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LIFTING THE VEIL – SHELLEY’S SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Abstract

Shelley’s political and social ideas form an integral part of his poetry, beliefs and lifestyle. This reformist vein is found also in his prose works, such as essays and plays. Despite coming from a wealthy aristocratic family, Shelley was always concerned with serious contemporary political issues and societal reform, never shying away from promulgating those beliefs in his works. They were often unpublished because of the unstable political situation in nineteenth century England, where repressive measures and censorship were particularly strong because of the fear that the effects of the French Revolution would spread and threaten the existing social order. True to Romantic fashion, Shelley was a rebel who never compromised on his ideas. He was not only interested in the abstract, ideal notions of beauty and virtue, but was very well informed of the burning issues of his day, sparing no effort in criticizing tyranny and injustice. Greatly inspired by such important figures such as the progressive philosopher William Godwin as well as his fellow poet Byron, Shelley espoused reformist notions about social change throughout his brief life, before he tragically perished in 1822. He went beyond having a specific political option or religion, advocating instead an idealistic concept of adopting universal virtues through education, development, but most importantly imagination, which would enable us to lift the veil of familiarity and realize the true potential and value of the world around us; this would improve society and usher a brighter future for mankind. This discussion will investigate Shelley’s ideas in relevant works, specifically the prose work *An Address to the Irish People*, poems such as *Ozymandias*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *The Mask of Anarchy*, *England in 1819*, and the famous essay *A Defence of Poetry*, where the role of the prophet / poet is most clearly defined.

Key words: social reform, idealism, justice, tyranny, anarchy, poetry, freedom

Percy Bysshe Shelley seems to have not only lived, but also died according to the popular Romantic notion of a very bright flame that perishes quickly for that very reason. Shelley, similar to Byron, died as a young man of twenty nine at the peak of his creative powers. Indeed, “[his] sudden and tragic death when his maturing genius was just becoming apparent may, however, have helped catapult him from relative obscurity to the front ranks of English literature” (Barcus, 1975, p. 18). Despite his short life, Shelley used his time well and published a myriad of works in multiple genres which from the earliest stages of his creative output dealt prominently with societal reform. Reiman outlines four important reasons for such a deep interest, the first two deal with Shelley’s early upbringing and education, but the latter two are more important because of the volatile period of the early nineteenth century:

Third, [Shelley] observed the contrast between the social realities of England during the Napoleonic wars and the ideals of human virtue and social justice in the Bible, the Classical school texts, and eighteenth-century humanitarian writers. Finally, he noted a sharp discrepancy between England’s traditional role as the defender of individual liberty and constitutional government (a role historically championed by the Whig party of his father and grandfather) and England’s hostility toward those same ideals following the French Revolution. (1969, p. 16)

An Address to the Irish People (1812) is Shelley’s early and lesser known, but important prose work, as it allows us to trace the progress of his ideas on societal reform. It represents a more serious foray into reformist activity than *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), a collaborative effort with Hogg written during their student days at Oxford, which eventually got them expelled. In *An Address* Shelley clearly has higher goals than simply rebelling against the religious conventions of the day. It is an attempt to initiate far reaching reforms and improvement of the volatile political situation in Ireland by using sound arguments. He is aware and supportive of the several figures in the Irish struggle, like Finnerty and Emmet, even writing a poem dedicated to the latter. The Irish people under the leadership of O’Connell were fighting mainly for the repeal of the Union and Catholic Emancipation, an effort to remove various restrictions placed on that religion in the United Kingdom, which would mostly be realized by the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1829. Shelley was 19 when he visited Dublin with *An Address* already in hand, specifically written in simplified language due to its intended purpose of reaching the masses, i.e. mainly Irish peasantry. He had the manuscript printed and distributed on the streets by other people, sometimes by himself as well. He also participated in the general

meeting of supporters for the Emancipation by making a speech which got mixed reception.

