

SHELLEY: A RUSSELLIAN ROMANTIC

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Russell's enthusiasm for the romantic poet Shelley contradicts the common notion that the philosophical outlook dulls our emotions. Russell loved Shelley even though he was careful to examine the shortcomings of the young poet and of the romantic genre. Furthermore, Russell acknowledged his own weaknesses inherent to his interest in the romantics. Love through a philosophical lens is arguably superior to love through a romantic filter because the former allows for a clear perception of the object. Russell's passion for Shelley is a case in point.

Bertrand Russell's love of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley adds an intriguing dimension to his reputation as a polymath. Philosophy, Russell's primary interest, exalts reason over passion while the romantic genre extols emotion and creativity over reason. Romantic works, therefore, would be an unlikely choice for the pursuit of philosophical truths. Indeed, Russell's chapter on the romantic movement in *A History of Western Philosophy* is both cautionary and critical. Why his particular affection for Shelley was so powerful and long lasting may be somewhat elusive, but we do know for certain that this man whose name is all but synonymous with romanticism always had a place in Russell's heart.

The romantic writers had a revolutionary spirit that Russell would have respected even if he did not generally share their goals. The romantic movement, by many accounts, dates from approximately 1770 to 1870, a significant parallel with the American and French revolutions. The respect for individual rights carries over to a championship of individual perception, and therefore an artist's unique personal insight into his or her subject is superior to detached observation. The purpose of art is now to create rather than to imitate. In literary works, this emphasis on the subjective can be problematic in both fiction and non-fiction.

Self-absorbed commentary, for example, is of negligible value, and romantic works of fiction are often disturbing rather than sentimental. A romantic hero may directly or indirectly kill the innocent and often himself as he relentlessly pursues his self-seeking objectives.¹ Shelley's own *Alastor*, Russell's first and rather resonant exposure to the author, depicts the latter situation. Russell had legitimate and logical reservations concerning romanticism. In a letter to Helen Flexner, a cousin of his first wife, Alys Pearsall Smith, he wrote:

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.... 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.²

The evidence is strongly in Russell's favour here. In romantic pieces, violent delights do indeed lead to violent ends (*cf. Romeo and Juliet*), and the protagonist's obsession is generally torturous and often fatal. Even the most amorous and traditionally romantic of individuals could not reasonably desire such attention. For example, Hester Prynne and Catherine Linton, the female protagonists of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, respectively, receive gorgeously poignant and immortally canonized declarations from their lovers; but in both cases, one member of the couple dies of heartbreak and regret very soon afterwards. Lover and beloved in these two narratives live apart, and they perish in agonized, unfulfilled desire. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Wuthering Heights* both end with a resigned narrator describing the graves of the tragic lovers who were denied life together but who were buried side by side, an ironic conclusion rather than a comforting one.

The curious element of this for many people is the manner in which such characters capture the reader's imagination, Russell included. The

¹ An initial search for canonized female romantic heroes yielded few noteworthy results except for Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret Mitchell's twentieth-century novel, *Gone with the Wind*.

² Quoted in Gladys Leithauser, "The Romantic Russell and the Legacy of Shelley", *Russell* n.s. 4 (1984): 32.

romantic figure often serves to entice rather than to repel. In the play *Uncommon Women and Others*, by Wendy Wasserstein,³ one privileged female undergraduate wistfully asks another why she can't find her Heathcliff, and her friend promptly encourages her to give up the search. Since the character Heathcliff drives the woman he loves to suicide and then kills himself after spending years trying to destroy the happiness of her only child, allowing his own son to die in the process, this is sound advice. However, the exchange encourages us to ask what would create such an irrational yearning in the first place. If naïve college students are susceptible to romanticism, Russell makes no claim to be immune. In the aforementioned letter to Flexner, Russell explains: "The worship of passion, has, I confess, a great instinctive attraction for me, but to my reason, it is utterly abhorrent." Russell certainly becomes cautionary as he discusses romanticism in *A History of Western Philosophy*. He writes:

