And though my form might move
> Like a ~~vain cloud~~ through a wilderness
> Of mountains, o’er this world; I am not of
> Its shadows or its sunbeams—

Beside his half-hidden child-self there always walked another boy. Like him, this child had been born to wealth, but he was neither happy nor comfortable. Mocked, misunderstood, touched already with divine inspiration, he was a Poet-child who lingered and dreamed alone. When Shelley read Byron’s *The Lament of Tasso*, a romanticised verse-life of Italy’s sixteenth-century heroic poet, the sixth canto made his head ‘wild with tears’.[33] This boy of ‘delicate susceptibilities and elevated fancies’, was too much like another he knew. Byron’s lines were the history of himself.

> And then they smote me, and I did not weep,
> But cursed them in my heart, and to my haunt
> Return’d and wept alone, and dream’d again

The visions . . .[34]

Shelley said he had been beaten too, by boys as well as masters, though they could not tame him. He told friends that he had been twice expelled from Eton, already a fighter for liberty and equality against the system of 'fagging', or doing chores, for the senior boys. Contemporaries remembered no expulsions, but instead a prankster and a brawler, a tall, slovenly looking boy (though also like 'a girl in Boy's clothes'), who flailed around with his fists and was fearsomely violent when thwarted. Yet in his mind he was the quiet, trembling youth at the edge of the playing field, already dedicated to his calling, listening to the elements as though these alone had truth to impart to him.

At Eton one tutor alone, Dr James Lind, had befriended him. The old gentleman, tall, white-haired and with 'supernatural spirit' in his eyes, had talked to him for hours, nursed him through a fever and introduced him to Plato, Herschel and Erasmus Darwin, opening his mind to wonders of Socratic philosophy, natural science, steam-power and the stars. In Lind's library Shelley first read William Godwin's *Political Justice*, the dense treatise on equality and practical philanthropy that most keenly developed his urge to reform the world.[35] Teacher and pupil cursed George III as they drank their tea together.

From these beginnings, Dr Lind entered the Poet-child's life. In *Prince Athanase*, an unfinished poem of 1817 that tracked Shelley's imagined history, he became the philosopher Zonoras, 'the last whom superstition's blight/ Had spared in Greece', tutoring the young prince in a flame-lit tower from which light streamed across the sea.[36] One 'rainy even' they read Plato's *Symposium* together, perhaps for the first time. Shelley then deleted that English, Eton rain, inserting instead a beach where they walked, talking Plato, as the moon set.

In his idealised past, his childhood contained no school or family. At times even Dr Lind was dismissed. All teachers were ‘tyrants’. ‘I have known no tutor or adviser not excepting my father’, Shelley told Godwin, ‘from whose lessons and suggestions I have not recoiled with disgust.’[37] His hero-self grew up alone in some glen, or mountain, or wood. His teachers and playmates were the trees, the wind, the waves and the stars. ‘Solemn vision and bright silver dream’ were all the instruction he needed or received.’[38]

In his preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, his epic 1817 poem of idealised French Revolution-making, Shelley described his own education as a Poet. No desks or canes were mentioned. Instead,

> I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes and the sea, and the solitude of forests: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate . . . I have been a wanderer among distant fields, I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars come forth . . . I have seen populous cities, and have watched the passions which rise and spread, and sink and change, amongst assembled multitudes of men.

Of all those childhood experiences, real or imagined, one had marked him above all others. This was his sudden awakening, on one particular morning, to the shadow of the Spirit of Beauty in the world. After this he became a fighter for Liberty and an insatiate seeker after Beauty, Love and Truth, obsessions that never left him. He was made aware, in a moment, of what his purpose was.

He had not dreamed this. Several of his poems described the moment of conversion, but enclosed it in details too vague to pinpoint where or when it had occurred.[39] Again, facts were unimportant. Shelley mentioned only ‘a fresh

May-dawn', 'glittering grass', harsh voices from a nearby schoolroom. In one draft, he was wandering among meadows and trees while shouting schoolmates pushed past him.[40] Whether this was Syon House or Eton, he was indifferent. The visitation had happened despite teachers and despite school. Nothing mattered except the 'bright shadow' that had fallen on him and his own boyish promise, spoken aloud, to love and to obey.

> And then I clasped my hands and looked around—
> —But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,
> Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground—
> So, without shame, I spake: '—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.' I then controlled
> My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

In later poems the tears and ecstasy happened under 'the breathless heavens', on the sea-shore, or among night ruins. Beauty's shadow visited him not once, but often, in 'visioned wanderings' quite removed from earthly things:

> far aloft,
> In the clear golden prime of my life's dawn,
> Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,
> Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
> Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves
> Of wonder-level dream . . .[41]

In other writings Beauty's shade was not to be retrieved. In 'Una Favola', an unfinished story written in Italian in 1820–21, Shelley described a young man awakened by love at the age of fifteen and led by veiled female figures through a hidden sexual labyrinth of pines, cypresses, cedars and