

**NOTE-BOOK OF THE
SHELLEY SOCIETY,
FIRSTS SESSION,
MARCH 10TH, 1886, PART I**

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SHELLEY SOCIETY

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THE SHELLEY SOCIETY'S NOTE-BOOK.

PART I.





NOTEBOOK

OF

THE SHELLEY SOCIETY.

EDITED BY THE HONORARY SECRETARIES.

FIRST SESSION, 1886.

INAUGURAL MEETING,
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10th, 1886.

THE Society's Inaugural Meeting was held on Wednesday evening, the 10th March, in the Botany Theatre of University College, Gower Street. This large room was crowded with members and their friends, fully five hundred being present. Dr. F. J. Furnivall took the chair, and on the platform were Messrs. H. Buxton Forman, A. Forman, T. J. Wise, W. B. Tegetmeier, H. Sweet, B. Dobell, R. A. Potts, J. Todhunter, S. E. Preston, and others of the committee. Also Miss Alma Murray, Mr. Henry A. Jones, Mr. Leonard S. Outram, Messrs. H. S. Salt, J. J. Rossiter, T. C. Abbott, and others closely connected with the Society.

The Chairman regretted the absence of Mr. W. M. Rossetti owing to the very serious illness of a relation, and expressed the indebtedness of the Society to Mr. Stopford Brooke for coming forward to give them a lecture on Shelley, especially as that was not his first appearance on the platform that day.

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The Rev. Stopford Brooke, in stating the objects of the Society, said that the humour of about a hundred persons might alone be considered a good reason for the existence of any Society whatever, but the founders of the Shelley Society desired to connect together all that would throw light on the poet's personality and his work, to ascertain the truth about him, to issue reprints, and above all to do something to further the objects of Shelley's life and work, and perhaps to better understand and love a genius which was ignored and abused in his own time, but which had risen from the grave into which the critics had trampled it to live in the hearts of men.

There are those, however, the lecturer continued, who do not love Shelley's poetry. Mr. Matthew Arnold finds in it an incurable want of sound subject-matter, and consequently a large element of unsubstantiality. He considers a volume of selections from Wordsworth or Byron of far more value than a similar selection from Shelley. Others are of opinion that the comparison of such selections really proves Mr. Arnold to be in the wrong. Byron is inferior to Shelley in what Mr. Arnold calls true seriousness of substance and manner, as well as in felicity of diction. As a serious attempt to grasp the problem of good and evil, Byron's "Cain" cannot bear comparison with "Prometheus Unbound." Byron was rarely true to himself; and this lack of sincerity will always prevent the world from loving him as it loves Shelley. The high praise which Shelley gave to Byron did not imply that he had not detected the weaknesses of Byron's work. Shelley's remark that "Cain" was the finest thing in poetry since "Paradise Regained" evinces his hatred of orthodox religion rather than his critical acumen. He had no such unreserved opinion as Mr. Arnold imagines about Byron's work. He by no means approved of Byron's poetic method, and was indignant with the spirit that animated "Childe Harold," regarding the life and temper of Byron at the time of which he wrote as an insane and self-willed folly, in which he deliberately hardened himself. In short, Shelley did not consider Byron possessed the qualities which make a poet consistently great. This estimate was not the

offspring of jealousy ; Shelley had too little care for the applause of the world to feel annoyed at Byron's influence as a poet becoming greater than his own.

Shelley's truthfulness extended to his descriptions of natural scenery. He gives us with closest accuracy, not, like Keats, minute details, but the tone, the spirit, the changing impression, of the scene. It is interesting to notice in "Alastor," for instance, how the character of the stream varies with the changing thoughts in the wanderer's mind. Shelley, like Turner, painted his impressions, but the impressions were invariably true to nature. Byron obviously wrote in the studio, not face to face with the living world ; but Shelley, even when most victimized by his exuberant imagination, never fails to give an accurate picture of nature's beauty. For faithfulness and splendour of descriptive power the representation of the Alpine valley in the "Prometheus" stands alone in the poetry of savage and solitary Nature.

The pessimistic spirit is shared by so many in the present age, that the sombre colouring, the element of discontent, in Shelley's poems has a peculiar interest for us. But we must not take this to be his prevailing temper. The preface to "Alastor" is evidence of his disapproval of the despairing view of human life. He felt it deeply, and wrote of it often, but he wrote in order to get away from a condition of life with which he did not sympathize. It is most unfair to say that Shelley had no serious human aims.

Much that Shelley wrote in relation to love cannot be called serious. His fancies are woven of ether and fine fire, but they are nevertheless true as expressions of passing phases of feeling. Life is not wholly made up of what we call realities, and we may be grateful to Shelley for expressing what no other poet has done.

Another aspect of Shelley's poetry is worthy of careful attention—his desire for a more rapid advance of the welfare of mankind. He dwells on what is of great importance—of human life as it will become when freed from evil. Few have done more to overthrow false conceptions of God, and to shake the foundations of superstition, caste, tyranny, and slavery of mind and

body. His desire to see justice made universal between man and man, to extend the bounds of freedom, to promote the love of his fellows, was with him a fervent passion. His poetry is steeped in these things as a summer garden in sunshine. They are part of the serious body of his poetry, and the world will always be drawn to Shelley for this religious gravity of his teaching. His method was the method of Jesus Christ, reliance on spiritual force only, and was marked out in the strongest way. This cannot be said to be an unsubstantial basis for poetry. Poets in all ages have chosen the golden future for their theme, and have done their best work when they felt the passionate longing for it overmaster them. This was Shelley's ideal; would we were all as faithful to it as he!