It is not the psychology of the romantics that is at fault: it is their standard of values. They admire strong passions, of no matter what kind, and whatever may be their social consequences. Romantic love, especially when unfortunate, is strong enough to win their approval, but most of the strongest passions are destructive—hate and resentment and jealousy, remorse and despair, outraged pride and the fury of the unjustly oppressed, martial ardour and contempt for slaves and cowards. Hence the type of man encouraged by romanticism ... is violent and anti-social, an anarchic rebel or a conquering tyrant.

(HWP, p. 681)

In this chapter, Russell discusses how the effects of romanticism carry over from fiction to non-fiction, often with very undesirable results. He begins by describing *la sensibilité*, the eighteenth-century French progenitor of the romantic movement, in the following manner:

Cultivated people ... greatly admired what they called *la sensibilité*, which meant a proneness to emotion, and more particularly to the emotion of sympathy. To be thoroughly satisfactory, the emotion must be direct and violent and quite uninformed by thought. The man of sensibility would be moved to tears by the sight of a single destitute family, but would be cold to well-thought-out schemes for ameliorating the lot of peasants as a class.

(HWP, pp. 675–6)

³ Included in Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).

Apparently, Russell's grandmother, Frances Russell, gave him an opportunity to cultivate an opinion on such perspectives when he was quite young. In his autobiography, he recalled:

She [his grandmother] demanded that everything should be viewed through a mist of Victorian sentiment. I remember trying to make her see that it was inconsistent to demand at one and the same time that everybody should be well housed, and yet that no new houses should be built because they were an eyesore.... Her morality was that of a Victorian Puritan.... Like many of her type she made an inconsistent exception of Byron, whom she regarded as an unfortunate victim of an unrequited youthful love. She extended no such tolerance to Shelley, whose life she considered wicked and whose poetry she considered mawkish.⁴
(*Auto.* 1: 20–1)

Russell did not share his grandmother's opinion on the second poet. His very narrations of his first experience with Shelley⁵ are poetic in themselves. In a talk entitled "The Importance of Shelley" he recounts:

... 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.⁶

Fifty years earlier, he had written to Ottoline Morrell:

Shelley was a wonderful discovery. I remember the moment now ... 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.

(Quoted in Leithauser, p. 34)

⁴ "The admiration of Byron on the Continent", Russell explains, "has always been something of a mystery to his compatriots; English Radicals preferred Shelley, whose revolutionary poems were recited at Chartist meetings and read by Owenite working men. But abroad Byron was considered the greatest poet of the age, with the possible exception of Goethe" (*Freedom versus Organization, 1814–1914* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1934], p. 345).

⁵ Russell first became interested in Shelley at age sixteen (*Freedom versus Organization*, p. 60).

⁶ *Fact and Fiction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 12; *Papers* 29: 75. Quoted in Leithauser, p. 34. Cf. Monk, 1: 33–4.

As Russell became more aware of the drawbacks of romanticism, he lost no enthusiasm for Shelley. In fact, while delivering “The Importance of Shelley”, Russell commented:

... what attracted me most to Shelley was what made him a typical romantic.... I agreed passionately when he said:

I love waves and winds and storms,—
Everything almost
Which is Nature’s and may be
Untainted by man’s misery.

The scenery in *Alastor* I should now feel might be criticized for its vagueness which is like that of scenery in dreams, but at that time it suited me completely ... like many adolescents I had a very vivid sense of a happy past now lost, and of this I found many expressions in Shelley....

