



POETS AS VISIONARIES

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the recent find of Shelley's (presumed lost) poem written 200 years ago entitled: A Political Essay on The Existing State of Things. A comparison is then made of the subject matter of this poem with that of my own, and my great grandmother's poetry which shows that this work of Shelley's is as relevant today as it was in the early 1800s. The suggestion is made that the best poets are visionaries and I use the above examples to illustrate this claim.

The recent "find" and consequent acquisition by the Bodleian Library, Oxford of Percy Bysshe Shelley's work; *A Political Essay on The Existing State of Things* written in 1811 is exciting, vitally important, and engagingly relevant to the 'state of things in 2015'.

Shelley wrote this 172 line poem (with Preface and Notes) under the pseudonym of - *A Gentleman of the University of Oxford* just over 200 years ago. He is considered a poet of the romantic genre, and perhaps the greatest lyrical poet in English literature. With masterpieces such- as *Ode to the West Wind*, *To a Skylark*, and *Adonais* - rightly so. However, Shelley's work *The Necessity of Atheism*, the pamphlet which resulted in him being "sent down" (expelled) from Oxford, and *The Existing State of Things* show clearly he was also a reactionary, rebellious, activist poet.

In *The Existing State of Things* he prefaces the work with a disclaimer:

The following poem is such, as some might conceive to demand an apology; it might appear to those, who do not consider with sufficiently accurate investigation, that its ultimate view is subversive of the existing interests of Government. A moment's attention to the sentiments on which it is founded must demonstrate the erroneousness of this supposition. (p. 5)

I am personally not convinced by this disclaimer, fortunately those in power at the time of publication were. Had they not been Shelley could have been charged with sedition and faced far more dire consequences than being expelled from Oxford because of his following publication (the same year) regarding atheism.

Punishment for sedition in this era varied greatly, partly depending on whether actual physical violence was committed or only criticism with the written or spoken word. Nevertheless, fines, periods of imprisonment, or transportation to the colonies were all possibilities. (Scrivener) Had he been charged and found guilty he may have ended up a convict in Australia, avoided accidental drowning off the coast of Italy at the age of thirty, and become Australia's first bard!

A Footnote to the Preface also shows Shelley's distrust and loathing of certain religious doctrine and members of the Church. A few pertinent lines:

These ideas of a future state of rewards and punishments, it must be confessed, do not exactly coincide with those of St. Athanasius,

regarding that, by which he so liberally condemns all who differ from his own opinions to eternal torture. (p. 6 – 7)

This shows that Shelley had in his “firing line” not only Kings and Governments but also the Church. *The Necessity of Atheism* was printed (published) also in 1811, a revised and expanded version was printed in 1813, please see Appendix 1 for a full copy of this text.

As mentioned *Existing State of Things* is vitally important especially for scholars researching Shelley’s very short career. The work was, “*considered lost until it was rediscovered in a private collection in 2006, and has only been viewed by a handful of scholars since.*” “*Now the 20-page printed pamphlet – the only known copy of the text in existence- has been acquired by the Bodleian Library...*”. (Flood, 2015) The library has digitised the text in exact facsimile and is free to download to the general public, for me this find and *availability* is a literary “pot of gold”. Please see References at the end of this paper for the URL link. Below a few lines from the poem:

*Ye cold advisers of yet colder kings,
To whose fell breast no passion virtue brings,
Who scheme, regardless of the poor man’s pang,
Who coolly sharpen misery’s sharpest fang,
Yourselves secure. Your’s is the power to breathe
O’er all the world the infectious blast of death,*

(Lines 37 – 42 p. 11)

