

Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted With Darwin's

Mathilde Blind

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—I venture this evening to offer a few remarks on a very complex and far-reaching subject, and before beginning I must crave your indulgence if you find, as must almost unavoidably be the case, that my treatment of it is more fragmentary than could be wished. Speaking broadly, I think it will be admitted that the poet's attitude toward, and interpretation of, Nature may be said to undergo continual modification in harmony with the development of religious and scientific thought. For although the poet in his happiest intuitions often leaps at truths far in advance of the conclusions reached by the slower processes of methodical research, yet on the whole, the representative poems of the world seem to body forth the view of Nature, which is essentially the product of their age and nation.

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* we find the aspects of the visible universe personified in a thousand and one shapes of plastic beauty. The vivifying power and splendour of the sun radiates through the limbs of Apollo; shaggy-breasted Pan is the expression of lush-teeming forest life, and the fatal allurements of lapping waters murmurs for ever in the sweet-voiced sirens. The manifestations of the inorganic world are regarded, by Homer for example, as synonymous with human nature; and the gods, demi-gods, titans, nereids, dryads, and fauns, which represent sky, clouds, ocean, rivers, and forests, are neither better nor worse than the men and women that people the earth.

With the Christian conception of the world this feeling towards Nature underwent a complete transformation. She was now regarded as something opposed to the divine, something inherently bad given over to the flesh and the devil. There is a stanza in Milton's *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* which aptly expresses this view:—

"Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow:
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw;
Confounded that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities."

Indeed all through the Middle Ages there was a distinct recoil from the material universe, which may be traced more or less clearly in all mediæval poets. They liked snugly hedged-in gardens and sunny closes surrounded by venerable cloisters and "the waste and solitary places," which Shelley loved, appalled them with thoughts of bogies and hobgoblins. For in their day the vapour-shrouded mountain-top, the wild and desolate moorland, the tumbling stream, were the haunts of the Evil One—as is still attested, indeed, by a thousand significant appellations of bridge and pass; while to their superstitious fancies the exiled gods of Greece and Rome, now changed into demons, were supposed to hold their ungodly revels in moonlit woods and valleys. In fact, the poetic feeling of mediæval times toward the more remote and unfamiliar scenes of Nature, seems to find expression in that weird German ballad where the witch Lorelei warns the belated traveller:—

"Es is schon spät, es ist schon kalt,
Kommst nimmermehr aus diesem Wald.'
Full late it is, and chill the eve,
This wood thou nevermore shalt leave."

But as men shook off the gloomy and cruel superstitions engendered by the oldest and most oppressive form of

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the Christian religion, the idea that Nature was accursed passed away along with the belief in witches, spells, dæmoniacal possessions, and other hideous fancies begotten of ignorance and credulity. The human heart turning thirstily towards a rehabilitated nature, saw that she was fair, and felt a thrill of delight at the beauty of moonlight on still waters, at the radiance of snow-crowned Alps, at the sublimity of seas in storm or calm. This new sensation of wonder and admiration in the splendour of the material Universe found its apostle in Jean Jacques Rousseau. He became the High Priest of this modern Nature-worship. In his eyes Nature was entirely good, sinless, and beneficent. Man alone, by introducing an artificial kind of civilisation, with its kings and priests, its class distinctions, its arbitrary division of property, its irresponsible power and abject poverty, had brought injustice into the world and all the evils that oppress society. Let him but return to a state of nature, and it would be as well with him as with the fish disporting themselves in the water, or with the birds in the air. Considering these violent transitions from one mode of thought to its opposite, one can't help owning that Luther was not so far out when, with his sledge-hammer wit, he likened mankind to a tipsy boor who has no sooner been lifted into the saddle on one side than he tumbles down on the other. And we must own that the leap from the mental state of St. Bernhardt, who, passing along the shore of the lake of Geneva, was so absorbed in his pious meditations as to be quite oblivious of the scenery around him, to that of Jean Jacques, whose whole soul went out in adoration to the beauty of this identical landscape, is quite as a whimsical a performance as the boor's toppling from one side of the saddle to the other. But be that as it may, there can be little doubt that Rousseau and the French Encyclopédists, with their rose-coloured view of Nature, powerfully influenced that group of English poets to which Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Keats, and Shelley may be said to belong. For widely as they differ from each other, they yet have one thing in common—that passionate, that all-absorbing love of Nature which sustained them in all disappointments they were doomed to meet in regard to their social aspirations. Shelley, above all, was profoundly and permanently swayed by this fervid feeling. In his youth, as is testified by *Queen Mab*, and the notes appended to it, he had been vitally influenced by the study of Rousseau's writings, and those of the other philosophical precursors of the French Revolution. From them he had to a great extent imbibed the firm conviction that if you could only rid society of kings and priests we should immediately enter on the Golden Age, and instead of discord, war, and wretchedness, the earth would become the abode of love and harmony. This is the keynote of Shelley's most important poems—of *The Revolt of Islam*, of *Prometheus Unbound*, of *Hellas*. The same ideas, packed in a narrow compass, are expressed in *The Ode to Liberty*—that noble and inspired poem which is a kind of epitome of the development of man from the beginnings of life to its culmination in the loftiest intellectual achievement. Shelley here seems to us nearly to approach the threshold of the new era, and almost to apprehend that revolution in our conception of Nature which was to take place not so very long afterwards, when the Darwinian theory of the evolution of life gave a new aspect to man's relation to the world around him. Had Shelley only lived longer, he might have succeeded in harmonising his views of Nature with those so luminously developed by Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, and other scientific thinkers, and by doing so there can be little doubt that the body of his poetic work would have gained in backbone and solidity. It is just because Shelley was a philosophic poet, because he aimed at grasping the world as a whole, and at embodying sound ideas in his loftiest flights of imagination, that we must regret that his conception of Nature is rather the off-spring of the eighteenth century than of the nineteenth. Two evils, or more properly speaking, one evil with two heads, like the Austrian eagle, is ever present to Shelley's mind—the double yoke of superstition and tyranny. Let but triumphant liberty abolish this, and it seems to him that all the rest must inevitably follow. From hard-hearted oppressors men will become kind, sympathetic, and gentle, while women, no longer required to be hypocrites by Mrs. Grundy, will naturally turn into brave, generous, and sincere human beings. There will be a return to a primitive state of innocence, and man, no longer divorced from Nature, will be guided by her benign influences. This idea is enunciated in many of Shelley's works, but perhaps the clearest expression of it is in *Queen Mab*, where he says:—