(*Fact and Fiction*, p. 13; *Papers* 29: 76)

Adolescence is, of course, an impressionable age during which our opinions can be more extreme and our emotions less fettered. During this time, we are all perhaps ripe for romanticism. A cloistered youth such as Russell was arguably even more so. A boy who most likely had more access to solitary walks than group outings could easily develop an affinity for nature, a favourite subject of romantic authors. A lad with more opportunity to reflect than to converse could easily foster a tendency for introspection. A type of literature that championed subjective perception and paid homage to the majesty of nature could be expected to bring comfort and happiness to such a boy. In any case, *Alastor* is a beloved and enduring poem, and why Russell would love it is no mystery. The piece tells the story of a youth who dreams of an unbearably glorious female being who possesses all the elusive understanding that keeps people from being happy and enlightened. Upon awakening, the youth fruitlessly pursues this vision and dies in the process. Like many romantic works, the narrative is hardly uplifting, but the emotional engagement is enticing. The following passage would have been part of Russell’s first 75 lines of ever reading Shelley.

By solemn vision and bright silver dream
His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.

The fountains of divine philosophy
 Fled not his thirsting lips: and all of great,
 Or good or lovely which the sacred past
 In truth or fable consecrates he felt
 And knew.

(ll. 67–75⁷)

These lines obviously moved Russell as they would many of us.

Russell noted, “[Shelley] attracted me as much by what I now consider his weaknesses as by what I still consider his merits.”⁸ The poem “Epipsychidion”, which played a large part in his courtship of Alys Pearsall Smith, would have appealed to Russell’s own weaknesses and merits in turn. The word “epipsychidion” combines the Greek root *epi*, meaning “upon”, and *psychidion*, meaning “little soul”.⁹ There are strong indications that this poem was the first piece that Russell and Pearsall Smith ever read together, and his autobiography makes clear that the poem played a part in their bonding. His recollection of 4 January 1894, a day on which he braved adverse weather to visit Alys and her family, describes the event:

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 ... I had not foreseen how great would be the ecstasy of kissing a woman whom I loved.... 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. I arrived home quite late having walked the mile and a half from the station through a blizzard, tired but exultant.

(*Auto.* 1: 82–3; quoted in Leithauser, p. 36)

As in the case of *Alastor*, there is little wonder Shelley’s poetry appealed once again to Russell. Very near the conclusion, the poem reads:

We shall become the same, we shall be one
 Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?

⁷ Lines are as in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* (A Norton Critical Edition), ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002). Russell’s library copy is *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, 3 vols. (London: John Slark, 1885). The set was inscribed to him from his grandmother Stanley. All three Bertrand and Alys bookplates have been removed. There are marginal lines beside some passages, and (rarely) a word or two in Russell’s handwriting.

⁸ *Fact and Fiction*, p. 12; *Papers* 29: 75.

⁹ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 392.

One passion 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 unconsumable:
In one another's substance finding food
Like flames too pure and light and unimbued.... (ll. 573–81)

The above lines are sublime, and Bertie and Alys are only two of countless lovers who have recited them to each other. An earlier passage from “Epipsychidion” makes more of a distinctive connection to Russell. Shelley, who indulged in liaisons during both of his marriages, writes in “Epipsychidion”:

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 in 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. (ll. 149–61)

Russell would adopt a similar psychology as he aged;¹⁰ but, notably, this did not appear to be the case when he was so enamoured of “Epipsychidion”. The autobiography notes that in 1893, the previous year:

Alys came to Cambridge ... and I had more opportunities of talking with her than I had ever had before.... We went on the river, and discussed divorce, to which she was more favourable than I was. She was in theory an advocate of free-love, which I considered admirable on her part, in spite of the fact that my own views were somewhat more strict. (Auto. 1: 81)

Russell's viewpoint on marriage obviously did not remain so rigid. In

¹⁰ He quoted this passage in *Marriage and Morals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 113.

fact, he became amenable enough to the notion of divorce to procure three of them. Since he read “Epipsychidion” eight times total between 1893 and 1894 (*SLBR* 1: 44), we are free to wonder how much the latter section of the poem invited Russell to question convention.

