CHAPTER XXV

SOME NOTES ON THE POETRY OF SHELLEY

A RECENT lecture, you will remember, was about Wordsworth, the least impassioned of all the great poets of the nineteenth century. I have thought that Shelley may very fitly be considered in a short lecture, because he offers such an extraordinary contrast to Wordsworth in everything. No man was more conventional in certain ways than Wordsworth; no man was less conventional and more passionate than Shelley. Even as a youth, Wordsworth acted and thought and wrote like an old man. Shelley was only a boy, and even if he had lived to be a hundred years old, never could he have lost the charm of his boyishness, though he would no doubt have outlived and overcome his faults. Here I am going to try to interest you in some of his exquisite poetry — poetry which, at its best, has never been equalled and probably never will be surpassed.

This poetry is not all of it equally good. Some of it was written when he was quite a boy and had chiefly excited attention by calling himself an atheist, by attacking Christianity, and by getting himself expelled from Oxford University. In those days he was not wise enough to do really great things. The best of his poetry was written later, a few years before his death, and a great deal of it was not published until after his death. It was then edited by his young widow. Mary Shelley was one of the best editors who ever edited poetry; but she reverenced her husband's work too much even to think of trying to finish anything which he had left unfinished; and we have, therefore, in the complete edition of Shelley's works a large quantity of unfinished stanzas — quarter poems, half poems,

half stanzas, quarter stanzas, broken lines, fragments of all descriptions. Thus we have to choose selections from the more immature work or from the later unfinished work. Altogether the finished portion of Shelley's poetry is much smaller than might be imagined at a glance. In this he resembles another poet of the same period, Coleridge, who left a great deal of work half done. But in both cases, the fragments are precious in a supreme degree; and perhaps, if they were completed, we might be less pleased than we now are with them.

It is in the shorter poems that Shelley is most great, and if you can learn the beauty of only three or four of these, you can claim to know something of the very best poetry ever produced in England. I shall begin with a little piece which some critics have called the most perfect poem of the nineteenth century—not meaning English poetry only, but all poetry written during that time. I am not learned enough to attempt any confirmation of this judgment; to do so would require a very great knowledge of poetry in a great many languages. But the observation has been made even by so capable a scholar as Professor Saintsbury, and I repeat it merely as an interesting fact. The little poem has no title, but is remembered always by the first line. However, the editor has called it "A Lament." It contains only two stanzas:

O world! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb,
  Trembling at that where I had stood before;
When will return the glory of your prime?
    No more—Oh, never more!

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight;
  Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
    No more—Oh, never more!

What is this little bit of emotion? It is the regret of

a young man for the joy of his boyhood. He compares his path of life to a steep flight of steps or a ladder—so dangerous and difficult to climb that, at every succeeding step, the climber shudders and wonders at the peril of the step taken immediately before. I suppose that every young man, or nearly every young man, has regretted his boyhood, though not many young men have had such cause for wonder and fear as Shelley had. And in boyhood we do not know enough about the difficulties of life to feel afraid for the future. The thought of to-morrow never poisons the happiness of to-day. But after one has grown up and has become the head of a family, then anxiety and fear for the sake of others begins to darken every aspect of life. Nature seems to us still beautiful; but we cannot now enjoy that beauty as we did before the real struggle of life began. That is why the poet cries out, "O, when will the beauty of the old happy time come back to me?" Of course it will never come back. Something, he says, something joyous, has gone out of the world, out of the night, out of the day, out of the beautiful seasons. Each season used to bring a particular sense of happiness to the boy. But to the man each season now brings only the remembrance of some great sorrow, some great pain, — the death of somebody loved, the memory of some unhappy thing. And these unhappy things never can be forgotten; therefore the seasons will never again bring to the beholder pleasure and joy.

This is the meaning of the poem; and you will recognize how true and how sadly beautiful that meaning is. But why should these two little stanzas have been called the most perfect poetry in the whole range of English lyrical verse? Because the composition is, in the first place, emotionally perfect; and because in the second place it is musically perfect. The first merit you can easily judge of yourselves; so much has been so well expressed in those few words. But I am not sure that you would not find it difficult to appreciate the music of the thing. Really it requires a good ear to perceive the supreme value of Shelley.

I do not think I could possibly explain to you the beauty of the verse as melody, unless you can feel it without explanation. It consists of a peculiar, liquid, slow, soft melancholy, implied much more by the measure than by the mere words. The measure is not at all difficult to analyze. You will at once see the slight irregularity of the composition. But this irregularity is artistic in the highest degree; it is the same principle of irregularity which characterizes the best forms of Japanese decorative art. And, furthermore, it not only avoids every tendency of monotony, but it greatly enhances the slow, sobbing melancholy of the measure. Yet what does all this analyzing signify towards a proper valuation of the poem? Just exactly nothing at all. You cannot explain the beauty of a verse by dividing it into iambics or trochees, and the poet in composing it never could have thought about measuring and varying its syllables; he only sang suddenly out of his heart like a bird.

The same quality of regret—regret for the joy of young days—will be found beautifully expressed in another poem which is simply entitled "Song." I shall quote the finer verses of the composition.

Rarely, rarely, comest thou,
  Spirit of Delight!
Wherefore hast thou left me now
  Many a day and night?
Many a weary night and day
'Tis since thou art fled away.

How shall ever one like me
  Win thee back again?
With the joyous and the free
  Thou wilt scoff at pain.
Spirit false! thou hast forgot
All but those who need thee not.

As a lizard with the shade
  Of a trembling leaf,

Thou with sorrow art dismayed;
  Even the sighs of grief
Reproach thee, that thou art not near,
And reproach thou wilt not hear.
. . . . . .
I love all that thou lovest,
  Spirit of Delight!
The fresh Earth in new leaves dressed,
  And the starry night;
Autumn evening, and the morn
When the golden mists are born.

I love snow, and all the forms
  Of the radiant frost;
I love waves, and winds, and storms,
  Everything almost
Which is Nature's, and may be
Untainted by man's misery.
. . . . . .
I love Love—though he has wings,
  And like light can flee,
But above all other things,
  Spirit, I love thee—
Thou art love and life! Oh, come,
Make once more my heart thy home.

You will find this quite as beautiful emotionally as the other poem,—though perhaps it is less perfect musically,—when you understand exactly what Shelley means by the "spirit of delight." This spirit is nothing else than what philosophers call the "simple joy of being," the pure delight in mere existence, which man shares with the animals. Every young thing has this kind of joy, — perhaps notably the little kitten. But young horses, calves, lambs, kids, and puppies exhibit the same delight on bright sunny days, when nature seems joyful. Then we notice all these young creatures jumping about, running hither and thither, chasing each other, playing together, apparently perfectly happy. But much more does the child, even the boy or half-grown

girl, show the same joy in the mere act of living. How often do we see a boy or a little girl laughing at the sky, the grass, the flowers, out of pure happiness, or running about and jumping merely for the pleasure of movement, the delight of free exercise! That is the spirit of delight—the true happiness of existence, perhaps the very greatest happiness possible in this world. The older we grow, the more we lose the capacity for such pleasure. Your student of eighteen or twenty does not skip about like a kid, or roll on the grass for mere fun, like a happy boy of ten or twelve years. He is becoming too serious for that. Nevertheless the young man can still feel something of the pure joy of life; he feels it in his larger sports, his athletic contests, his adventurous excursions. But as the years go by the pure happiness that a bright day brings, the delight of motion and vision, comes less and less often, and the whole capacity for happiness simultaneously diminishes by slow degrees. It is for the boyish joy that Shelley prays in this charming poem; he wants to feel again as he felt when he was very young and very innocent. So he addresses nature, telling her how much he loves her, asking her to share with him her own happiness, which is the joy of being. And he is not wrong in declaring that happiness means both love and life. Perfect health and freedom from care, and strong youth, really mean all that is good — the whole power of exercising our best faculties in the most generous way. But though we can sympathize with all such regret, we feel how utterly hopeless it is. You cannot make the river of time flow backwards; you cannot become young again — except, perhaps, by dying. And the poem leaves us with a soft impression of sadness. It is curious that the sadness of the song is not in the least affected by the measure used. The trochaic measure is especially adapted to joyful emotion, but Shelley has used it successfully in the expression of regret.

Now I shall take a little poem of an entirely different kind to show you how exquisite Shelley can be in handling even subjects of a kind which poets do not usually find in-

spiring. What do you think of a poem about an owl? I believe there are plenty of Japanese verses about owls, but they are not of a tender or serious kind — at least such is my impression. Tennyson and Coleridge as well as Shakespeare have written poems about owls, but these are usually of a dismal or weird kind. That an owl could inspire feelings of love, or pity, or tenderness, may seem strange to most of us, but Shelley found such inspiration from the hoot of the bird. However, there is a little owl in Southern Europe of which the cry is rather sad than disagreeable,— indeed, it is almost plaintive. The title of this little poem is "The Aziola."

'Do you not hear the Aziola cry?
Methinks she must be nigh,'
Said Mary, as we sate
In dusk, ere stars were lit, or candles brought;
And I, who thought
This Aziola was some tedious woman,
Asked, 'Who is Aziola?' How elate
I felt to know that it was nothing human,
No mockery of myself to fear or hate:
And Mary saw my soul,
And laughed, and said, 'Disquiet yourself not;
'Tis nothing but a little downy owl.'

Sad Aziola! many an eventide
Thy music I had heard
By wood and stream, meadow and mountain-side,
And fields and marshes wide,—
Such as nor voice, nor lute, nor wind, nor bird,
The soul ever stirred;
Unlike and far sweeter than them all.
Sad Aziola! from that moment I
Loved thee and thy sad cry.

This little poem takes a personal interest from what we know of the life of Shelley, besides charming us by its delicate music and suggestiveness. Mary is, of course, Mary

Shelley. The husband and wife are sitting together in Italy, some beautiful summer evening, when the cry of the bird is heard. The name Aziola is a feminine name, and Shelley, who has reason to dislike the visits of any but personal friends, imagines that it is the name of a woman, "a tedious woman," as he says, meaning some strange visitor. He is quite pleased to find that it is only an owl, a very small owl, hooting in the garden. This owl has rather a sweet note, unlike its kindred, and it is the melancholy in the note that particularly interests the poet. He had often heard it before, but never knew what bird produced that strange note.

After such a poem about an owl, one need not be surprised to hear that the finest poem about a bird, in the English language, with one possible exception, is by Shelley. There are two very famous English poems about birds, — I say two because the hundreds of other English poems on the same subject do not even faintly approach the perfection of these. One is the poem of Keats upon the nightingale; the other is Shelley's ode to a skylark. The whole of this would take a considerable time to cite in class; I shall select the more beautiful stanzas. To make a comparison between this poem and the poem of Keats is almost impossible, so nearly equal is the merit of both. However, one thing may be noticed. The poem of Keats is singularly sad; its emotion is pleasure-pain, and pleasure-pain in which the painful element dominates the pleasurable one. But in Shelley the emotion is all joyful; it is an ecstasy, gladsome as the song of the lark itself. And the difference in the two compositions very properly harmonizes with the difference in the birds' songs described. The music of the nightingale is as melancholy as it is sweet, but the chant of the skylark is only joyful — there is not one sad note in it.

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,

That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

. . . . . .

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflowed.

. . . . . .

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine:
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Chorus Hymeneal,
Or triumphant chant,
Matched with thine would be all
But an empty vaunt,
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields, or waves, or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

. . . . . .

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if we could scorn
  Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
  Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
  Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
  That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
  That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
  From my lips would flow
The world should listen then—as I am listening now.

I have left out eleven stanzas of exquisite description and exquisite music, so that we can take the philosophical kernel of the poem by itself. The thought of the poet is simply that the happiness of the bird, which cannot think in the same way that a man thinks, is shown by its song to be superior to any happiness that man can feel. But this simple happiness of the bird is not necessarily superior in itself. It may be due to the fact that the memory of such little creatures as birds and insects is too short or too special to allow of their thinking about the troubles of life. Most of our human sorrows are either of memory or of prevision; and fear of the future can only exist in minds that keep the memory of the past. We are troubled by the prospective only in proportion as we see the retrospective. Except for this fact we might say that Shelley's statement about the happiness of the little bird is really true. And he thinks to himself, "If a man could only feel the same delight in living that the bird feels — if a man could only have the same freedom from pain, what happiness it would be! Yet even then human happiness could not produce the very same kind of joy." And he proceeds to praise the song

again, as sweeter than all human melody. If a poet could only sing like that, his power would be something beyond estimate. "If I could sing like that," says Shelley, "the whole world would stop its work and thought, just to listen to me, as I now listen to that lark." Of course Shelley does not mean that he wishes to sing with a bird's voice. He means only that if a man could make a poem as full of joy and sweetness, then that man would be a greater poet than any other who ever lived in this world. And we feel that this is true.

A great deal of the old poetry about animals and birds has been spoiled for us by modern science. Even some of the poetry of Wordsworth suffers from the expansion of modern knowledge. During the centuries preceding the nineteenth and even in the beginning of the nineteenth, it was almost a fashion to write about the "happy birds," the "joyous butterflies," the "merry flies." At the time of the nature-movement in France,—the movement partly made by Rousseau, when nature was falsely represented as loving and pure and ineffably good — it was the custom to write about the happiness of animals. But we now know a great deal too much about nature to write in this way. The philosophy of evolution is partly responsible; because it first taught us the meaning of the struggle for life. We now comprehend that nature is very cruel, that animals and birds, in the wild state, live in almost perpetual fear, and that insect life contains tragedies more horrible than ever old poets dreamed of in their imaginations of Hell. But we know also enough about the psychology of animals to perceive that they cannot suffer mentally as we do in certain directions. There was published a few years ago a little sketch in French about a cow, which impressed me as being illustrative of the difference between the modern and the old-fashioned way of thinking. A French man-of-war is on its way from Tongking to Europe, and there are many soldiers and sailors to be fed, so the ship carries many cows. Every day one or two cows are killed; and at last

there are only two cows left. When one of these is killed in the presence of the other, the living cow becomes horribly frightened, and moans, and struggles, so that everybody is sorry for it. Then a sailor goes up to the moaning cow and gently rubs its nose and speaks kindly to it. Thereupon the cow licks his hand, forgets its fear, forgets the killing and the blood and everything, and begins to eat quite happily again. That one little act of kindness was enough to obliterate the memory of the killing and the fear of death. That was a good and touching little study of animal psychology. You can see that the old talk of the poets about the joys of nature and the happiness of animals seems utter nonsense, in comparison with such observation as that. So, as I said before, much poetry on the subject of birds suffers a great deal to-day because of scientific progress, and because of the habit of exact thinking. But such poetry about birds as the poetry of Shelley and Keats does not suffer by comparison with the results of exact knowledge. The highest poetry is always true. And the truth in these two cases is not a truth about bird—it is the truth of the emotion which the poet feels at hearing the birds sing, and which he has expressed so purely and so strongly that his verse will never die.

So, again, in the treatment of inanimate objects the old poets wrote much that science to-day laughs at. It is only the greatest poetry in which the poet's ignorance of science does not injure the beauty of his thought, or mar the force of his description. We know so much now about the atmosphere, about the rocks and the trees, about the moon and the stars, that we want our poets to remember facts when they write verses on such topics. To the old English mind, as to the Greek mind, the moon might appear divine, but to-day we have maps of the moon; we know that it is a dead world, and we cannot think of it as divine at all. Formerly everything might be personified, infused with spirit by the poet; but to-day he has to be very careful. Nevertheless Shelley's personifications have such intrinsic value

that they charm us still quite as much as they charmed people half a century ago. For example, that wonderful stanza of "The Cloud"—

> That orbèd maiden with white fire laden,
> Whom mortals call the Moon,
> Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,
> By the midnight breezes strewn;
> And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,
> Which only the angels hear,
> May have broken the woof of my tent's thin roof,
> The stars peep behind her and peer;
> And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,
> Like a swarm of golden bees,
> When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
> Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,
> Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
> Are each paved with the moon and these.

It is not merely the wonderful music of the double rhymes and the beauty of the images that pleases here; there is also truth of a kind which every observer of nature can feel and praise. Of course it is the spirit of the cloud that is supposed to speak; and we do not believe in such spirits. Neither can we believe in the beautiful Lady Moon worshipped by the old Greeks; and the stars do not really appear to move in the way here described. But all that makes no difference. How beautiful is the suggestion of the slender goddess walking over the heavenly floor of white clouds, as over fleeces of silver and gold laid down to welcome her. Nothing could be better than the comparison of the appearance of the highest clouds to light fleeces; indeed, popular fancy long ago used the same comparison, and large white clouds are still called by English peasants and sailors "wool-packs." The words used throughout the stanza are as imponderable and delicate as vapour or moonshine itself. And the man who wrote this must have been a good deal upon mountains. The description is of clouds as seen from above, not from below. Did you

ever look down from a mountain top upon lakes and rivers far away, and at such an angle of vision that the water caught the sky-colour? If you have, you will remember how much those spaces of still blue water looked like pieces of sky, as the poet calls them, — pieces of sky fallen down through holes in the clouds and reflecting the lights of heaven. Shelley may have seen them at night, from the top of some Italian mountain; then, reflecting the moon and stars, they might well have suggested to him this idea of a pavement celestial, studded with figures of the moon and the stars.

One more stanza from the same poem; it is still the cloud that speaks:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the Sky;
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die.
For after the rain when with never a stain
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams with their convex gleams
Build up the blue dome of air,
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise and unbuild it again.

Here even the scientific facts are sufficiently correct to bear criticism, although a meteorologist might laugh at the line about the "caverns of rain"; for "caverns" suggests something below, something hidden away underground, and we know that the great source of rain is above — the heat that updraws the vapour. Still there is no reason why a poet should not mingle fancy with science at times, and we do not care whether the caverns of the rain exist or not— the imagery is beautiful. Notice the exquisite use of simple words, "blue dome of air," for example, in relation to the use of such surprising expressions as "convex gleams." No poet has ever more beautifully imaged the sky, and

that which the sky images in fancy. The word "convex," you know, means the opposite of hollow. It is here used optically; why does the poet so use it? Undoubtedly because of its scientific connotation. We speak of lenses as concave which have this form (and of those as convex which have this form). Almost everybody knows these words through their relation to telescopes, spectacles, eyeglasses of some sort. Thus we think of "convex" or "concave" in relation to glass and transparency. The value of the word in this stanza is in this very suggestion of transparency, the sky being represented as a vast transparent blue dome, or the appearance of a dome, formed by optical effects of air and light. But the principal charm of this poem lies in the way that it repeats to us the ghostly impression which cloud forms make upon anybody watching them. If you will take the trouble any windy day to watch the clouds for even half an hour, you will easily persuade yourselves that nothing is so ghostly as the coming and the changing and the vanishing of a cloud. It comes into the sky apparently from nowhere like a ghost; then it rises and takes a form entirely different from the form at first seen; it shifts its shape in a hundred ways, too quickly and too multiformly even to be correctly drawn. Try to draw a moving cloud some day, just for fun. Before you have drawn one side of it, both sides have changed shape. It is only by instantaneous photography that you can correctly fix the apparition of a cloud. And after haunting the sky for a little space, again it passes away to nowhere. In summer, very high white clouds may actually be seen to melt away into the blue air. Probably most of the world's poetry about ghosts, and the vanishing of them, has been suggested by watching the motion of clouds. Now Shelley's poem produces in the reader the ghostly feeling which the watching of clouds can snggest to any imaginative mind; and it does this in a way that no other English cloud-poem has ever done.

Accordingly when one reads any of the shorter poems

of Shelley upon inanimate objects, one can never entirely forget them. They are personifications of so powerful though so ghostly a kind, that they haunt the memory like some impression of living faces. A week or two ago as I was returning home, a very cold strong wind began to blow, and I looked to see from what direction it was blowing,—as from that I could guess what kind of weather we should have upon the following day. The wind was blowing directly from the west; and immediately there came to my memory the opening words of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," though I had not read the poem for many years. It is a splendid example of the qualities about which I have been telling you. There is only one other poem addressed to wind in the English language that can be at all compared with this, and that is Kingsley's "Ode to the North-East Wind." But there is a tremendous difference in execution; and in point of fancy the poem of Kingsley cannot at all compare with Shelley's, though equal to it in strength of another kind. Let us take a few stanzas of Shelley's famous poem.

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
> Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are drawn, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
>
> Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
> Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
>
> The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
> Each like a corpse within its grave, until
> Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
>
> Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
> (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
> With living hues and odours plain and hill:
>
> Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
> Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

This is in spirit Greek. The Greeks, you know, person-

ified the winds, giving them names, and praying to them as gods, and building temples to them. At one time there were eight winds worshipped as divine beings, and one famous temple of the winds is still standing. Like the Greek poets, Shelley is about to pray to the wind; and first in the old Greek manner he repeats all its attributes and powers, speaking at the same time of the south wind of spring as an "azure sister," a very beautiful expression, reminding us of bright warm days when all things are bathed in blue light. And we think also perhaps of the famous old Hebrew phrase, "When the earth is still by reason of the South Wind." But what is the poet about to ask of the cold and angry wind of the west? This:

> If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
> If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
> A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
>
> The impulse of thy strength, only less free
> Than thou, O uncontrollable!
> . . . . . .
> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
>
> Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
> Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
>
> 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!

The first half of the above quotation is only the expression of a wish — the wish that the poet could be borne away from the troubles of life by the wind, like a dead leaf, like a cloud, or like the waves of the sea which run before the wind's urging, and so are free!—only less free

than the wind itself. The second part is the direct prayer, a prayer to the wind for inspiration. "Let me be your harp, O wind!" the poet says — "even as the forest is a harp for you!" From very old times in poetry the forest has been called "the harp of the wind," and anybody who has listened to the sound of the wind in a pine-forest will be able to appreciate the power of the comparison. The rest is more fanciful, but very beautiful too, in its way. "Give me your strength, O wind! — or, since you cannot give me that strength, take my place, act for me, like a soul! Scatter my burning thoughts over the world, even as you scatter the autumn leaves, or sparks from a dying fire! I am but a weak man—Oh! would that I had your mighty power!"