"Look on yonder earth:
The golden harvests spring; the unfailing sun
Sheds light and life; the fruits, the flowers, the trees,
Arise in due succession; all things speak
Peace, harmony, and love. The universe
In nature's silent eloquence, declares
That all fulfil the works of love and joy,—

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All but the outcast man. He fabricates
The sword, which stabs his peace; he cherisheth
The snakes that gnaw his heart: he raiseth up
The tyrant, whose delight is in his woe,
Whose sport is in his agony."

Mark here that man the outcast is contrasted with the peace, harmony, and love which otherwise prevail on the earth. I should like to quote still another passage to the same effect:— "Hath Nature's soul
That form'd this world so beautiful, that spread
Earth's lap with plenty, and life's smallest chord
Strung to unchanging unison, that gave
The happy birds their dwelling in the grove,
That yielded to the wanderers of the deep
The lovely silence of the unfathom'd main,
And fill'd the meanest worm that crawls in dust
With spirit, thought, and love; on Man alone,
Partial in causeless malice, wantonly
Heap'd ruin, vice, and slavery; his soul
Blasted with withering curses; placed afar
The meteor-happiness, that shuns his grasp,
But serving on the frightful gulf to glare,
Rent wide beneath his footsteps? Nature!—no!
Kings, priests and statesmen, blast the human flower
Even in its tender bud; their influence darts
Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins
Of desolate society. The child
Ere he can lisp his mother's sacred name,
Swells with the unnatural pride of crime, and lifts
His baby-sword even in a hero's mood."

We see here that, according to Shelley, all living creatures, "from the meanest worm that crawls" to the happy birds in the grove, enjoy peace and happiness, all excepting poor miserable man, who, by some fatality of his constitution, has ever been the prey of some few among his own kind who, by superior force or cunning, have befooled him, despoiled him, enslaved him, and generally rendered his state one of abject fear and wretchedness. If such were the case, society would certainly have to be regarded as an unmixed evil, and the sooner human beings followed Rousseau's advice and returned to the state of primitive nature the better!

