

How perfectly they express the inspiration, which prompted the poet himself throughout the whole course of his life, and dictated every line of his more than poetical writings. He had drunk deeply too at the fountain of historic lore, and its too often bitter draughts had made deep impressions on his sympathetic soul, which the sight of the human suffering and degrading tyranny of his own day served to render deeper and more indelible. He might say of himself as Laon did in the Revolt of Islam:

I heard, as all have heard, life's various story,
And in no careless heart transcribed the tale;
But, from the sneers of men who had grown hoary
In shame and scorn, from groans of crowds made pale
By famine, from a mother's desolate wail
O'er her polluted child, from innocent blood
Poured on the earth, and brows anxious and pale
With the heart's warfare: did I gather food
To feed my many thoughts—a tangleless multitude.

The stories of the persecutions and oppression sanctioned by the church in ages past, the coldness and falsehood which disgraced so many of the servants of Christianity, even in his own time, and the seeming harshness of some of the Christian doctrines, caused his sensitive untutored soul by a strange perversion of understanding, to turn away from the faith itself, and for much the same reasons from every other existing form of religion, and seek for some natural code of faith, which might to his mind conform more closely to the workings of his only instructress nature's self. Thus it is that such a large portion of his poetry, especially in *Queen Mab*, is closed to the Christian's ear by reason of the atheistic opinions and daring blasphemy which mar its wonderful power and beauty. Yet, if we set aside the blasphemous infidelity contained in it, and turn our regard only to its main import, we cannot but feel that it was indeed a magnificent poet's dream that vision of a heaven on earth in a future time when all men whose natures he believed to be originally pure and good, should be liberated from all government and from the evil influences of a system of life which corrupted them from their birth, and made as free as the winds of heaven to follow the instincts of natural goodness and virtue which should gradually lead them to perfection, to pure, glorious, unselfish happiness, without the further aid of laws and systems of morals. It should be such an age as he describes in the following lines:

Mild was the slow necessity of death;
The tranquil spirit failed beneath its grasp,
Without a groan, almost without a fear,
Calm as a voyager to some distant land,
And full of wonder, full of hope, as he,
The deadly germs of languor and disease
Died in the human frame, and purity
Blessed with all gifts his earthly worshippers.

Shelley was one of the few who still clung firmly to hope after the cause of liberty had been apparently crushed in France. The French revolution, the first stroke for freedom in his own age, had passed away in a wild scene of reckless extravagance and awful crime. The chains of despotism once more enthralled the land, apparently riveted forever in the downfall and despair of the friends of liberty. Men in despondency gave up the cause, and regarded earth as hopelessly consigned to the fetters of oppression.

It was to counteract this feeling, and keep alive the hopes of those who not long before had risked life and liberty in the struggle, that he wrote the *Revolt of Islam*, which is by far the most important, though not the most perfect of his works.

In spite of many defects—and does the eagle-eye of the critic ever fail to find these in any mortal production—

the reader of the *Revolt of Islam* is less than human if he is not charmed with the wonderful music of the poet's versification, displayed perhaps to best advantage in the Spenserian Stanza, "a measure inexpressibly beautiful," as Shelley himself says, and he cannot but be astonished and enraptured at the glorious imagery, which in its marvelous yet easy profusion, brings up before him some sublime picture in every line. He is carried away with the poet's lofty hatred and scorn of oppression, flowing into majestic utterance in those fearful pictures of human misery which abound in the poem, bursting upon our ears like the voice of the storm; and above all must be impressed with the glowing language in which he speaks of the future age of perfect freedom for mankind in a strain of solemn enthusiasm, like the inspired outburst of a prophet's overflowing heart.

Surely the English language contains but little poetry more beautiful than Shelley's description of Cythna, and the parting between her and Laon, in the Second Canto of the *Revolt of Islam*. Through these passages there runs a spirit of intense and ethereal sweetness, such as Shelley only could have conceived and framed in words so exquisitely musical and wonderfully picturesque. And what terrible descriptions are those of Laon's imprisonment in the Third Canto, the return of the tyrants to the Golden city, the panic, the final desperate struggle of Laon's faithful band, and his glorious rescue by Cythna. His own tender nature guides the pen when he describes how Laon rescued the father tyrant from the angry multitude, how he softened their hearts with words of deepest pity, and in spite of all the despot's cruelty and selfishness, uttered these sublime words in his behalf:

Oh! wherefore should ill ever flow from ill,
And pain still keener pain forever breed?
We all are brethren—even the slaves who kill
For hire are men; and to avenge misdeed
On the misdoer, doth but misery feed
With her own broken heart! Oh earth, Oh heaven!
And thou, dread nature, which to every deed
And all that lives, or is to be, hath given,
Even as to thee have these done ill, and are forgiven.

Wonderfully beautiful is the strange tale of Cythna's imprisonment in the subterranean sea cave, her madness and final rescue by the female slave ship, whose crew she prevailed upon to turn to the cause of liberty and release their wretched cargo. And the frightful story of the slaughter, the famine, and the plague in the Golden city, the desperate prayer of every nation to its God, the exhortation of the Iberian priest, and the horrible preparation for Laon's execution, is told in words of awful power and ghastly vividness. Finally, in the last Canto is the description of the death of Laon and Cythna, their awakening in Paradise and discovery of the beautiful child that had come like a dream to Cythna during her imprisonment in the cave, and had been found by Laon dancing before the tyrant in the Golden city.

What first strikes the reader of Shelley, and fills him with wonder, is the extraordinary profusion, variety, and splendor of his imagery. There is wealth enough in half a dozen of his stanzas to adorn splendidly a whole ordinary poem. An unpoetical reader is dazzled and bewildered by it, and a careless one throws the book aside and pronounces it obscure and unreadable. But the student and admirer of Shelley, turns the pages of his favorite author at random, and is continually enchanted by the marvellous succession of magnificent pictures which every stanza opens before his eyes; an imagery, bold, grand, and profuse, but never strained, never out of place.