Shelley's primary purpose was actually not the Emancipation as a specific issue, but the adoption of the ideals of freedom, truth and justice. He hoped that the energetic atmosphere in Dublin at the time would serve as an inspiration and impetus for discussion and development of those ideas. Legislative and religious reforms would simply be a consequence of the true spiritual, inward reform of an individual. The key part in achieving this is in a peaceful resistance to the government's oppressive mechanisms, and this resistance was intended to be practiced through organized associations of people. The crucial flaw of these attempts was Shelley's mistaken belief that the Irish people would eventually substitute Catholicism for the aforementioned higher goals. He did not fully realize just how important that religion was for Irish identity, especially in its opposition to the Protestantism of their English oppressors. Shelley's mentor Godwin was aware of his activities, and was more realistic regarding these associations. He predicted that such groups would inevitably descend into sectarianism in the sense that the bickering opinions of each "club" would go nowhere, but far more dangerous was the real possibility of armed resistance, something which both men abhorred. Godwin wrote to Shelley that he was "preparing a scene of blood," (as cited in Rolleston, 1890) and for all his idealism and youthful stubbornness, Shelley eventually acquiesced and admitted the failure of his mission. The goal was simply set too high. For all his short-sightedness and a somewhat naive view of the situation, Shelley deserves appreciation for his good-natured attempts and especially for advocating a peaceful resistance. This really speaks well of him and of his advocacy of patience, peace and legality, whereas many older and supposedly wiser men would argue something very much different.

If we analyse Shelley's *An Address* in detail, we can see a very interesting blend of sincerity, simplicity and also subtlety of his attempts in trying to awaken the people and make them more appreciative of generalized and idealistic virtues rather than specific religious notions. He starts by going beyond religious barriers, identifying himself as an Englishman and non-Catholic, but also non Protestant, which does not mean that he will not consider members of these, or any other religion, as his brothers. Shelley makes his stance on the nature of the reform perfectly clear, as it is absolutely not a call to arms of any sort: "I know that there are some (...) who seeing the title of this piece, will take it up with a sort of hope that it may recommend violent measures, and thereby disgrace the cause of freedom" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). He appeals to their mentality and describes, somewhat stereotypically, the Irish passion and temper: "I know the warm feelings of an Irishman sometimes carries him beyond

the point of prudence,” but then Shelley says: “I do not desire to root out, but to moderate this honourable warmth” (as cited in Rolleston, 1890). He discusses in detail the history of violence in Catholicism, referring to events such as the Inquisition, abuses of priestly power, St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, but he also recognizes the crimes of Protestantism, such as the medieval burning of witches. The purpose is to convince the readers that, just because Christianity has a violent history, it does not mean that they need be violent as well. Shelley assumes a friendly, sometimes even a paternal tone with the intended audience as he is in his enthusiasm not immune to flashes of youthful arrogance: “I seek your confidence, not that I may betray it, but that I may teach you to be happy, and wise, and good” (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). Still, these moments are rare and he quickly gets to perhaps the most important part where he describes the flaws of a tyrannical government but also those of violent revolutions which substitute them. Shelley cautions against such sudden transference of power from the oppressors to the oppressed, with both sides being corrupted by power: “But I wish your views to embrace a wider scene, (...) to take great care (for it all rests with you) that whilst one tyranny is destroyed another more fierce and terrible does not spring up” (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). He criticizes sectarianism and religious intolerance, but at the same time, as mentioned previously, naively advocates the formation of various associations by assuming they will possess an inherent willingness to work for the common goal while disregarding the differences.