It is true that the form in which Shelley embodied his aspirations was often unreal and visionary. But we must not forget the matter because of the form, and the form itself was indicative of Shelley's mind. How serious his ideal was, a glance at his biography will show. His life—kind, affectionate, full of natural piety, and devoted to a practical support of his noble ideals—may well be contrasted with that of Lord Byron. Plain living and high thinking were not dead in England while Shelley lived. He hated materialism; he believed in goodness, and in the ultimate triumph of goodness—a belief that may be recommended to an age of scepticism, an age whose tendency is to look upon material progress as all that is needed to heal the woes and sins of the race.

We should not omit to notice that Shelley's unsubstantial form changed in later life. That he could go straight to his point, and write with incisive power, is shown by many passages of his works, and especially by the noble fragment, "Charles I."

Since Shakspeare, no dramatic blank verse has been written to equal Shelley's. Unequal as it is in weight and dignity, it is much freer than that of Tennyson. Browning hardly counts as an artist in dramatic blank verse; and the rest are nowhere, as regards this form of dramatic expression. Beyond the drama, he has many rivals, but he keeps a good place. Keats does not know his instrument well enough. The art of Tennyson is too

perceptible, the technique too easy to imitate. Shelley used this form of verse as his natural tongue, loose or close-knit, as the subject demanded. It is far from finished in "Alastor," much more noble in the "Prometheus," less so in the "Cenci," but superb in "Charles I."

Mr. Arnold will agree with none of these things. His judgment regarding Shelley's poetry has been victimized by his personal antipathy to Shelley's idealism. One would not say this of the first critic of the day, had not his own words proved it. He says, "Except for a few short things, Shelley's original poetry is less satisfactory than his translations, the subject-matter in the latter being found for him." That is sufficiently petulant, but we may excuse it on the ground of the critic's theory of the subject-matter. His prejudice, however, drives him further, for he actually expresses a doubt whether Shelley's letters and essays will not "resist the wear and tear of time better, and finally come to stand higher, than his poetry." Mr. Swinburne might well remark that a few more such judgments would be the ruin of any critic, however eminent.

The subject has thus far been treated in somewhat general terms, because this is a public lecture; but for the more private gatherings of the Society a few suggestions may be of service. One is that particular matters should be entered into a book, so that members wishing to write essays may choose subjects suitable to their tastes. Comparison should be made of Shelley's views on political and social topics as expressed in prose, with his views on the same topics as expressed in verse. The contrast in treatment is curious. In the former case Shelley expresses himself with a quietness and coolness, a strictness of logic, and a temperance of argument and metaphor, worthy of John Stuart Mill. But in his poetry, the same ideas soar into the sky, and become children of the lightning and the sun. Shelley's notions on love should be gathered and compared in this way. We cannot understand "Alastor," "Prince Athanase," or "Epipsychidion," unless we comprehend Shelley's idea of Love. His theories of the universe must be understood, if we wish to understand his references to death and his conceptions of the life

beyond. We must grasp his conception of a living universe to enter into the spirit of his interpretation of nature. The fine descriptions of scenery in the letters and prose works should be collated and compared with the corresponding passages in his poems.

In conclusion, the lecturer remarked that he had no wish to exalt Shelley above his proper rank. He does not sit apart from the solemn choir of poets, some of whom have presented a closer and truer image of life than he has; but within his own sphere, Shelley's work is of extraordinary power, beauty, and creative impulse. His mistakes arose from the adoption of a particular method, rather than from weakness of capacity. He was an idealist undoubtedly, but it is useless to say that his themes are not fit subjects for poetic treatment. When he wrote for mankind, he was close enough to his subject, though he idealized it. When he wrote for himself, and expressed fine films of feeling, he was unsubstantial, but practical as we are, dreams of feeling are part of our life; and it is fitting that a great poet should give expression to the vague fancies that are born within us. We get from Shelley what we do not get from Wordsworth; and those who love the thrush chanting in the woods need not abuse the lark singing in the sunlit sky.

✓ Many are content to take the world as it is, but those who, like Shelley, are not content, who find in him their prophetic singer of the advancing kingdom of faith and hope and love, are not to be blamed for loving him well. Though the song be clothed in visions, it need not be deficient in serious subject-matter. It could be wished that subject-matter were always before the hopes and in the hearts of men. From a social point of view it is to be wished that our faith in it were as strong as Shelley's. If the poor could believe that such a time as Shelley dreamed of is really coming, their lot would be easier to bear. Were his ideals more general, philosophy would be less loud, science less insolent, and the opinion that this is the worst of all possible worlds would cease to be the last resource of men. It is the nature of a great faith to make life simple. Those who remain apart from the ideal hopes of man in the midst of a formulated