But is it true that all things in Nature, where man is not, speak "peace, harmony, and love"? Why, if we open our Darwin, the very opposite fact meets us at every turn. Yes, in the very vegetable kingdom, amid the gentle race of flowers so dear to Shelley, precisely the same forces are at work, the same incessant strife is raging, the same desires and appetites prevail, which he so abominated in the world of man. For gnawing at the root of life itself seems this power of evil from which the poet's sensitive soul shrank with such horror—lust, hunger, rapine, cruelty. So far from peace being the law of Nature, we learn on the contrary, from our great naturalist, that from the lowest semi-vital organism to the highest and most complex forms of life battle is being waged within battle for the right to breath, to eat, and to multiply on the earth. Look, for example, at the flower-like sea-anemones, with their exquisite forms and delicate rainbow-tints. What a shock it is to one's moral being to see them suddenly close like a tightly-drawn sack on a lot of little living creatures that one sees madly struggling through the semi-diaphanous substance till they are stifled in their living tomb. And this law which bids animal prey upon animal, however revolting to the human conscience, is a necessity of that Nature, which, if not as terribly unjust as the God of Calvinistic theology, seems, at least to our human apprehension, to be callous to the sanguine strife and destruction which is going on in every nook and corner of the earth. Darwin, like Shelley, admits that we see the face of Nature bright with gladness: but he adds, "we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing around us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey."

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Inch by inch every available space of air, of earth, and of water is contested, fought for, finally conquered by some living creature or other, the stronger ever devouring the weaker, or at least beating him out of the field and leaving him to perish. So that the reckless competition, the selfishness, the cruelty which to Shelley appeared as essentially the result of bad government, nay, as almost an accident of human society, might have been traced by him feature by feature throughout the animal kingdom, from the slave-making ant to the thievish sparrow. For Dr. Watt's admonition to the children that "birds in their little nests agree," is, unfortunately, one of those amiable delusions which, on closer examination, turn out anything but true. On the contrary, not only does active jealousy exist between the different species of birds, but they are the most omnivorous of creatures, and one is sorry to think that, in spite "of the spirit, thought, and love which fill the meanest worm that crawls," they swallow the poor innocent with no more compunction than the human biped does his lamb and mint sauce. And then what unchronicled tragedies happen in those leaf-embowered nests, whose form and structure look indeed as if they were presided over by the spirit of love and peace. What, for one thing, should we see if we were to peep into some of them? Perhaps a cuckoo, uninvited, laying her egg in the nest of another kind of bird, whose own brood, when she has hatched the intruder, will be ruthlessly ejected by him. For, according to Darwin, the young cuckoo has not only the instinct, but a back actually adapted for getting rid of his foster-brothers, who thus, poor things, unceremoniously thrown on the ground, perish of cold and hunger.

Then again, if we take the hive-bees, we shall see in that wonderfully-regulated community something not unlike an old-fashioned monarchy with a ruler "by the grace of God." For the queen-bee is so absolute in her own domains that she will suffer no second near her, and promptly destroys the young queens her daughters, as soon as they are born, or perishes herself in the combat. Shelley would have had to own here that even "those royal murderers, whose mean thrones are bought by crimes and treachery and gore," could hardly match the savage instinctive hatred of this little insect fresh from Nature's hand. There is perhaps something even more appalling in the fact that the slave-making instinct should exist among animals. But it seems that certain species of ants are in the habit of carrying off the pupæ of another species to their nests and there rearing them as slaves. These slaves are black and not above half the size of their red masters, so that the contrast in their appearance is striking. With some kinds of ants, the *Formica rufescens*, the tyrants, by never doing any work, have actually lost the power of helping themselves, and are so dependent, that when a migration takes place the slaves have to carry their masters in their jaws!

These, alas! are but a few examples taken at random of the oppression, strife, and cruelty, which seem to pervade all organic beings according to that dread law formulated by Darwin: "Let the strongest live and the weakest die."

The fact is, that Shelley, when flying to Nature away from the hard-hearted ways of men, was really leaping from the frying-pan into the fire. For the very thing he abhorred most in human society—the implacable struggle for supremacy of one individual with another—was raging with tenfold force in the world around him, because less tempered by the mitigating influences of conscience and sympathy. It is true that the sensitive organisation of Shelley, shrinking from the rough contact with reality, never quite looked Nature in the face; and in west wind and sunset cloud, in running stream and fragrant flower, he recognised a more benignant manifestation of power than that which he saw in the Social State of Man, because what he saw reflected by these passive phenomena was in reality the shade of his own soul. And his own soul, being one of the loveliest as well as loftiest that ever passed across the stage of the world, transmuted the visible Universe to something after its own likeness.