I came across the news of this find in a wonderful article in *The Guardian* paper written by Alison Flood, this was exciting news for me personally for two reasons. Firstly, my great grandmother, Agnes Maddox (wife of Dr Richard L. Maddox) wrote similar poetry concerning social inequality, scathing of the existing government and rulers of England in the 1880s. My own ‘find’ of Agnes’ poetry (and artwork) in her notebooks and memoirs gave me the idea to create a book of poetry in which each contemporary poet represented had to have an ancestor who also wrote poetry – “ink the veins” or “poetic DNA” some have commented. This resulted in the publication in 2014 of *Voices Across Generations* which I edited. (Harle, 2014) As well as the normal text poems the book has scans of original hand written poems, and photos as far back as the late 1880s. Appendix 2 reproduces two of Agnes’ more activist style poems, followed by two of my own. I am not at all comparing the quality of the poems by Agnes or myself with that of Shelley, just the subject matter and concern about social issues. As the spokesperson for the library at Oxford said; “*The themes Shelley addresses remain as relevant today as they were 200 years ago.*” (Flood, 2015) Secondly, both Shelley and Maddox’s poems concerning activist themes are similar to many of my own and informed my statement that, these works “*are engagingly relevant to the state of things in 2015*”. Do the following words of Shelley from *A Defence of Poetry* sound familiar? “*To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away*’. *The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer;*”

Shelley’s belief that poetry can change public opinion is well known, as he is often quoted from his prose work *A Defence of Poetry*, “*poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world*”. Although Shelley, was from a well educated, and well to do English social position, as was my great grandmother, he chose to champion the poor, and speak on their behalf, through poetry and prose. That is, he gave a voice to those who were rendered mute because of social standing, lack of education and suppression by those in power whose only agenda was to further, “feather their own nests”.



This “championing of the poor”, if for no other reason, connects Shelley with my recent poetry and publication efforts which has seen ten books published in the past three years. These books have been co-edited respectively, Sunil Sharma, Sangeeta Sharma and Jaydeep Sarangi from India. Our declared *modus operandi* was, and is, to give a voice to those who for the same reasons that were present in Shelley’s time cannot speak for themselves. Our work has helped the Dalit in India, indigenous Australians and exiled Tibetans tell their story through poetry and short fiction to the world. A list of these titles may be found on our publisher’s websites: www.cyberwit.net and www.authorspressbooks.com.

Poetry is serious business. As Shelley remarks, “*Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.*” (ADOP) Writing poetry is not an activity for dabblers nor for insincere dilettantes. As the old saying goes, “*If you don’t have anything worth dying for you’ve got nothing worth living for.*” All great poetry is worth dying for. In the first years of the 21st century poetry seems to have become quite prolific, it is my opinion that this increase in quantity, primarily because of the Internet and desktop publishing, has not necessarily been accompanied by commensurate quality.

Much recent poetry has narrow self-absorbed themes, oh yes, sorry I forgot, it is a Steve Jobs’ “i” “me”, “mine” world! Apart from solipsistic subject matter, poor poetic structural quality, such as forced amateurish rhyming words at the end of lines, and complete ignorance of metrical qualities, result in poems which are quite tragic to read and distract the reader from of the *sometimes* important message of the poem. Secondly “free verse” does not mean “free for all”, good quality free verse should still retain such poetic qualities as rhythm, musicality or cadence, and use the absolute best possible word available in every case. I despair of reading poetry which is churned out, with little or no revision, and reads just like a paragraph in a newspaper article. Good poetry may come from being born with the gift of a poet but we also need to learn the craft of writing poetry to hone the works into their final perfection. One of the best resources I have come across for learning this is a fairly old book, *The Poet and The Poem* (Jerome, 1979).

The great poets of the past all were characterised by having a visionary quality, not necessarily in everything they wrote, but when Tennyson wrote of the “*flower in the crannied wall*” he was dealing with the big questions concerning humankind not just his personal psychoses! The simplicity and brevity of this poem belies its significance.

*Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.*

“Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters.” (ADOP) Shelley in this prose work is not giving a lesson on how to write poetry but has the intention of restoring poetry to its rightful position as one of the highest, most important arts. Again quoting from his essay, “*Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge.*” This statement immediately reminded me of the lines of

T.S. Eliot's poem, in *The Four Quartets, Burnt Norton*:

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

This work is absolutely at the heart of divinity, and expresses the “*centre and circumference of knowledge*” as an astonishing metaphysical insight. If poets are truly “*the unacknowledged legislators of the world*”, and as poets we emphatically believe this, then it carries with it huge responsibilities. If we want to be taken seriously and bring about change for the good of all people we need to develop or maintain the visionary components that result in great poetry such as the Shelley, Tennyson and Eliot examples above.

Appendix 1

The Necessity of Atheism

Percy Bysshe Shelley

A CLOSE examination of the validity of the proofs adduced to support any proposition, has ever been allowed to be the only sure way of attaining truth, upon the advantages of which it is unnecessary to descant; our knowledge of the existence of a Deity is a subject of such importance, that it cannot be too minutely investigated; in consequence of this conviction, we proceed briefly and impartially to examine the proofs which have been adduced. It is necessary first to consider the nature of Belief.

When a proposition is offered to the mind, it perceives the agreement or disagreement of the ideas of which it is composed. A perception of their agreement is termed belief, many obstacles frequently prevent this perception from being immediate, these the mind attempts to remove in order that the perception may be distinct. The mind is active in the investigation, in order to perfect the state of perception which is passive; the investigation being confused with the perception has induced many falsely to imagine that the mind is active in belief, that belief is an act of volition, in consequence of which it may be regulated by the mind; pursuing, continuing this mistake they have attached a degree of criminality to disbelief of which in its nature it is incapable; it is equally so of merit.

The strength of belief like that of every other passion is in proportion to the degrees of excitement.

The degrees of excitement are three.

The senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind, consequently their evidence claims the strongest assent.

The decision of the mind founded upon our own experience derived from these sources, claims the next degree.

The experience of others which addresses itself to the former one, occupies the lowest degree,--

Consequently no testimony can be admitted which is contrary to reason, reason is founded on the evidence of our senses.



Every proof may be referred to one of these three divisions; we are naturally led to consider what arguments we receive from each of them to convince us of the existence of a Deity.

1st. The evidence of the senses.--If the Deity should appear to us, if he should convince our senses of his existence; this revelation would necessarily command belief;--Those to whom the Deity has thus appeared, have the strongest possible conviction of his existence.

Reason claims the 2nd. place, it is urged that man knows that whatever is, must either have had a beginning or existed from all eternity, he also knows that whatever is not eternal must have had a cause.--Where this is applied to the existence of the universe, it is necessary to prove that it was created, until that is clearly demonstrated, we may reasonably suppose that it has endured from all eternity.--In a case where two propositions are diametrically opposite, the mind believes that which is less incomprehensible, it is easier to suppose that the Universe has existed from all eternity, than to conceive a being capable of creating it; if the mind sinks beneath the weight of one, is it an alleviation to increase the intolerability of the burden?--The other argument which is founded upon a man's knowledge of his own existence stands thus.---A man knows not only he now is, but that there was a time when he did not exist, consequently there must have been a cause.--But what does this prove? we can only infer from effects causes exactly adequate to those effects;---But there certainly is a generative power which is effected by particular instruments; we cannot prove that it is inherent in these instruments, nor is the contrary hypothesis capable of demonstration; we admit that the generative power is incomprehensible, but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient Almighty Being, leaves the cause in the same obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible.

The 3rd. and last degree of assent is claimed by Testimony---it is required that it should not be contrary to reason.---The testimony that the Deity convinces the senses of men of his existence can only be admitted by us, if our mind considers it less probable that these men should have been deceived, then that the Deity should have appeared to them---our reason can never admit the testimony of men, who not only declare that they were eye-witnesses of miracles but that the Deity was irrational, for he commanded that he should be believed, he proposed the highest rewards for faith, eternal punishments for disbelief---we can only command voluntary actions, belief is not an act of volition, the mind is even passive, from this it is evident that we have not sufficient testimony, or rather that testimony is insufficient to prove the being of a God, we have before shewn that it cannot be deduced from reason,---they who have been convinced by the evidence of the senses, they only can believe it.

From this it is evident that having no proofs from any of the three sources of conviction: the mind *cannot* believe the existence of a God, it is also evident that as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality can be attached to disbelief, they only are reprehensible who willingly neglect to remove the false medium thro' which their mind views the subject.

It is almost unnecessary to observe, that the general knowledge of the deficiency of such proof, cannot be prejudicial to society: Truth has always been found to promote the best



interests of mankind.---Every reflecting mind must allow that there is no proof of the existence of a Deity. Q.E.D.

Appendix 2

Two poems by Agnes Maddox written 1880 – 1890

The Visit of The Shah

England stretches hands of welcome
To her Royal Guest
Shows him all her Palaces
Gives him of her best
Proudly wave the Flags on high
Happy people passing by
All to please the Shah!

Royal hands present their treasure
Gifts are lordly without measure!
Army, Navy. all combine
To show him how they can shine
“Happy People.” “Wealthy land”
Whispers he behind his hand.

Shall we show the King another picture
Not just from the Palace of the Queen
Where around the island of the wealthy
Moan the dark tide of our crimes unseen.

Where the little children live or languish
In foul dens amid despair
Does the Shah know of this Coppice?
When the lank beasts spread in noisome air.

Does he know how very sad and dreary
Are the lives of people in “the Slums”?
Or of this deep wrong is England silent?
And for very shame of it – is dumb?

Oh the sorrow, Oh the sadness
Of this blot on England's fame!
How can she rejoice and triumph
With this slur upon our name?

Oh Rulers. Princes. People
Rise and battle with the Foe!
Grow sweet flowers where lank weeds flourish
Till the fields and plant and sow.



And when next the Shah doth visit
This fair land of wealth and fame
Let him find the thorns uprooted
Slums called [by] another name.

“Gardens” fair with all things lovely
Grow and flourish in fresh air
So that even Kings may enter
And pronounce thine “Very fair”.

Dedicated To A Visitor In The East End Of London

Without the helping hand, how can the poor arise?
Give them – bread first – after that
The virtues – if you're wise!
How can they rise. When all they know of life
is living death?
And – every breath they draw
is just a dying breath.
To them. Virtue is but a name -
A name – and nothing more – and Truth a Tabernacle
With a closed door!
A door that's never opened. Night or day!
How can they enter 'till they know the way?
Oh Ye Who Know these things.

Two poems by Rob Harle written 2014 & 1996

Ennui

*He is Ennui! - with tear-filled eye he dreams
Of scaffolds, as he puffs his water pipe.
Reader, you know this dainty monster too;
-Hypocrite reader, - fellowman, my twin!
....Charles Baudelaire*

Ennui I'll have no part of you,
living in a village green
where water pipes are plague-like
common as the morning mist,
and just as truth obscuring.

I am x21 an alien from far away,
millennia have come and gone
and only peace sustains my home of light.
Baudelaire, an alien and from very far away
lit the smallest candle



in the *Flowers of Evil's* pages,
but no one understood the warnings,
or didn't care ... Ennui?

Mugabe - dictators, despots of history -
Stalin, Kim Jong II and the like
inhuman beyond acceptance
merchants of unconscionable death,
have tortured countless millions
more sinister than any Satan
invented by a deceptive, lying, dying Church.
They still exist though covert,
hidden in the cells of spread sheets
going by the multi-national title ... CEO,
their insanity kills others - once removed
their destruction of the very earth
that sustains their own deranged existence.

Greed drips from their mouths
like puss from gaping gangrene wounds,
families live in constant fear
of hunger and foreclosures,
as media barons manipulate the masses
from fortresses of legal shelter.
Empty hearts in hollow suits
haunt Wall Street and the like,
these are no dainty monsters
and no tears will ever fill their steely eyes,
and the planet slowly dies.

Betrayal

The baptismal fonts decay,
and information structures
breed like alien dictators;
fat rubber stamps rot slowly
as the assumption of integrity
collapses under hypocrisy's vengeance.
Force the young to live in gutters
squats and cardboard cut-outs,
build your National empires grand
which rest on stumps of misery;
your status rises, temporarily
with every option to oppress.
The young who only want a chance,
share the air and blood that's yours;
even more they trust you with their care.
Just like Judas you betray
not once, not twice,



but your enshrinement in the Chamber
perfects a continual betrayal
of lies and graft and horror.
Even as you drown your mind
and whisky spills across your soul,
you can't escape the burden of their hope.
Councillors of heavy hype and hail
empty, heartless, barren,
your life is a useless farce
if you sleep warm and weightless
when your children cower and freeze
in the sewer of your mind.

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