An Address is in many places academic and formal, but despite his intention to keep the language plain, his poetic nature sometimes breaks through and the tone turns grand and somewhat melodramatic: “Oh! Ireland, thou emerald of the ocean, (...) thou art the isle on whose green shores I have desired to see the standard of liberty erected, a flag of fire, a beacon at which the world shall light the torch of Freedom!” (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). Again, the true purpose of the work is revealed when Shelley employs the notion of eternal, universal virtues: “Virtue and wisdom always so far as they went produced liberty or happiness long before any of the religions now in the world have ever heard of” (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). The true value of a peaceful, gradual and legalistic revolution is that its proponents will not sully their hands with blood and crimes of the tyrants; therefore, they will likely escape power corruption and resorting to the same brutal methods in dealing with subsequent problems, as was the method of their predecessors. Indeed, if civility is present in protests and demonstrations, as well as calling on the changing of the laws peacefully, the general populace will not be inclined to view the protesters as savages who deserve to be dispersed with brute force and thrown into jail or worse, which would happen if they behaved violently: “If you can descend to

use the same weapons as your enemy, you put yourself on a level with him on this score. But appeal to the sacred principles of virtue and justice, then how is he awed into nothing?" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). This descent is exactly what happened during the French Revolution in which the Jacobin "liberators," led by Robespierre, proved to be even worse during the Reign of Terror, something which Shelley evidently recognizes: "The French Revolution, although undertaken with the best intentions, ended ill for the people; because violence was employed" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). He acknowledges the difficulties of a large number of people behaving properly in these situations, hence the importance of an individual's inward reform, which would prevent him from becoming a part of the mob: "You know what is meant by a mob, it is an assembly of people who without foresight or thought, collect themselves to disapprove of by force any measure which they dislike" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). So many revolutions in the past have failed, either immediately or subsequently, mainly because of this lack of foresight. The key is not providing to the current regime the justification to crush the process of change: "Be warm in your cause, yet rational, and charitable, and tolerant - never let the oppressor grind you into justifying his conduct by imitating his meanness" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). Again, this foresight must come through the betterment of each individual, both through education and open-mindedness: "Think, read and talk; let your own condition and that of your wives and children, fill your mind" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). Near the end of *An Address* Shelley finally declares the true goal: "the Catholic cause is subordinate, and its success preparatory to this great cause, which adheres to no sect but society, to no cause but that of universal happiness, to no party but the people" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). He concludes with this poetically inspired passage: "Adieu, my friends! May every Sun that shines on your green Island see the annihilation of an abuse, and the birth of an Embryon of melioration!" and also with Lafayette's quote about freedom: "For a nation to love Liberty it is sufficient that she knows it, to be free it is sufficient that she wills it" (Shelley, as cited in Rolleston, 1890). We can reiterate that, despite the idealistic, theoretical and sometimes overtly poetic tone of the proposed changes and the ways to achieve them, the value and legacy of *An Address* remains in promoting a peaceful resistance to oppression.

Ozymandias (1818), arguably Shelley's most well-known poem, is a sonnet about the greatest Egyptian pharaoh, Ramses II, famous for his military conquests, expansion of the empire, the longest rule in Egypt's history, and numerous statues and temples built during his reign. The interest in Egyptian history and culture surged in Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century, primarily because of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. *Ozymandias* is concerned

with the paradox of the eternal nature of human vision, and how fragile it is when faced with the ravages of time. The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with preserving their cultural, militaristic and political legacies, hence the proliferation of monuments of all kinds, especially funerary ones:

Ancient Egyptian culture was a civilization obsessed with death and personal survival, an obsession indicated by its foremost occupation—the construction of inscribed funerary monuments— pyramids, tombs, obelisks, stelae, and sarcophagi. It was a culture obsessed with time, and its fascination with the after-life influenced all its earthly work and effort. These themes are prominent in 'Ozymandias.' It is simultaneously a poem concerned with poetic effort and the anxiety of whether that effort will be remembered. (Bloom, 2001, p. 19)

The poem begins with a speaker meeting a mysterious traveller from "an antique land," (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 109) who relates the sight of a ruined stone statue of Ozymandias, with "trunkless legs" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 109) in one place, and the crumbled face of the statue nearby, partly covered in sand. On the pedestal is an inscription: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 110). This is paraphrased from Greek historian Siculus's account of the inscription on one of pharaoh's statues: "King of Kings am I, Osymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works" (Oldfather, 44). The poem aptly ends with a description of the desolation and barrenness of the sandy environment where the broken statue lies.