In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley grapples with the problem of good and evil, and with the moral regeneration of man; but, as I remarked before, it is to be regretted that in the working out of this magnificent idea the poet was not able to profit by those great generalisations of Darwin which have revolutionised the modern conception of life. I am inclined to call this poem the Passion-Play of Humanity. Instead of the Crucifixion of Christ we have here Man himself, or perhaps, rather the Human Mind, enduring an agony of thousands of years through being held captive by Jupiter. Now Jupiter is in a certain sense the creation of Prometheus, and primarily holds his sway in heaven through him. So that all the misery endured by the Titan, and by the world of men and women for whom he suffers, and by the earth herself in sympathetic pity for her offspring, is due in reality to the phantasm of a celestial tyrant whose shadow clouds the universe. But surely the existence of evil is more deeply entwined with the roots of life than seems here admitted; and though the abolition of irresponsible tyrannic power in heaven and on earth would no doubt do much to lessen the ills of life, it can certainly not be regarded as a universal panacea

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for them. I do not know whether I shall be ignominiously expelled from the Shelley Society, or perhaps even stoned, if I confess that there has always seemed to me to be something crude and undigested in the manner in which the poet tries to solve the problem of good and evil in *Prometheus Unbound*. His leading motive is apparently the same as that which constitutes the vital teaching of all great religions—namely, the redemption of Man. The Titan, by the endurance of woes which hope thinks infinite, by the forgiveness of wrongs darker than death or night, by the defiance of power which seems omnipotent, has wrought out this deliverance. But it is curious how vaguely this great triumph is described. The principle of evil incarnated in Jupiter simply topples down or is hurled down, one hardly knows how, by Demogorgon, his son, and the change which straightway transforms the earth from a scene of toil, famine, war and tyranny, to one of boundless love and harmony, is equally shadowy. The spirit of the hour thus describes the change which has come over things on his proclaiming the glad tidings of the liberation of Prometheus:—

"But soon I look'd,
And behold thrones were kingless, and men walk'd
One with the other even as spirits do,
None fawn'd, none trampled; hate, disdain, or fear,
Self-love or self-contempt, on human brows
No more inscribed, as o'er the gate of hell,
'All hope abandon ye who enter here,'
None frown'd, none trembled, none with eager fear
Gazed on another's eye of cold command,
Until the subject of a tyrant's will
Became, worse fate, the object of his own,
Which spurr'd him, like an outspent horse to death...
Thrones, altars, judgment-seats, and prisons; wherein,
And beside which, by wretched men were borne
Sceptres, tiaras, swords, and chains, and tomes
Of reason'd wrong, glozed on by ignorance,
Were like those monstrous and barbaric shapes,
The ghost of a no more remember'd fame,
Which, from their unworn obelisks, look forth
In triumph o'er the palaces and tombs
Of those who were their conquerors: mouldering round
Those imaged to the pride of kings and priests,
A dark yet mighty faith, a power as wide
As is the world it wasted, and are now
But an astonishment; even so the tools
And emblems of its last captivity,
Amid the dwellings of the peopled earth,
Stand not o'erthrown, but unregarded now. "

This ultimate triumph of the human mind over the forces of evil by which it is encompassed, and the consequent advent of a Golden Age, has been mystically foreshadowed by all great religious and ethical teachers, and Shelley could not have chosen a finer or more stupendous subject for a great dramatic poem. But I venture to think that if he had worked out this theme with more historic realism—if he had not unfortunately been debarred from casting into a poetic mould the modern scientific conception of evolution and the struggle for existence—that he would have shown the human race as typified in Prometheus, not as physically and morally depraved, owing to its gradual alienation from Nature, but, on the contrary, as emerging from a semi-brutal, barbarous condition, and continually progressing to higher stages of moral and mental development. For the true conflict consists in man's struggle with the irresponsible forces of Nature, and the victory in his conquest over them, both as regards the subjection of his own lower animal instincts and in his continually growing power through knowledge of turning these elemental forces, that filled his savage progenitors with fear and terror, into the nimblest of servants. This, I take it, would have been a conclusion more in harmony with the Darwinian conception of the universe, and also more consoling on the whole. For I suppose most of us would agree with

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Strauss's view that, just as it is more honourable in a citizen to have raised himself from a lower to a higher station in the social scale instead of having lapsed into degradation from some former proud estate, so **Man** himself gains in moral value, when one reflects that with infinite pain and struggle he has slowly risen above the thralldom of physical nature, and eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge has learned, at whatever cost of mere sensuous enjoyment, to distinguish good from evil. Shelley, on the contrary, bitten by the nature worship of Rousseau, was too much inclined to glorify not only the future but also the remote past, at the expense of the present. As, for example, when he says "that at some distant period man forsook the path of nature, and sacrificed the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites, and that **ALL VICE** arose from the ruin of healthful innocence." Here is hardly the place, or it would be easy to prove, from Darwin's *Descent of Man*, that every kind of unnatural appetite and vice has prevailed among men in a state of nature. Thus the murder of infants was practised on the largest scale throughout the world, the robbery of strangers was considered as honourable, women were commonly like slaves, among some savage tribes it was custom to kill their old and decrepit parents, while intemperance, licentiousness, and unnatural crimes were the common practice. Considering that such was the original bias of humanity, we may perhaps apply to it the remark of an American humorist on being told that some one was a self-made man, to wit, that it relieved his Maker of a great responsibility.