As Russell matured and his moral code shifted, his love for Shelley endured. Approximately twenty years after the memorable afternoon with Alys and “Epipsychidion”, Russell would recite, by heart, Shelley’s 70-line poem “Ode to the West Wind” to Lady Constance Malleeson, who went by the sobriquet of Colette. “Ode to the West Wind” is a tribute to the wind’s literal power to facilitate the earth’s life cycle and its metaphorical ability to motivate reflective thinkers. Russell’s performance of this poem was grand enough to earn a place in Colette’s memoirs. In *After Ten Years*, Colette recalled:

One day we were out walking in rough, tempestuous weather and he sat down on 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”.

(Quoted in Leithauser, p. 43)

In reading a section from the ode such as the following:

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! (ll. 63–9)

one has no trouble understanding how Russell found inspiration from Shelley. At the same time, Russell had no romantic misconceptions about the artist. As we have seen, he is careful to note Shelley’s weaknesses. Furthermore, at least twice, Russell discusses the poet’s shortcomings in the course of general arguments he makes about the human condition. First, Russell’s *Education and the Good Life* employs Shelley’s verse to caution society, educators in particular, from embracing overly poetic ideals:

We must first make a distinction: some qualities are desirable in a certain proportion of mankind, others are desirable universally. We want artists, but we

also want men of science. We want great administrators, but we also want ploughman and millers and bakers. The qualities which produce a man of great eminence in some one direction are often such as might be undesirable if they were universal. Shelley describes the day's work of a poet as follows:

He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The honey-bees in the ivy bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be.

These habits are praiseworthy in a poet, but not—shall we say—in a postman.¹¹

Next, *Marriage and Morals*, written a few years later, explains the dangers of emulating an individual such as Shelley:

Shelley when he fell in love was filled with exquisite emotions and imaginative thoughts of a kind lending themselves to expression in poetry; naturally enough he considered that the emotion that produced these results was wholly good, and saw no reason why love should ever be restrained. His argument, however, rested upon bad psychology. It was the obstacles to his desires that led him to write poetry. If the noble and unfortunate lady Emilia Viviani had not been carried off to a convent, he would not have found it necessary to write *Epi-psychidion*; if Jane Williams had not been a fairly virtuous wife, he would never have written *The Recollection*. The social barriers against which he inveighed were an essential part of the stimulus to his best activities. Romantic love as it existed in Shelley depends upon a state of unstable equilibrium, where the conventional barriers still exist but are not quite insuperable; if the barriers are rigid, or if they do not exist, romantic love is not likely to flourish.

(*Marriage and Morals*, p. 61)

These writings demonstrate that Russell's enthusiasm for Shelley did not mar his powers of assessment.

The logical question now is not "why Shelley?" but "why specifically Shelley?" If Russell had reservations concerning the romantic movement, which many people had; and he still loved romantic poems, which many people did; why did he gravitate so distinctly toward this particular poet? Russell made no such exception for Wordsworth. In fact, he states that:

In particular, my great hate is Wordsworth. I have to admit the excellence of some of his work—to admire and love it in fact—but much of it is too dull, too

¹¹ *Education and the Good Life* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), pp. 59–60.

pompous and silly to be borne. Unfortunately, I have a knack of remembering bad verse with ease, so I can puzzle almost anyone who upholds Wordsworth. (Auto. 3: 71)

Byron, for whom even Shelley had great respect, fared even worse. In a letter to Lady Morrell, Russell wrote:

It is a comfort to me that you find Byron so hateful—I thought you felt I was unduly prejudiced against him. I . . . thought him such an unmitigated CAD that I almost wished to forget that he ever existed. (Quoted in Leithauser, p. 37)

Shelley's verse and commentary both give indications why Russell favoured his work. Russell once explained, "I have found . . . a magical, transfiguring beauty . . . in Shelley's poetry that I found intoxicating. In this respect, I do not know of any other poet equal to him."¹² This statement is lovely and credible, but a Russellian is often inclined to look for causes in addition to those termed "magical".

If one leaves the realm of enchantment and examines Shelley's biography and prose, other possible connections present themselves. When composing his own obituary, Russell wrote: "His [Russell's] life, for all its waywardness, had a certain anachronistic consistency, reminiscent of that of the aristocratic rebels of the early nineteenth century" (*UE*, p. 223; *Papers* 21: 232). Shelley was, without doubt, such a rebel, and the parallels between the two men's lives are clear. Russell sounds almost autobiographical when he discusses Shelley's notoriety. Both men advocated free love, procured scandalous divorces, and showed great concern for the less fortunate. Shelley and Russell shared enlightened convictions for which they were shunned, and this could easily have helped Russell develop an affinity for the poet. For example, Russell's discussion of the Whig party's "polite scepticism" demonstrates how easily he could have felt empathetic connections to Shelley:

... their middle-class supporters were mostly earnest nonconformists, and therefore infidel opinions were only to be avowed in conversation: to state them in a form accessible to the lower orders was vulgar. For this reason, Shelley, whose talents would otherwise have made him eligible, was an outcast from the first. For an undergraduate to try to convert the Master of his College to atheism, while it may not have been wicked, was certainly bad form. Moreover, he

¹² *Fact and Fiction*, p. 16; *Papers* 29: 78.

had abandoned his wife, and what was worse, he had run away with the daughter of that old reprobate Godwin, a Jacobin who had escaped the just penalty of his crimes by publishing his book at a prohibitive price. And not only was the young lady's father a hoary revolutionary, but her mother had advocated the rights of women, and had lived an openly immoral life in Paris, not for fun merely, but in obedience to a theory. This was beyond a joke. The Whigs remembered that even liberal aristocrats had had their heads cut off by Robespierre. They always knew where to draw the line, and they drew it, emphatically, at Shelley. The prejudice persisted down to my own day...¹³

(*Freedom versus Organization*, pp. 59–60)

Russell faced comparable situations. He too was ostracized for his secular humanism, his sexual ideals, and his support for female suffrage. In fact, Russell's viewpoints fostered so much disapproval that City College of New York rescinded an offer to teach philosophy, largely because of an outcry that Russell might corrupt the female students, a darkly comic objection because these particular classes, by policy, would have excluded women.

Well aware that there would be consequences, Russell and Shelley both wrote pieces that addressed religious injustices, a sensitive subject still today.

In the area of non-fiction, the titles of Russell's and Shelley's more famous essays show that they both wished to contribute to a secular enlightenment. In 1927 Russell delivered "Why I Am Not A Christian", an essay in which the content does not betray the title. Not surprisingly, Russell paid a hefty price for giving such a lecture during that time. Therefore, one must respect Shelley and the risks that he took when, more than a century earlier, he co-wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). In response, University College, Oxford expelled both Shelley and his co-author, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, but repercussions could have been much worse. *The Necessity of Atheism* approaches its conclusion in the following manner:

If he [God] is infinitely good, what reason should we have to fear him? If he is infinitely wise, why should we have doubts concerning our future? If he knows

¹³ In "Eisenhower's Nightmare", Shelley is included, along with Milton and Byron, as authors who "praised liberty" and were consequently of interest to the grumbling dissenters from the missions of McCarthyism, cold war arms races, and the like (*Nightmares of Eminent Persons* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955], p. 62; CS, p. 247).

all, why warn him of our needs and fatigue him with our prayers? ... If he is inconceivable, why occupy ourselves with him? IF HE HAS SPOKEN, WHY IS THE UNIVERSE NOT CONVINCED?¹⁴

Russell, invited his own audiences to ask these questions, and he must have felt some sympathy with the authors' goals and respect for their courage. In 1916, Russell felt comfortable describing how bravely a twentieth-century Shelley would have behaved had he faced conscription. As a member of the No-Conscription Fellowship, Russell wrote an open letter in *The Nation* which contained the following assertion:

No one with any knowledge can doubt that Blake would have been with them, and Shelley; if these men were now alive, and subject to the Military Service Act (No. 2), the Tribunals would have told them to stop talking such sickening rubbish, and they would be at this moment undergoing arrest or solitary confinement in a military prison.¹⁵

On a further political bent, we may consider Russell's fondness for Shelley's *Hellas*,¹⁶ the opening lines of the chorus in particular:

The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn;
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.¹⁷ (ll. 1,060–5)

The above verse is quite lofty, but Shelley wrote *Hellas* in sympathy with Greece's then current struggle against the Turks, and he advised the excision of any material from his work that could lead to legal complications. *Hellas* thus indicates that Shelley could be prudent and political as well as romantic. One of Russell's discussions concerning this passage strikes

¹⁴ Shelley's capitalization, in Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 43.

¹⁵ Russell, "A Clash of Consciences", in Ray Perkins, ed., *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court), p. 60; *Papers* 13: 347.

¹⁶ Part Three of *Freedom versus Organization* has a quotation from *Hellas* on its opening page.

¹⁷ Four of these lines are quoted in the preface to the third volume of Russell's autobiography.

a similar balance between hope for the future and concern for the present. At the conclusion of an interview with the late Studs Terkel that focused on the dangers of nuclear arms, Terkel mentioned an essay of Russell's¹⁸ in which he had quoted the lines above. Russell replied:

I liked Shelley because he had a vision of what the world might be. I still like him for that, but it's a much more difficult matter getting there than he thought. He thought kings and the Holy Alliance were the obstacles. If they were got out of the way, the world would be happy. They're all dead now, but we're not happy.¹⁹

Terkel then informed Lord Russell that he carried this quotation on his person, and upon Russell's request, he produced the lines and read them aloud. In response to Terkel's recitation, Russell said "It's a hope grown rather distant, but it remains a hope. It's what human life could be. In gloomy moments, it's good to reflect how glorious and *splendid* and wonderful human life could be, if only human beings would let it...." If Russell could take any comfort in Shelley's lines as he pondered the consequences of Armageddon, the connections he felt to the poet must have been very solid.²⁰

This strength of character that Russell admired went beyond adherence to principle.

Desmond King-Hele, author of *Shelley: His Thought and Work*, recounted a visit with Russell during which

He [Russell] spoke with affection about Shelley, with whom he felt he had much in common, and said he would have like to write a book called "Shelley the Tough", emphasizing his robust and practical side. I said that my own book on Shelley emphasized this aspect among other things....²¹

This toughness was not strictly metaphorical. Edmund Blunden's biography of Shelley provides an account of a time when the poet might

¹⁸ Probably it was "The Importance of Shelley".

¹⁹ Terkel, *Talking to Myself* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 68.

²⁰ While Russell could easily connect disparate subjects and disciplines, his capability and willingness to bring Shelley's poetry into a talk about nuclear annihilation is welcome to those who wish to underscore that poetry can have practical value.

²¹ *Russell* no. 16 (winter 1974-75): 21-6. See also Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 24, and (on *Shelley the Tough*) Leithauser, pp. 36-7.

have had to defend more than just his principles:

On the night of February 26th, 1813, as Harriet²² reports it, a night of roaring wind and rain, an attempt was made to murder Shelley in his house. Shelley had suspected that some trouble was coming and had loaded his pistols, “expecting to have occasion for them”; and it came when he went downstairs to investigate a noise in one of the parlours. He was shot at, he fired back, and the intruder ran out; but Shelley stayed downstairs till four in the morning when he was shot at again by a man at the window. He snatched an old sword and struck at the assailant. Harriet came down and saw a bullet-hole in Shelley’s flannel gown and another in the window curtain.²³

Some met this account with skepticism, but Russell would tell a Shelley enthusiast who sent him research on this extraordinary incident that the correspondence provided a “fresh stimulus” to his interest in the poet.²⁴