We can interpret this poem through its structure, if we consider the poem as an Italian sonnet which typically consists of an octave, which presents a situation, and a sestet, which provides a comment or a resolution of that situation. The octave therefore establishes the faraway exotic land of antique Egypt, giving the poem an ancient, mythical atmosphere. One of the most recognizable symbols of the ancient Egypt's might were the pharaohs, who were considered to be demi-gods by their subjects. Hubris of these pharaohs was evident in the magnificent monumental tombs, i.e. pyramids they had built, along with numerous statues and paintings of themselves. Ozymandias' statue is supposed to immortalize his royal features and noble bearing, but the statue is in ruins. The traveler describes the pharaoh's features: "a shattered visage lies, whose frown / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command," (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 109) which can portray him as an emotionless, calculating tyrant who treated his people as objects wholly subservient to his will: "The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 110). The sestet offers us a comment or a resolution, i.e. Ozymandias' words on the pedestal, his final will and desire what his legacy should be: that all of his works and wealth

should testify to the greatness of his person. His true legacy is described in the final lines of the poem: "Round the decay / of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 110). The metaphor is clear: the pharaoh wanted to live forever through his fame and wealth, which are represented in physical things, but time and history will inevitably turn them to dust, or sand in this case. This is what has been happening since the beginning of human civilization and what will happen to all power corrupt tyrants who, in their arrogance, posit themselves above humanity. The pharaoh's boastful statement is therefore deeply ironic, since nothing remains of his kingdom but broken remains and the oblivion of the desert. The poem suggests that this type of desired immortality will always be doomed, and that the real immortality is in the eternal virtues, not earthly rulers. The pharaoh could have had a much more enduring legacy if he was an upright king, for he would live longer in the memories of succeeding generations. Instead, his legacy is a warning against all those who fail to leave a true legacy on mankind.

Ode to the West Wind (1819) is Shelley's visionary poem about a poet's role in inciting change. It is divided into five cantos, with each canto having five stanzas, which are in *terza rima*. The destructive / creative forces of nature and the changing of seasons from autumn and winter to spring are symbolically meant to portend the political and social change. Autumn and winter are usually associated with decay and deterioration of the energies of the preceding seasons, which means the crumbling of the old order, while spring is supposed to bring at least an inspiration for the creation of a new order. The first three cantos represent the ideal forms or virtues that will not only herald but achieve the change as well. The last two cantos represent the quintessential role of the prophet / poet, through which those ideal forms must be articulated in order to provide an effective inspiration for the rest of the people.

In the first canto the speaker directly addresses the west wind by using an apostrophe; the wind blows away the dead leaves which could symbolize the old ineffectual way of thinking, or the oppressed people as well: "Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 298). Here Shelley quite possibly had in mind the Peterloo Massacre, which will be discussed later. But a tragedy like this will not be in vain as the seeds for a better future are there: "The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low, / Each like a corpse within its grave, until / Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 298).

The second canto moves the west wind from leaves to clouds, meaning that the wind of change will be effective not only locally, or in a single troubled country, but in a universal sense. By comparing clouds to leaves, the speaker

refers to the oppressed all over the world: "Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 299). The poem here seems to assume even an apocalyptic tone: "Angels of rain and lightning" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 299) and "Black rain and fire and hail will burst" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 299). The wind of change in itself is not enough; if the wind is not used, or channelled properly, it, like a true unpredictable force of nature, could bring devastation. The west wind, or the universal, eternal ideals or virtues, must have a lyre, or an Aeolian harp (a common motif in romantic poetry) in order to be truly utilized.

The cryptic third canto could ironically refer in some places to the old, established order which will be shaken by the wind: "Thou who didst waken from its summer dreams / The blue Mediterranean, where he lay / Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 299). But the old, seemingly perfect and functional order (as governments would have people believe) is an illusion. The speaker mentions that he "saw in sleep old palaces and towers" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 299) which are "All overgrown with azure moss, and flowers / So sweet, the sense faints picturing them" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300). This shows the delusion of the old order in thinking that it is relevant and good. It is in fact old, ineffectual, torpid, impotent, overgrown with moss and dust, near death and ready to collapse or: "Cleave themselves into chasms" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300). But far below the ocean, or deep within the ivory towers, those of authority will know "Thy voice and suddenly grow gray with fear, / And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300). The time is nigh for a change.

In the fourth canto the speaker wishes to be the harp of the wind, he wishes to assume the role of the prophet / poet to herald the new times, so the importance is shifted from the wind or the change itself, to the vessel, or the harp. The speaker truly yearns for this, evidenced by the repetition of phrase: "If I were," although he knows he is only human and sometimes feels inadequate to fill this heavy role. This may signify Shelley's own depression because the beginning of the change in Europe did not come, the people were not yet open to the possibilities that awaited them and they have not lifted the veil of familiarity. For a moment, he even questions the possibility for it because there were still many tragedies happening every day: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300). Even the firm optimism and energy appears to falter: "A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd / One too like thee – tameless, and swift, and proud" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300).

In the last canto, during these darkest moments, the speaker calls upon the wind to grant him much needed energy and vitality to persevere: "Be thou, Spirit fierce / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (Reiman & Fraistat,

2001, p. 300). The speaker still manages to summon hope, even when he describes his previous efforts as futile: “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like wither’d leaves, to quicken a new birth” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 300). This sudden renewal of energy could be the one spark of inspiration that will help to bring about the much desired change: “Scatter, as from unextinguish’d hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 301). Shelley at the end of the poem firmly grasps his role as the prophet / poet, and finally embraces the previously shaken optimism: “Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth / The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 301).

The Mask of Anarchy (1819) is Shelley’s most famous political poem, and the one that has exerted its greatest legacy by inspiring such champions of non-violent resistance like Mahatma Gandhi. This long visionary poem, unpublished during his lifetime, was written as a direct address to the infamy of English government’s authoritarianism in Manchester. The poem is not only a biting indictment against tyranny, but a rallying point for future social action regarding reforms. The event in question took place in St. Peter’s Field in Manchester on August 19th 1819 where the military’s violent handling of peaceful protests organized by the disenfranchised classes, whose woes were further compounded by the famine, high food prices and the financial exhaustion caused by the Napoleonic Wars, caused outrage. The local magistrates urged the military to disperse the crowd, and after they charged with sabres, 15 people were killed with several hundred injured. Peterloo became the ironic moniker for the event, which actually only made things worse, as the government further increased its grip on civil rights, evidenced by the introduction of the infamous Six Acts. Especially oppressive of these were the Seizure of Arms Act, which enabled authorities to search private properties without a warrant, and the Seditious Meeting Prevention Act, which severely restricted the people’s freedom to gather in public places.

Shelley was living in Italy when the news of the massacre reached him, so the poem begins with an inspiration that gripped the speaker: “And with great power it led me / to walk in the visions of Poesy” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 316). He embarks on a journey and encounters various apocalyptic figures, such as Murder who wears the mask of Lord Castlereagh, a reference to the British statesman who was known for his repressive domestic activities. Next comes Fraud, who is Lord Eldon, the lawyer and an important member of the repressive government of Lord Liverpool, wearing an ermine cloak and having false tears i.e. sentiment. There is a reference to another member of the government in the guise of Hypocrisy, actually portraying Lord Sidmouth, who passed the infamous Six Acts. The speaker also criticizes other people in

positions of power like lawyers, bishops and spies, all taking part: "And many more Destructions played / In this ghastly Maskrade" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 317). The last and the worst is Anarchy, which represents authority and wears a kingly crown and a shiny sceptre: "On his brow this mark I saw- / I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 317) which should represent a supposedly sacrosanct law for the people. This ominous figure is followed by mighty troops who worship it like a deity and will shy from nothing in order to enforce its whims, like they did in Peterloo: "And a mighty troop around, / With their trampling shook the ground, / Waving each a bloody sword, / For the service of their Lord" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 317). The companionship cuts a desolate path through England and arrives in London to continue their destructive work.

The only figure to resist them is fading Hope, a product of a helpless Time: "He how idiot like he stands, / Fumbling with his palsied hands" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 319). To the rescue at the last moment comes a bright armoured shape with a dazzling plume, which represents Imagination. The spectral shape fades away, but its benevolent effect on the people is powerful: "As waves arise when loud winds call, / Thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 319). Imagination lifts the veil of familiarity from people's eyes, making them aware of what they need to do. The benevolence of the apparition also has an adequate impact on Anarchy: "And Anarchy, the ghastly birth, / Lay dead earth upon the earth; / The horse of Death tameless as wind, / Fled" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 320). The Earth itself, possibly signifying the ideals of Justice, Truth and Peace, feels the blood of its people on her, and, roused by Imagination, stirs from sleep to awaken her previously passive fold:

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number -
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many - they are few. (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 320)

People simply need to recognize their own worth, and with the right state of mind and action they will be unstoppable. In all of this, the wisdom in achieving this change, particularly in learning from past mistakes, is crucial. As Shelley expressed before, innumerable revolutions and rebellions in history failed, either initially or consequently, because they were tainted by violence, which only further propagated the vicious circle of tyranny: "Blood for blood - and wrong for wrong - / Do not thus when ye are strong" (Reiman & Fraistat,

2001, p. 321). Then the ideal virtues of Freedom, Justice, Wisdom, Peace and Love are described, as well as the proper ways to manifest them. Again, the proper ways must be realized by a successful appropriation of these virtues through a developed mind, where Imagination plays a key role: "Science, Poetry and Thought / Are thy lamps" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 323) combined with "Spirit, Patience, Gentleness, / All that can adorn and bless" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 323).

With all of this in mind, the people are ready to realize the reforms through peaceful protests: "Let a great Assembly be / Of the fearless and the free" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 323). People will mobilize from every corner of the land, with all classes participating, even some people from the higher ones, "Where some few feel such compassion" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 324). This grand Assembly must answer the inevitable violent response with calm and determination, because these weapons will be more powerful than mere steel, and the cycle will be broken: "Stand ye calm and resolute, / Like a forest close and mute, / With folded arms and looks which are / Weapons of unvanquished war" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 325). Slaughter of innocents will dishonour the soldiers: "Then they will return with shame / To the place from which they came, / And the blood thus shed will speak / In hot blushes on their cheek" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 325). The ignominy of massacres like Peterloo will echo throughout the land, shattering the legitimacy of the tyranny and sounding its death knell: "And these words shall then become / Like Oppression's thundered doom" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326). The poem ends with a refrain of the rallying stanza, truly paving the way for a better, civilized future:

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number -
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you -
Ye are many - they are few. (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326)

England in 1819 is a political sonnet written as another response to the Peterloo Massacre. In the beginning, the poem describes the ineffectual king George III, who is "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326) and widens the criticism of the uselessness of the aristocracy and politicians: "Princes, the dregs of their dull race" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326). They are insensitive to the opinions of people: "Who flow / through public scorn" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326) but also to their needs as well: "Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know" (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001,

p. 326). They use the majority of the resources for themselves and desperately cling to the system which enables them to live in luxury at the expense of others: “But leech like to their fainting country cling / Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326). The direct reference to the Peterloo Massacre is in the lines: “A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326) where the army which turns on its own people is “as a two-edged sword to all who wield” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 326). The criticism moves to the corrupt and tyrannical legislation: “Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 327) and to the inability of religion to provide a positive change in society: “Religion, Christless, Godless, a book sealed” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 327). The Parliament responds to the situation by enforcing even more restrictive laws: “A Senate – Time’s worst statue unrepealed” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 327). The situation looks grim indeed, but the concluding couplet of the sonnet again brings forth that optimism, where hope will rise from the graves made by the authority itself, which is not aware of its self-destructiveness: “Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst to illumine our tempestuous day” (Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 327). The word like “burst” seems incongruous with Shelley’s ideas of a slow, gradual change. These final lines are open to multiple interpretations, but from an optimistic perspective this could mean that the people will finally have had enough and that the change could come quicker than it normally would, because the dire circumstances will speed up the process from the individual’s inward to societal outward reform.

A Defence of Poetry (1821) is Shelley’s unfinished essay which was only published in 1840; it is a reaction to Peacock’s deliberately exaggerated essay on the futility of poetry compared with the power of sciences. Shelley’s views are here eloquently and passionately represented, namely the concept of a crucial role of poetry in everyday life, as poetry itself is elevated to divine proportions. The philosophical background echoes Plato and Kant and the important ideas are frequently repeated. The essay opens with the distinction between reason and imagination, and that poetry is the expression of the latter. He gives a metaphor of a man being an Aeolian harp, where the internal and external stimuli produce sounds and melodies. But rather than the harp simply being a passive recipient of the stimuli, there is an inward principle which can produce harmony in the melody, and that is imagination itself. Shelley argues that poets are those who have a very developed sense of this inherent principle. From harmony comes beauty, which is the relation between the causes, i.e. the ideal forms and the pleasure derived from expressing the harmony of those forms. This ability to bring into being such a harmonious melody will inspire other people, or as Shelley says: “[It] gathers a sort of reduplication from the community”

(as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 512). The necessity of the metaphorical language of poetry is in the frequently mentioned phrase: lifting the veil of familiarity. By trying to understand this kind of language, readers will be prompted to look for the relation between things that they previously thought were non-existent; these “new” relations will lead to a new understanding.

Shelley’s idealism states that there is some sort of universal, indestructible and inherently good order of things, and we might express some sense of it through imagination. He argues that poets not only express this order, but they can also serve as founders of civility and laws which support them. This connects to the role of the prophet (legislator) / poet Shelley wrote so much about, and it stems from the ability to simultaneously consider present and future: “For he not only beholds the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered but beholds the future in the present and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 513). Poetry is more apt to convey this order than other forms of art, since poetry expressed through language has a direct relation to imagination and thoughts, while with painting or sculpture, for example, the relation is more indirect: “The former [poetry] is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 513). The main value of poetry is, once again, the enlargement of the ability to fathom a myriad of combinations of thoughts, thus enriching our perception and understanding of the world around us: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 517). Imaginative powers of a poet allow him to be much more emphatic, so that the concern for the fellow man springs from there, not from any condescending attitude or false pity, or as Shelley puts it: “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” (as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 517). This intense sense of empathy is what drove so many poets to be active in social in political reform. Shelley does not fail to tackle the pervading influence of science and technology on everyday life which enabled people to establish their dominance over the external world. Without imagination, however, or without the ability to use these advances into nobler purposes, people have lost much of their inner worth, or as Shelley says: “man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave” (as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 530). This was especially true in the years following Shelley’s death, during the full swing of the Industrial Revolution, where all those dazzling technological innovations did much to increase material gain of some and

little to actually advance the quality of life of common people. Instead we had mass poverty and child labour, among other things, or as Shelley states: “Poetry, and the principle of Self (of which money is the visible incarnation) are the God and Mammon of the world” (as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 531).

The ability of a poet to create is not to be understood lightly, as Shelley discusses the difficulties of composing poetry, arguing that the moment a poet starts to create, the inspiration already starts to wane, and that the end result is a pale approximation or a shadow (here he echoes Plato) of the imagined project. Shelley thinks of poetry as “an interpretation of a diviner nature through our own” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 532) but these inspirational moments are rare and fleeting, and the poet must labour to connect them into a whole the best way he can. Shelley cannot resist his Romantic urges and starts to idealize the role of a poet by saying that a poet is able to capture the shades of eternal beauty that appears all too brief in this world, so that he can, in a sense, make it immortal: “Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 532). Some parts of the essay are very similar to Kant’s ideas of the impossibility to perceive the true state of things, we can only perceive them through our human nature: “All things exist as they are perceived” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 533) but poetry is able to provide us with glimpses of the underlying perfect order and harmony of the world, and once again the veil of familiarity is mentioned. Heraldic and inspirational role of poetry in the betterment of man is emphasized near the end of the essay: “The most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution is poetry” (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 535). Perhaps the most famous passage of all of Shelley’s prose works regarding not only the relevance, but the essential importance of poetry in the vital matters of society reflects his deeply held beliefs and optimism that poetry can truly be a great benevolent force for the development of human life, instead of being merely an ornament or simply a part of the arts:

Poets are hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirror of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (Shelley, as cited in Reiman & Fraistat, 2001, p. 53)

Shelley throughout his life tried to live according to the high ideals he postulated in his poetry and prose, and he verily embodied many of the characteristics of a true poet; but if we had to isolate the most important one, that would be empathy for the fellow man. In many of his best poems, essays and dramas,

Shelley always kept the blade of his criticism sharp and relevant and tirelessly worked to bring closer that elusive universal beauty and harmony to his readers in the efforts to propel the positive change. The success and value of his work is suitably described in the term *inspiration*, as many influential social reform fighters were influenced by Shelley, most importantly Gandhi. It is therefore, a remarkable testament to the man of such short life that the legacy of his work is twofold: it is not only artistic, felt in the Romantic traits of description of beauty, nature and vivid imagery, but also in the social component, and as the recent times show, truly one of the best ways of advancing humanity is non-violent resistance championed by Shelley and others like him.

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OTKRIVANJE VELA – SHELLEYEVA DRUŠTVENA SAVIJEST

Sažetak

Shelleyjeve političke i društvene ideje čine okosnicu njegovog pjesničkog stvaralaštva, ideala i stila života. Njegov društveni aktivizam se također može pronaći i u njegovim proznim djelima, poput eseja i drama. Iako je porijeklom iz plemenite obitelji, Shelley se uvijek zanimao za goruće društvene problem svog vremena, posebno klasnih problema. On se nikad nije susprezao jasnog i strastvenog izražavanja stavova u svojim djelima. Neka od njih su ostala neobjavljena zbog nestabilne političke situacije u Engleskoj i Europi početkom devetnaestog stoljeća; tada su represivne mjere poput censure bile dosta izražene zbog straha da će se posljedice Francuske revolucije proširiti i na Ujedinjeno Kraljevstvo. U skladu s idealima Romantizma, Shelley je bio umjetnički buntovnik koji nikad nije ublažavao svoje ideje. On nije bio samo zainteresiran za apstraktne idealne predožbe pojmova poput slobode, ljepote i pravde, nego je bio izrazito dobro upućen u aktualna društvena i politička zbivanja, te nije oklijevao izraziti svoje stavove i u javnim nastupima. Uvelike inspiriran važnim društvenim reformatorima poput Williama Godwina, ali i slavnim suvremenim pjesnicima poput Byrona, Shelley je nastavio izražavati reformističke stavove do kraja svog kratkog života, kada je tragično nastradao u brodolomu 1822. godine u 29. godini života. Shelley se nije svrstavao u specifične političke stranke niti programe, a posebno ne u određene religijske strukture. Umjesto toga, on se zalagao za idealistički concept usvajanja univerzalnih vrijednosti kroz obrazovanje, samo-razvoj, maštu, kreativnost, što su aspekti koji bi nam omogućili da skinemo veo upoznatosti sa stvari koje uzimamo zdravo za gotovo, te shvaćanja prave vrijednosti svijeta oko nas. Ovo bi uzrokovalo snažni društveni napredak te omogućilo svjetliju budućnost za čovječanstvo. Shelleyjevi stavovi ove vrste su najbolje izraženi u proznom djelu *Obraćanje irskom narodu*, pjesmama *Ozymandias* i *Maska anarhije* te poznatom eseju *Obrana poezije*.

Ključne riječi: društvena reforma, idealizam, pravda, tiranija, anarhija, poezija, sloboda