

## *The Romantic Russell and the Legacy of Shelley*

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When Bertrand Russell is a writer's subject, the reader may well ask, "Which Russell is being considered?" As Mario Bunge has put the matter in a study of Russell's philosophical method, "It is well known that Bertrand Russell was not a single person but a whole sequence of scholars. Every one of them was eminent in at least one field and all of them were responsible, deep and clear thinkers as well as superb writers and outspoken men."<sup>1</sup> This notion of diverse selves, which goes beyond the usual conception of the polymath, is applicable to Russell not only as a philosopher but also as a man of letters. To assess the method and role of a writer who was both lyrical and austere, who was a formal and familiar essayist, epistolary artist, social and political polemicist, popularizer of philosophy, expositor of science, and author of short stories, is a difficult task. One way to integrate this diversity of literary Russells is to focus on his attraction to the romantics and their influence on his expression.

In the conflict of allegiances that beset the adolescent Russell, the romantics opened patterns of meaning that were liberating and invigorating. From Shelley in particular, whose life, like Russell's, was challenged by double desires—in Shelley's case, the need to be a poet-philosopher and the need to be a reformer—Russell drew delight and inspiration. Characterized by a pervasive dualism of reason and feeling, Russell struggled in vain to match his prodigious gifts for rationality with corresponding abilities in the realm of feelings and values. Especially during adolescence and young manhood, Russell was trying to find his way into that second realm through imaginative writing. To do so, he needed guides, and one source where he sought them was the romantic literary legacy. From the aspiring literary portion of Russell's mind, which felt the impact of the romantic imagination, came writings so different from the mathematical and logical works that we can

label them the productions of the "romantic Russell".

Of course, Russell did not identify himself with the romantic movement. In fact, we find him expressing serious reservations about the movement in a letter which he wrote to Helen (Thomas) Flexner, a cousin of his first wife.

Romanticism, it seems to me, is the creed of passion, the belief that the good consists in overmastering emotion, of whatever kind, the stronger the better. Hence, it is led to dwell specially upon the strongest emotions—love, hatred, rage, jealousy—with one exception: No romanticist praises fear, though this is certainly as strong as any emotion can be. The reason is that the romanticist loves emotion as an assertion of personality, of individual force, while fear expresses the antithesis to this, the slavery of the individual to the world. The world, in the view of romanticism, is primarily material for the development of the individual—thus Kant is the parent of the romantic movement, and Nietzsche is its child. Its antithesis is not classicism, but Buddhism, quietism, the doctrine of submission to fate, and the hope of annihilation or absorption as the reward of virtue. This is, of course, more akin to romanticism than classicism is; but that is the nature of antitheses.

The worship of passion has, I confess, a great instinctive attraction for me, but to my reason it is utterly abhorrent.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if the revolt against reason is seen to be the essential feature of romanticism, Russell is not to be so classified. But romanticism, both as a historic movement and as a tendency of the human mind, is complex and varied. Many of its manifestations are apparent in Russell's work: his "impulse" (as he termed it) toward mysticism; his insistence on individual freedom of action, especially in the cause of broad humanitarianism; his spirit of protest against dogma and injustice; his sensitivity to nature; his venture into imaginative, lyrical expression. The refusal expressed in the above letter to perceive classicism and romanticism as antithetical makes difficult the attempt completely to isolate romantic elements. Yet Shelley played such an important role in Russell's developing consciousness as to warrant the effort to determine the basis for that appeal. Observing the poet Shelley's attraction for Russell, the reader finds himself reorganizing his perception of Russell the philosopher. For, notwithstanding all his reservations about the romantic movement, Russell found powerful incentives to make an exception for Shelley.

Soon after the turn of the century, and largely coexistent with the laborious work of the *Principles of Mathematics* and the formidable innovations of *Principia Mathematica*, Russell's belletristic writings began to appear. Their efflorescence supported his developing claim to the role of man of letters. Like the romantics, Russell saw the role as a function of the

prophet, a view which he later expressed in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, speculating on the possibility of his developing a prophetic voice much like Carlyle's.<sup>3</sup> These belletristic writings may be divided into three categories. The lyrical essays, of which "The Free Man's Worship", "The Study of Mathematics", "On History", and "The Essence of Religion" are outstanding early examples, may be considered as the first group. To the second category, fiction, Russell made only one contribution, "The Perplexities of John Forstice", until late in his life, when he returned to that form. Third are Russell's private letters. In this group, his correspondence with Lady Ottoline Morrell constitutes his most remarkable achievement of the pre-war era. Andrew Brink has called these letters "the work of literary imagination at full stretch", declaring that Russell became "a master" of epistolary autobiography. The letters to Ottoline became for Russell, Brink explains, "an exercise in self-transformation".<sup>4</sup>

The lyrical essays show Russell drawing on elements from many writers, using these elements to present the romantic tragic stance. He tells us, for example, that when he wrote "The Free Man's Worship", Milton's rhythms echoed in his mind,<sup>5</sup> and we recognize syntactical patterns of *Paradise Lost*; but we think also of the melancholy of "*Il Penseroso*" and the grieving of "Lycidas". Again, we may see the suggestion of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, in which we move through consideration of Nature as "red in tooth and claw / With ravine" to consolation at the end. Russell, however, strives to avoid what he considers Tennyson's "sentimentality" in regard to Nature. And we see a Shelleyan elegiac strain. But whereas Shelley in "Adonais" merges elements of science, religion, and art to mourn the death of Keats and to elevate him to the transcendent "white radiance of Eternity", Russell uses fragments from many fields to lament the "death" of all humanity. Starting from the cosmic view, he expresses existential consolation, a call for individual heroic endurance strengthened by the companionship of shared mortality. We see, of course, Marlowe's influence, especially in the fragment of drama that opens the essay, a scene in which Dr. Faustus hears the twentieth-century view of creation as science presents it. Although Russell thus drew inspiration from a range of sources, the romantics provided the basic concept that allowed his originality to operate on these materials: the concept of the creative function of the imagination. This concept underlies his individualistic vision that man's finite actions must be undertaken in a larger arena of tragic significance.

In "The Perplexities of John Forstice", the autobiographical novella written in 1912 (but unpublished until 1972), Russell creates a protagonist who displays Russell's own dualism of rationalism and romanticism. Forstice affirms, in Russell's words, "side by side the two truths, the truth of science and the truth of vision".<sup>6</sup> Forstice reaches this affirmation after many experiences, including placing his quest for the meaning of life before

a symposium of “lovers of thought”, who in turn discuss what things give human life its value. The situation reflects Russell’s own profound questioning at the time, when the need to express both the truth of science and the truth of vision was an insistent preoccupation. At the same time that he was producing the works of mathematics and logic on which his primary reputation rests, he was also engaged in a complementary effort to produce works based on emotional perception, that is, on a way of “knowing” alternate to the rational. Struggling to turn his own complex experiences into meaningful literature, Russell read deeply. The product, as others have observed, was a mind like a continuing symposium. Russell listened to many voices and tested many ideas in his own internal debate. But his later statement, looking back at this period, “For many years Shelley dominated by imagination and my affections”,<sup>7</sup> supports the thesis that, for Russell’s imaginative writings, Shelley was paradigmatic. Shelley’s language communicated an affinity of spirit; and his poetic strategies expressed themes also at the center of Russell’s own aspiring, Platonic mind of that time: the quest for the ideal; mysticism, the conviction of “the truth of vision”; and the apocalyptic hope for a regenerate world.

Russell made his pronouncement about the shaping influence of Shelley from the perspective of more than half a century. In the 1950s, he opened a series of BBC talks on works that had influenced him from approximately the age of fifteen to the age of twenty-one by declaring that books read in later life can seldom if ever have the impact of books read in youth. His first talk, “The Importance of Shelley”, described his discovery of the poet in terms reminiscent of the excitement in Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”:

and then one day I came upon Shelley, whose very name was unknown to me. I took out from a shelf the Golden Treasury volume of selections from Shelley and opened it at *Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude*. I read on and on entranced. Here, I felt, was a kindred spirit, gifted as I never hoped to be with the power of finding words as beautiful as his thoughts.<sup>8</sup>

In a letter to Lady Ottoline, he recalled his first reading of the poem:

Shelley was a wonderful discovery. I remember the moment now. I was alone in my Aunt Maude Stanley’s room at Dover Street, and by accident I took out the Golden Treasury Selections from Shelley and began reading *Alastor*—it utterly carried me away, and I couldn’t understand how grown-up people, who admired Shakespeare and Milton could fail to care about Shelley. I got a passionate personal love of him—more than for any one I knew.<sup>9</sup>

In his *Autobiography*, Russell adds these details:

I spent all my spare time reading him, and learning him by heart. Knowing no one to whom I could speak of what I thought or felt, I used to reflect how wonderful it would have been to know Shelley, and to wonder whether I should ever meet any live human being with whom I should feel so much in sympathy.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence of the importance of Shelley and other romantics also exists in “What Shall I Read?”, a record of books he read between 1891 and 1902. “In keeping such a record, Russell was following a well-established practice of many Victorian intellectuals such as Mill, Arnold and Gladstone.”<sup>11</sup> While incomplete (containing no mathematical readings assigned for courses at Cambridge, for instance), the record-book provides clues to his deepest personal, though not professional, interests. Literary works make up the majority of the entries. Of these, a high proportion concerns works by romantics, including Wordsworth, Heine, Edward Fitzgerald, Carlyle, Scott, Bryon, Keats, Goethe, Emily Brontë, and Coleridge. Especially remarkable are the facts that the most frequent entry is Shelley’s “Epipsychidion” and that Hogg’s *Life of Shelley* is the only literary one among the biographies. (Sometime before 1906 Russell also read Hogg’s *Shelley at Oxford*.)

Russell’s many readings of “Epipsychidion” still allowed this statement written later to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “Shelley’s long poems I don’t care for much—it is his little ones, sometimes a line or two that I love.”<sup>12</sup> By 1912 he felt that he had exhausted his capacity for response to some of the long poems by turning to them so often. “What Shall I Read?” demonstrates that Russell read “Epipsychidion” ten times within less than four years and that these readings occurred in clusters that suggest intense interest. For example, Russell recorded this poem for December 1893, January 1894, and February 1894. The listings show, moreover, that the poem was especially important in Russell’s relationship with his first wife, Alys. In 1894, he began the system of using the letter “A.” in front of books they read together. The initialing reveals that “Epipsychidion” was the first work that he read with Alys (Jan. 1894) and the first work that they read in the month of their wedding (Dec. 1894). Several of their letters attest to the importance of “Epipsychidion” in their relationship. For example, his letter of 25 October 1894 refers to the poem as “a perfect expression for what we can only express with other eloquence than words”, a reference to lines 560–8:

And we will talk, until thought’s melody  
Become too sweet for utterance, and it die

In words, to live again in looks, which dart  
 With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,  
 Harmonizing silence without a sound.  
 Our breaths shall intermix, our bosoms bound,  
 And our veins beat together; and our lips  
 With other eloquence than words, eclipse  
 The soul that burns between them.

Russell's *Autobiography* adds a felicitous description of their first reading together. Here he gives an account of 4 January 1894, when he waded through a heavy snow to spend the day at the home of Alys's parents:

The snow brought a strange effect of isolation, making London almost as noiseless as a lonely hill top. It was on this occasion that I first kissed Alys.... We spent the whole day, with the exception of meal-times, in kissing, with hardly a word spoken from morning till night, except for an interlude during which I read *Epipsychidion* aloud.<sup>13</sup>

Although this reference to "Epipsychidion" may seem amusing, it conveys, I think, the configuration Russell found so attractive in Shelley: a setting that has become a psychic landscape, isolated, silent, offering loneliness and elevation; the physical expression of an ideal passion; the approach to the ideal shared with another seeker (here, as so often in Shelley's works, an ideal maiden). In reading aloud Shelley's poem, Russell transformed his personal experience to the symbolic.

In recalling that scene in the *Autobiography*, Russell makes his private experience both public and real. In the same way, when he recollected and wrote about his reading as a youth, he must have conducted a "dialogue" between himself as the older, ironic realist and himself as the remembered romantic. Russell analyzes Shelley's appeal; he identifies purity of passion, love of beauty, and scope of imagination. Despite his having come by this time to see the romantic movement as generally mistaken and even dangerous, Russell still valued Shelley's poetic and philosophical qualities. In an essay called "Reading History As It Is Never Written", also composed in later years, Russell states:

If I had more leisure, or a longer life, I should write a book called *Shelley the Tough*. I got very tired of the ineffectual angel of Matthew Arnold's criticism: Shelley, in fact, was not at all that sort of person ... altogether he was considered by the others at Eton to be a very tough customer. You will, no doubt, remember also that he was an extremely good shot with the pistol.... I think altogether that he should be represented in that line.... This is what Shelley was really like, it was only occasionally that

he wrote poems. In fact, he was a tough customer given to revolver shooting and to modern industrialism.<sup>14</sup>

While Shelley's weaknesses are outweighed in Russell's mind by his virtues, Russell does not manifest the same sympathy with Byron, or with other romantics whose writings he feared would encourage egoistic passions and self-realization as their supreme goal. Russell made Byron the subject of an entire chapter in *History of Western Philosophy* (the only poet distinguished in this way), but Russell did so on the basis of Byron's importance as a myth-figure, especially in Europe, not on his qualities as a poet-philosopher. That he made the choice to write on Byron a matter of scholarship, not personal preference, is evidenced by his comment to Lady Ottoline:

It is a comfort to me that you find Byron so hateful—I thought you felt I was unduly prejudiced against him. I ploughed through Moore's life once but thought him such an unmitigated CAD that I almost wished to forget that he had ever existed.<sup>15</sup>

(In contrast, Russell, indicating his attraction to Shelley's personality as well as to his poetry, declared: "It is one of the things that make me love Shelley that he has *something* of what I feel about nature."<sup>16</sup>)

While finally arguing against the romantics in *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell does state: "It is not the psychology of the romantics that is at fault; it is their standard of values."<sup>17</sup> Thus, Russell does not fault their recognition of the solitary part of man's nature, but rather the assertion of it without regard to truth or duty to others. In fact, "Alastor", the poem that first drew Russell to Shelley, presents this very theme: the solitary soul who, obsessed by his subjective quest, ignores other human relationships and perishes. The romantic revolt of the solitary instinct against social bonds, Russell finds, results in the individual's regarding others as only projections of the Self. Russell offers his own imaginative solution to the problem of human needs with Shelleyan, not Byronic, echoes. In "Perplexities", for example, John Forstice makes important discoveries after the death of his uncle, Tristram Forstice, through reading the older man's journal:

There is in all human intercourse, to those who have the power of love, some disquieting hint, some wistful suggestion, of a mystical world where solitude is overcome ... where the division between Self and Other is of no account.... The greatest passion knows that mortality cannot live at such a height or such a depth, and longs for death to prevent the return to common earth.... But all the greatest things,

however brief their outward life may be, seem ... to live for ever in a remote world of light ... something of the shining glory of love irradiates all the stunted lives of imprisoned souls.<sup>18</sup>

What Russell seems to have prized in the romantics, then, is what he terms their “psychology”—that is, their ability to function as dramatists who characterize aspects of the mind. Although he eventually opposed romanticism as a total mode of knowing, Russell gave it the compliment of imitation in the outpouring of his literary works in the opening decades of the twentieth century. To understand the ebullience of the “romantic Russell”, we need to examine some of the ideas and works which nourished Russell’s developing imagination.

“Alastor” and “Epipsychidion” merit primary consideration. In his Preface to the first, Shelley writes:

*Alastor* may be considered as allegorical ... of the human mind. It represents a youth ... led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe.... But ... these objects [of knowledge] cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves.<sup>19</sup>

This being unites in one image all the youth’s visions of the good, the true, and the beautiful. The youth is a nameless Poet. (Alastor is not the Poet’s name, but rather a Greek word meaning “evil genius”.) The image appears as “a veiled maid”, who sits beside the Poet in his dream; “Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought.” This vision, whose themes are knowledge, truth, virtue, and liberty, is characterized also by “fair hands”, “dark locks”, and “glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil / Of woven wind”. She folds the Poet’s frame “in her dissolving arms”. But he awakes to find her fled, his mind “vacant”, and the scene “empty”. Thereafter, obsessed by this vision he himself has created, the Poet searches in vain for her prototype through a series of vast, exotic, and pathless landscapes. One which impressed Russell particularly is a “wide and melancholy waste” where the Poet pauses briefly, “the lone Chorasmian shore”. The sound and image of that phrase lingered in Russell’s mind, occurring to him when he wrote the chapter “The Romantic Movement” in *History of Western Philosophy*: “The geography of the romantics is interesting: from Xanadu to ‘the lone Chorasmian shore,’ the places in which it is interested are remote, Asiatic, or ancient.”<sup>20</sup> The phrase may have intensified a similar image already in Russell’s mind. The image of human beings standing on a shore, facing emptiness, occurs frequently in Russell’s

essays and letters. For example, he wrote to G. Lowes Dickinson: “Human comradeship seems to grow more intimate and more tender from the sense that we are all exiles on an inhospitable shore.”<sup>21</sup> The image is a romantic one, and in “Alastor”, Shelley links his landscapes of loneliness with the Poet’s inability to relate to other human beings. Putting aside all such attentions, the Poet continues his obsessive search for his beloved ideal until, consumed with longing, he dies. While Russell has made no direct comment on what lesson he took from “Alastor”, his own writings often deal with the temptation to reject human feeling in the quest for the ideal. In “Alastor”, the “didactic” message (Mary Shelley’s word) is that we must bring our love for the ideal back to do its work among our fellow-beings. Writing to Gilbert Murray on the function of the poet, Russell affirmed this same idea when he declared that Murray’s artistry in his translation of the *Bacchae* helped “to support faith in the world of beauty, and in the ultimate dignity of life ... and as you have the power, you have also the duty, have you not? Each of us is an Atlas to the world of his own ideals, and the poet, more than anyone else, lightens the burden for weary shoulders.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to haunting imagery, a second appeal for Russell in “Alastor” was surely the “psyche-epipsyche” strategy. Shelley puts this Platonic concept to his particular use, as Carlos Baker explains: “The mind (psyche) imaginatively creates or envisions what it does not have (epipsyche), and then seeks to possess epipsyche, to move toward it as a goal.”<sup>23</sup> For the Shelleyan hero, this vision is of a complementary heroine; the hero’s search for her becomes a spiritual quest. If Russell identified with the aspiration and spiritual union of the Poet (and by extension with Shelley, for the hero and his creator are very similar), we perhaps see why Russell later sent a volume of Shelley’s poems to each new love as he became interested in her. The poems were an “explanation” of his psychological pattern, as well as a validation of his seeing the woman as an embodiment of the ideal. He explained to Lady Ottoline:

But nobody writes about love in a way that really satisfies me except Shelley. It is generally too physical—and too little in relation to the outside world. I don’t feel love a refuge from the world but a light to illumine the world.<sup>24</sup>

The significance to Russell of the search for the ideal is further exemplified in “Epipsychidion”. Indeed, the poem may be considered a rewritten, superior “Alastor”. Again, the theme is that the human soul aspires to reach the ideal. The soul needs a guide; the guide is a woman. Shelley likens his poem to Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, and, as with Dante’s Beatrice, the poet’s ideal passion symbolizes a real woman. In fact, the woman of Shelley’s dreaming was a real person, Lady Emilia Viviani, whom Shelley and his

wife Mary found living in an isolated convent. They considered her a prisoner. Centring his poem on her as “Emily”, Shelley addresses her first as a “captive bird”, “adored Nightingale” in a cage; he then continues with an outpouring of metaphors that reveal how she embodies the ideal: “Youth’s vision thus made perfect” (line 42). However, after this profusion of metaphors that exalt Emily, Shelley declares:

I never was attached to that great sect,  
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select  
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,  
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend  
To cold oblivion, though it is the code  
Of modern morals, and the beaten road  
Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread,  
Who travel to their home among the dead  
By the broad highway of the world, and so  
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,  
The dreariest and the longest journey go.

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,  
That to divide is not to take away.  
Love is like understanding, that grows bright,  
Gazing on many truths. (Lines 149–63)

These lines seem to argue for free love, and there have always been readers who, having taken this argument as the chief message, approved or disapproved of the poem on that basis. Others maintain that such a view is too literal. In their view, Shelley uses his encounter with the real Emilia, who strikes him as the ultimate appearance of his epipsyche, to create in lyric and narrative the account of his mythical union with the emanative part of himself that embodies the ideal.<sup>25</sup> Whatever our view of the degree of Shelley’s Platonism in the poetic love he expresses, the poem celebrates romantic love and argues for its liberation from the restraints of the institution of marriage. Shelley saw marriage at that time as a kind of tyranny of social and legal restrictions and conventions, a point he makes clear when he argues in *Queen Mab* (1813) for love that exists in “confidence, equality, and unreserve”. In a discussion of romantic love in *Marriage and Morals*, Russell points to what he judges a fallacy in Shelley’s argument. Realizing that falling in love led him to write remarkable poems, Shelley concluded that “the emotion that produced these results was wholly good, and he saw no reason why love should ever be restrained”. What he failed to realize, Russell felt, is that “it was the obstacles to his desires that led him to write poetry.... The social barriers against which he inveighed were an essential

part of the stimulus to his best activities.” In a later chapter, “Marriage”, Russell applies Shelley’s view to the difficulties of modern marriage: “Love can flourish only as long as it is free and spontaneous; it tends to be killed by the thought that it is a duty.” After quoting lines 149–59 of the selection quoted above from “Epipsychidion”, he adds:

There can be no doubt that to close one’s mind on marriage against all the approaches of love from elsewhere is to diminish receptivity and sympathy and the opportunities of valuable human contacts. It is to do violence to something which, from the most idealistic standpoint, is in itself desirable. And like every kind of restrictive morality it tends to promote what one may call a policeman’s outlook upon the whole of human life—the outlook, that is to say, which is always looking for an opportunity to forbid something.<sup>26</sup>

These words, of course, were written long after the time of our primary concern, the period of Russell’s courtship of Alys.

At that time, despite their commitment to each other, neither Russell nor Alys seemed to find difficulty in accepting Shelley’s argument in theory. Both felt at home with the liberal-radical tradition to which Shelley belonged in politics. Both were also complex in attitude. Russell had fallen in love with Alys at first sight when he was seventeen, she twenty-two. Although inexperienced and reserved at the time of their engagement five years later, Russell sent her during their engagement letters that biographer Ronald W. Clark calls “adventuresome” for 1894.<sup>27</sup> However, Russell was still not so liberal in opinion that he was not distressed when his older brother Frank, a few years later, avoided British law, obtained an American divorce, and married a second wife. Alys revealed similar contradictions. An active Quaker, she campaigned with moral fervour for temperance and women’s suffrage; her variety of Quakerism, Clark observes, “harking back to its ancestry in Anabaptism, included advocacy of free love.”<sup>28</sup> This advocacy, however, disappeared when Alys’s sister Mary left her first husband to run away with Bernard Berenson; Alys was shocked. Moreover, when after about eight years together Russell and Alys found that their marriage had collapsed, they lived together for over nine years in celibacy, concealing their failure. And Alys maintained fidelity even after their divorce and until her death over fifty years later.

Their complexity notwithstanding, Russell and Alys at the time of the readings of “Epipsychidion” were committed young lovers. In this poem above all others, Shelley exalts human love. In reaching for the ideal through rhapsodic language, Shelley offers several levels of meaning. Shelley had come to the composition of this poem fresh from his translating of Dante’s *Convivio*, in which Dante postulates four modes in which books can

be understood. Applied to “Epipsychidion,” the first, the literal, is the story of a man who finds his ideal love and prepares to take her to an idyllic island. The second is the allegorical—here, the notion that idealists seek the fulfilment of a complementary being. The third mode is the moral. Love, like imagination, is liberating and expansive, allowing the soul to create the ideal and to join it. The fourth mode, the anagogical (concerned with the soul), presents a rhapsody to love that also illustrates the mind in creation.<sup>29</sup>

The concept of the mind in creation would probably have fascinated Russell, who was attempting to forge creative methods. In “Epipsychidion”, Shelley places the creative process in a context at once sexual, mental, and mystical. The poet invites Emily to journey with him on a voyage to a place of innocence where “Earth and Ocean seem / To sleep in one another’s arms”. In that place, he tells her, she will be “the lady of the solitude”:

We shall become the same, we shall be one  
 Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?  
 One spirit in twin-hearts, which grows and grew  
 Till like two meteors of expanding flame,  
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,  
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still  
 Burning, yet ever inconsumable. (Lines 573–9)

The imagery conveys an appropriate anticipation to a young Russell contemplating a blissful marriage. Much of Russell’s fascination with the poem derives from Shelley’s expression of the mystical level of consciousness. Mysticism is a subject about which Russell would come to think and to write deeply. Still in the future, of course, at the time of these readings, is the event of 1901 that Russell described as his “mystical illumination”. The event bears a resemblance to the thought patterns of Shelley.

The experience of mystical illumination, which Russell also called his “first conversion”, appeared to happen by accident. After hearing a moving reading by Gilbert Murray of his unpublished translation of the *Hippolytus*, Russell arrived at the residence in Cambridge that he and Alys were sharing with the Whiteheads. They found Mrs. Whitehead in severe heart pain. Witnessing her pain, Russell experienced this process:

She seemed cut off from everyone and everything by walls of agony, and the sense of the solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me.... Suddenly, the ground seemed to give way beneath me, and I found myself in quite another region. Within five minutes I went through some such reflections as the following: the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached;

whatever does not spring from this motive is harmful, or at best useless.... At the end of those five minutes, I had become a completely different person. For a time a sort of mystic illumination possessed me.<sup>30</sup>

Much like a Shelleyan protagonist, Russell had entered “another region” and returned with the message that love must be the driving force of life. As for the Poets of “Alastor” and “Epipsychidion”, so for Russell a woman mediated the transfer to another dimension. The intensity of the experience is evident in that Russell attributed to those five minutes the changed political and social attitudes that he manifested during the decades to come.

As this experience indicates, an obvious attraction to Shelley’s work for Russell, in addition to the quest for the ideal and the expression of the mystical consciousness, is the glowing sense of transformation, of Utopian, apocalyptic vision. Although Russell’s statement in the lecture “The Importance of Shelley” is that his interest in Shelley as the political rebel came later than did his attraction to the lyrical Shelley, it seems likely that he responded immediately to the apocalyptic quality of the language. As Shelley adds image to image and metaphor to metaphor, his very syntax seems to be urging for change. This quality, I believe, is what Russell had in mind when he wrote, “I loved Shelley for his rhythm as much as for his sentiment.”<sup>31</sup> If Shelley’s work suffers from some of the shortcomings of youth, it receives compensation from the energies that are characteristic of youth. A key work that displays these energies together with the apocalyptic vision is the “Ode to the West Wind”.

That the poem was among Shelley’s works Russell had learned by heart we know from Colette (Lady Constance Malleon, who became intimate with Russell during the First World War). She writes in *After Ten Years* of her memories of Russell:

One day we were out walking in rough, tempestuous weather and he sat down on the top of a heathery bank with his hair all wild in the wind and reeled off from beginning to end Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”. It was the first time in my life I had heard it. It suited B.R.—“tameless, and swift, and proud.”<sup>32</sup>

The incident corroborates the affinity Russell felt for Shelley. The poet identifies himself with the audacious quality he sees in the personified West Wind: “A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud” (lines 55–6).

The five stanzas of the “Ode” comprise seventy lines, in which an electrifying surge of words mimics the appearance of a violent tempest in a wood near Florence. The first three stanzas invoke in turn the elements of

earth, air, and water; just as we need to find the human element in this landscape, the fourth stanza brings in the poet. In comparison to this display of the forces of nature he is frail, but he speaks in the first person, and the last stanza rings with his fiery emotion. He uses the imagery of the fourth element, fire, to assert the poet's prophetic function:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy! (Lines 63–9)

Just as enormous electrical energy animates the thunderstorm, so psychic energy pulsates in the poem. Between subjective idea and concrete image, between concrete image and abstract expression, this energy oscillates. The wind is vital. Winter is not final. Words become energizing.

Russell thrilled to Shelley's belief that human thought and energy can face reality and transform it. We recall his citation of Shelley's "transfiguring quality". Struggling to develop the prophetic role himself, Russell memorized the "Ode to the West Wind", taking into his consciousness Shelley's metaphors of inseminating thoughts, words in sparks, and an unextinguished hearth. One can conclude that Russell found affinity with Shelley's very language.

But that language has provoked disapproval elsewhere. In the 1920s and '30s, Shelley's reputation underwent severe decline, chiefly because of critical disapproval on the part of I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and the New Critics. While part of that disapproval fell on romantic poetry in general and part on Shelley's ideas in particular, some of it focused on Shelley's language. Typical criticism was that Shelley's "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" is embarrassingly self-pitying, or that the next lines (addressed to the West Wind), "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud" are too subjective. Such criticism hears the poet-voice speaking only of the problems of the individual Shelley. I believe that Russell heard the voice, as Harold Bloom does, speaking "in the guise of a battered Job",<sup>33</sup> and that much the same perspective and intention governed Russell's own words in "The Free Man's Worship"—an essay which has received similar criticism.

In addition to self-pity and subjectivity, the critics defined an even more serious problem with Shelley's poetic language—excessive abstractness and vagueness. But we know that for Russell abstractness was not an objectionable quality—indeed, in an essay notebook which he kept at the age of

seventeen while he was preparing for the examinations at Trinity College, Cambridge, his observation makes the opposite argument. In an essay on "The Language of a Nation", which discusses "the growth of Language" and compares "primitive speech" with modern, the student Russell wrote: "If we now compare this language with that of a modern Poet such as Shelley, for example, we find an extraordinary development of words which express abstract ideas; there is more capability of putting into words the deepest emotions of a feeling soul."<sup>34</sup> It is evident that, for Russell, the use of abstract rather than concrete terms did not necessarily reduce poetic effectiveness, but enhanced it through increased communication. (Unlike the New Critics, Russell did not disparage direct communication in poetry; the fact that he wrote little literary criticism and did not comment explicitly on this matter of critical theory is to be regretted.)

In the controversy over the nature and success of Shelley's language, however, defense came from an unexpected quarter—from scientists. Russell points to one reason in his talk "The Importance of Shelley":

My friend and collaborator Whitehead, not without some consciousness of paradox, used to praise Shelley for scientific accuracy and cited a line in *Prometheus Unbound* in which Earth says, "I spin beneath my pyramid of night". It would not be difficult to find many other instances, but I will give only one, from *Hellas*.

*Worlds on worlds are rolling ever,  
From creation to decay,  
Like the bubbles on a river,  
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.*

This might be a poetic paraphrase of any modern scientific treatise on the stars. [Russell's emphasis.]<sup>35</sup>

At least two critics, Carl Grabo and Desmond King-Hele, received impetus for their literary studies from such insights. Grabo so credits Whitehead in his book, *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley's Use of Science in "Prometheus Unbound"*, which appeared in 1930. King-Hele, a scientist trained in cloud physics, continued this line of inquiry in *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (1960), which explored the influence on Shelley of Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's physician grandfather, who anticipated the notion of evolution in his books of scientific verse). Whitehead's influential comment follows:

Shelley's attitude to science was at the opposite pole to that of Wordsworth. He loved it, and is never tired of expressing in poetry the



thoughts which it suggests. It symbolizes to him joy, and peace, and illumination. What the hills were to the youth of Wordsworth, a chemical laboratory was to Shelley. It is unfortunate that Shelley's literary critics have, in this respect, so little of Shelley in their own mentality. They tend to treat as a casual oddity of Shelley's nature what was, in fact, part of the main structure of his mind, permeating his poetry through and through. If Shelley had been born a hundred years later, the twentieth century would have seen a Newton among chemists.<sup>36</sup>

The comment indicates that Whitehead shared Russell's admiration for Shelley's mind and work.

Evidently, both Whitehead and Russell responded positively to the fact that Shelley makes extensive use of science as material in his poetry. Both philosophers thought and wrote about science and the modern world and were influenced by the revolution in physics. However, Russell's observation that Whitehead experienced "some consciousness of paradox" in praising Shelley for scientific accuracy makes clear that both expected their admiration to rest primarily on poetic qualities, not scientific. It seems unlikely that either they or the scientists who have been attracted to Shelley responded to the allegorized science. This form usually does not appeal to twentieth-century readers. Indeed, I believe that the negative response to allegory explains what seems a contradiction of Russell's admiration for abstract expression when he criticizes *Prometheus* in a letter to Ottoline Morrell: "*Prometheus* is not really a success: the idea is all right, and it has some lovely lyrics; but it is too abstract and thin and lifeless in most parts. I am glad you have come to like Shelley."<sup>37</sup> But it is also unlikely that any of these readers would value the poetry chiefly because of its rich scientific imagery. A response on this basis would reduce imagery to what Richard H. Fogle has called "inflexible and inert scientific and philosophic counters" and would deny poetic validity.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, a satisfactory explanation seems to be that Whitehead, Russell, and the scientists attracted to Shelley were professionals for whom exactness of language was a necessity; finding familiar scientific details used accurately—and even gaining new emphasis in the use—these readers came to trust Shelley's method. Unlike some romantic writers (for example, the German fantasist E. T. A. Hoffmann) who used scientific material to limit and define the unknown, Shelley incorporated it by means of the imagination into an expanded vision of the ideal. Believing Shelley well grounded in actuality, scientifically oriented readers are able to respond to his mythopoetic use of scientific materials. Such readers have been a vocal group among the lovers of Shelley's poetry and have contributed to the resurgence of his reputation in the past few decades. Among those whose early enthusiasm anticipated this renewed interest was Russell, who made

clear the poetic basis of his regard for Shelley: "But what attracted me most to Shelley was what made him a typical Romantic."<sup>39</sup>

To understand what Russell means by "a typical Romantic", we can look at the chapter "The Romantic Movement" in *History of Western Philosophy*. There we find that Russell sees the aims of the romantics to have been "vigorous and passionate individual life"; their standards and motives, primarily aesthetic; their temperament, attracted to the strange and exotic.<sup>40</sup> Of special interest in Russell's talk on Shelley, in addition to his statement that "Shelley dominated my imagination and my affection for many years", is his admission that this regard was never wholly superseded. Despite his analytic judgment, something of the romantic consciousness remained unrelinquished.

A repeated answer to the question in "What Shall I Read?" was the writings of the romantics, especially Shelley. In several places in his writings, Shelley makes clear his view that his audience is to be both select and limited in number. The discerning audience he envisions will find easy intelligibility in his work. These readers share, he writes, "a common organ of perception for the ideas of which it treats".<sup>41</sup> Notable as such a reader is Bertrand Russell, another divided consciousness, who took the poetic works of Shelley both into his mind and into his heart.

#### Notes

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- 2 Russell to Helen (Thomas) Flexner, 10 June 1902, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Penn.
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- 4 Brink, "Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell: The Letters of Transformation", *Russell*, nos. 21–22 (Spring–Summer 1976): 3–4, 7.
- 5 "How I Write" in *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), p. 196.
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- 7 "The Importance of Shelley" in *Fact and Fiction* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 9 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 28 Sept. 1911 #199.
- 10 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: 1872–1914 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 46.
- 11 Appendix II in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1, eds. Kenneth Blackwell, Andrew Brink, Nicholas Griffin, Richard A. Rempel, and John G. Slater (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 345.
- 12 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, [Feb.–March 1912] #366–7.

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- 15 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, postmarked 24 Oct. 1913 #900.
- 16 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 14 April 1911 #32.
- 17 *History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1946), p. 707.
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- 21 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, I: 286.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 23 Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p. 51.
- 24 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, [c. 24 Dec. 1911] #295.
- 25 Baker discusses this point in *Shelley's Major Poetry*, pp. 218-20.
- 26 *Marriage and Morals* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), pp. 72-3, 140-1.
- 27 Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 50.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 29 Baker discusses the modes more fully in *Shelley's Major Poetry*, pp. 223-8.
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- 32 Malleon, *After Ten Years: A Personal Record* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), p. 121.
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- 39 "The Importance of Shelley", *op cit.*, p. 13.
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- 41 Shelley, "Advertisement to Epipsychidion", *Poetical Works*.