In conclusion, Bertrand Russell’s admiration of Shelley demonstrates that reason does not necessarily dull one’s passion or aesthetic appreciation. Russell uses the word “enchantment” in reference to Shelley, but the philosopher remains cognizant of the poet’s flaws. Furthermore, Russell acknowledges his own shortcomings inherent to his fondness for romanticism. Russellian enchantment is therefore superior to romantic enchantment because the latter often necessitates that one perceives the object as he or she wishes rather than views the object as it is. Even the most negative of Russell’s critics could not call him cold or unfeeling, although that is the charge often brought against those who champion impartiality and empiricism.²⁵ Russell’s own commentary on love and

²² Shelley’s first wife.

²³ Blunden, *Shelley, a Life Story* (London: Collins, 1946), pp. 85–6. (Russell owned a copy of this book, which he inscribed: “P. from B. August 29, 1946. recalling August 1930.”) The controversy over whether this event really took place apparently diminished somewhat in 1905 when Margaret L. Croft’s article entitled “A Strange Adventure of the Shelley’s” appeared in *Century Magazine*. Ultimately, confirmation may not be possible, but Blunden does state “the central fact is that Harriet did not suffer from heated imagination.”

²⁴ *Dear Bertrand Russell* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp. 161–2. The fact that Russell lived, at the time of this correspondence, in view of Shelley’s house, Tanyrallt, naturally kindled the interest.

²⁵ “Russell is a proponent in principle of the enjoyment of strong emotions. As in his philosophy of literature . . . , he wishes to preserve strong emotions so long as they are directed impersonally. In old age he writes that he would often have sacrificed the rest of his life for a few hours of the joy of personal, romantic love (*Auto*. 1: prologue; see also

passion indicates otherwise:

I believe myself that romantic love is the source of the most intense delights that life has to offer. In the relations of a man and woman who love each other with passion and imagination and tenderness, there is something of inestimable value, to be ignorant of which is a great misfortune to any human being. I think it important that a social system should be such as to permit this joy, although it can only be an ingredient in life and not its main purpose.

(*Marriage and Morals*, p. 74)

Here, Russell gives a moving yet balanced tribute to love. This equilibrium arguably creates more potential for true happiness than a romantic obsession that can wax destructive without uniting the lovers. *Romeo and Juliet*, after all, is a tale of how unfettered passion destroys rather than creates happiness. The quest for such intensity, however, remains integral to our nature, our culture, and our literary canons. Russell's writings on the poet Shelley, the romantic genre, and romanticism in general indicate that reason can actually heighten our sensibilities. By all accounts, Russell had an outstanding marriage with his fourth wife, Edith, and perhaps his enthusiasm for Shelley enabled him to pen the following poem:

To Edith

Through the long years
I sought peace.
I found ecstasy, I found anguish,
I found madness,
I found loneliness.
I found the solitary pain

Marriage and Morals, p. 62). True, he holds that in such love the self expands impersonally, but it is specifically the 'ecstasy' of love he values so highly in the passage referred to. There is an inconsistency between such a valuation of strong emotion and the pursuit of philosophic calm, and Russell appears to be ambivalent about these alternatives. If the prevention of conflict depended upon the successful pursuit of philosophic calm, mankind would stand little chance: the experiencing of intense emotional states will not be given up—if it could be—by many in exchange for a peaceful but bland existence" (K. Blackwell, *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1985], p. 189).

In any event, for Russell, "All great literature requires the rare and all but impossible combination of fiery emotion with an intellect capable of viewing it impersonally" (Russell–Helen Thomas Flexner, 31 March 1902. See Blackwell, p. 231 n.43.).

that gnaws the heart,
But peace I did not find.

Now, old & near my end,
I have known you,
And, knowing you,
I have found both ecstasy & peace.

I know rest,
After so many lonely years.
I know what life & love may be.
Now, if I sleep,
I shall sleep fulfilled.

(Auto. 1: 7)