In concluding these few remarks, I can only trust that I have not been tiresome by dwelling too exclusively on Shelley's philosophy of Nature, and scarcely at all on the simply artistic value of his work. But as we meet to help each other in a fuller comprehension of his poetry, I hope I shall be forgiven if I have ventured to point out certain imperfections in the work of our beloved poet. "Swear by no master's words" is a saying of Goethe's that would have been heartily endorsed by Shelley, the iconoclast of authority. But if he failed comparatively in his attempt "at solving the universe," if I may be permitted to use a favourite expression of my friend, the late W.K. Clifford, Shelley succeeded, perhaps more completely than any other poet, in marrying the most sublime or evanescent appearances of the material universe to human emotion. Indeed, the essence of Shelley's being seems to have become one with the impetuous west wind, his heaven-aspiring song thrills us in the notes of the skylark, and the rapture of his words has added a new radiance to the beauty of flowers.

And though I have hitherto only dwelt on the contrast between the views of Nature held by Shelley and Darwin, I should like before concluding to say a few words as regards the final junction of their views in the glorious vistas they disclose of ever higher types of life replacing those that had gone before. For, judging by analogy, better, wiser, and more beautiful beings will inhabit this planet in the ages to come, according to the laws of evolution, than we can now have any conception of. And I hope that we are all agreed that in Shelley himself we have already a certain foreshadowing of something better—for with his exquisitely sensitive organisation, of which he might well say, "I am but as a nerve o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of the earth," with his scorn for vulgar aims ending in self-aggrandisement, with his impatience of the conventional, continually hampering standards of morality, and with his passion for reforming the world, he seems lifted, not only above the needs and greeds of sensual desires, but also above fierce competition, the corroding jealousy, and malignant rivalries from which intellectual workers are so rarely exempt: failing, where he did fail, because he could not help investing the imperfect natures of transitory individuals with an ideal beauty which, fading on a closer view, induced in him a shuddering recoil of dismay and disillusion. Outsoaring the limits of the actual world, Shelley's mind foreshadowed loftier types than any yet in existence, his purpose being, as he says, "to familiarise the highly-refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that, until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life, which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness." In the noble-hearted Laon, the liberator of his country, who only suffers defeat because he is fain to overcome his enemies by generosity; in Cythna, the high-souled woman, who rouses her sex in harem and seraglio from the inanition of a weak dependence to an ardent participation in the noble war of liberation; and, above all, in Prometheus himself, the heroic martyr who vanquishes hell by pitying his torturers, the Furies: in these and similar types Shelley has incorporated nearly all of goodness, love, and wisdom that it is at present possible to conceive. But his creations have been accused of being vague and unsubstantial shadows that take no more hold of us than the visionary shapes seen in a sunset sky. And we cannot deny that the accusation contains more truth. For poets have unfortunately always been more successful in depicting scenes of passion, crime, and agony than in their descriptions of divine love and beatitude.

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Take only as an example the *Inferno* of Dante as compared to his *Paradiso*, or Milton's Satan contrasted with the angelic hosts; and to come to more mundane subjects, the most tragic themes have always taken the strongest hold of men, as witness the murder of Agamemnon, the doom of Iphigeneia, the madness of King Lear, the ambition of Macbeth, the imprisonment of Margaret, the ordeal of Fantine.

And it must be confessed that though, as a rule, we know very little of heaven, our experience of hell is pretty considerable. Now, as the substance of all poetry has to be extracted mostly from experience, Shelley, when he tried to embody his beautiful idealisms of moral excellence, and found that reality yielded him a rather meagre crop of impressions, had to weave his ærial webs too much from his own inner consciousness. But his glowing anticipation of a better future in store for humanity is, in a certain sense, the warrant of its own fulfilment, and his poetry will become a factor in helping to bring it about; for in the continual process of selection there is no reason why the moral ideals of one generation should not become the stepping-stones toward their realisation in another. And in this process of evolution the final triumph of the human mind over the brute forces of nature may be achieved, and Shelley's magnificent prophecy at the close of the fourth act of the *Prometheus* turn to simple truth,

the prophecy that "The man remains,—
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man.
Passionless? no:—yet free from guilt or pain,—
Which were, for his will made or suffered them;
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance, and death, and mutability,—
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane."