

P.B. Shelley: Radical Liberalism

■ IRINA-ANA DROBOT

[Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest]

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to show how radical liberalism is illustrated in the works of the Romantic poet P.B. Shelley. Nationalism is, for the Romantics, a part of liberalism: the nations struggled in order to achieve freedom and independence.

The British Romantic poets Byron and Shelley were very active in the political life as heroes and rebels who could bring freedom and change. The ideologies of Romanticism that were being felt in the arts and liberalism and nationalism in politics are intertwined with the association of the image of ancient Greece with a problematic present and future, according to Beaton¹ when he writes about Byron's *Childe Harold*. Shelley and Byron are, from this viewpoint, radical liberals who value classical ancient Athens for being the liberal constitution's pioneer.

The time of the Romantic poets was a time when freedom was associated with a very slight intervention of the government in the lives of the citizens. It could be compared with a libertarian ideology nowadays. According to Zwolinsky², Shelley was not only a poet but also a political philosopher, and he could be defined as a Left Libertarian, based on his essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820), where he writes about the right to property. Shelley was committed to radical liberalism³. *A Philosophical View of Reform* "remains

1 Roderick Beaton, "From Ancient to Modern: Byron, Shelley, and the Idea of Greece," *The Athens Dialogues* 1 (2010): 1-22.

2 Matt Zwolinsky, *Percy Shelley: Left Libertarian?* (Available at: <http://bleedingheart-libertarians.com/2013/04/percy-shelley-left-libertarian>, 2013).

3 Paul Hamilton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 607.

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one of the most valuable documents for the interpretation of Shelley's poetry, for in it Shelley gives us his philosophy of history. History he views as a long struggle between liberty and dictatorship, with one sometimes in ascendancy, sometimes the other"⁴. Shelley's view is an echo of the theory of the elites, which claims that power is in constant change at the hands of the elites, which change their composition as they gain access to power. Indeed, Shelley's theory can be proved by what happened after Byron as a political poet, with Fiume as a poet promoting dictatorship. Shelley wrote revolutionary poems such as *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas* which promote the following ideas: "In regard to the existing situation in England the thing to do is to work first for the reform of parliament, peacefully if possible, by revolution if necessary, and then use the democratic base thus attained as a step toward a republican and eventually an egalitarian society."⁵ *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound* were written as a reaction against the intentions of the "leaders of the allied coalition, led by Castlereagh of England and Metternich of Austria" who "drew up agreements for joint action, political or military, against any state that attempted to overthrow its absolutist government"⁶. *Hellas* was written in response to "the revolutionary war in Greece against Turkish domination"⁷. Shelley sympathizes with the revolution in Greece not just by holding it out as a template and model for his British readers but since Byron himself was involved there: "*Hellas* was written rapidly and sent to England for immediate publication as Shelley wished it to assist the already developing Pan-Hellenic movement for Greek freedom, a movement that enrolled in its ranks the leading European and American intellectuals and had as its leader, and later its martyr, Byron"⁸.

Like Byron, Radical liberal Shelley looked up to the classical ancient Greek world as a role model for politics: "Radical liberals, such as the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, admired classical Athens as a pioneer of a liberal political constitution, as well as for its aesthetic and philosophical achievements."⁹ Liberalist ideals can be analyzed in parallel with the ideals of democracy and freedom. In the eighteenth century, "the tides of democracy were not to be stemmed, and the 1820's saw movements emerge which in the thirties and forties were to achieve victory."¹⁰ The French Revolution opened new directions for the "English liberals of the 1790's"¹¹.

Shelley was concerned with the radical revolts anywhere in the world, as he was looking to break free from the rigidity of the British conservatism in politics:

For Shelley, the prospect held out by the Greek Revolution was much more than a return to the past. A radical in politics, although he was also by nature a pacifist, Shelley was an admirer of revolution anywhere. He saw at once the radical nature of the revolt in Greece; it was natural to him to associate it in his mind with the achievement of classical Athens in establishing the world's first democracy.¹²

Shelley sided with the Spanish liberal revolution, which he "celebrated in his 1820 *Ode to Liberty*"¹³.

4 Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley. Selected Poetry and Prose*, introduction (New York and Toronto: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1956), ix.

5 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ix-x.

6 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, x.

7 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, x

8 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, x.

9 Beaton, "From Ancient to Modern", 1.

10 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, v.

11 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vi.

12 Beaton, "From Ancient to Modern", 5.

13 Jeffrey N. Cox, "The living pantheon of poets in 1820", in *The Cambridge Companion to*

By using characters which are heroes fighting for revolution, Shelley seeks to legitimize the need for taking action in the political situation of the Romantic age. By taking action, meaning by promoting freedom, his readers will come to feel that they are becoming heroes themselves and that they are taking the right course of action. His poems are, from this point of view, very motivating for those convinced that they need to side with the revolutionary spirit everywhere in Europe at that time.

The individualism promoted by the age is found in Shelley's work as well. The figure of Rousseau, present in Byron's poem *Childe Harold* had a great influence on the Romantic poets in Britain and Shelley is no exception: "The *Confessions* of Rousseau began a tradition of dramatic self-analysis that affected almost every major figure of the romantic movement both in England and on the continent (in Byron assuming Protean shapes of embodied melancholy, scorn and jauntiness)."¹⁴ This individualist spirit appeared as a consequence of the fall of "the feudal state, with its rigid authoritarianism of both social and religious life" which "gave way to commercial self-enterprise" and which led to the following, in its turn: "the assertion of man the individual mounted"¹⁵. The same spirit was expressed in "the late eighteenth century [...] in its heroic form, as in the Faustus of Marlowe or the Adam of Milton" that now "assumed also a subjective guise"¹⁶. In Shelley's work, this trends was expressed "in a series of personalized poems from his juvenilia to *Epipsychidion*" which "examined his life and mind", and he was not "giving self-analysis for its own sake, but because he felt that the analysis of one mind would reveal truth about men in general"¹⁷. Shelley's individualism thus makes him part of a collectivity, as the ideology of Romanticism claims. By promoting individualism, the Romantic ideology claimed a way of supporting people to stand up for their rights, to stand up against the rules of absolutist leaders and instead choose their own revolutionary way. Individualism is synonymous with courage to stand out and break free from norms, and this can only be done with the help of a collectivity that would sympathize with this ideal. Shelley's concept of love in his poems makes the connection with this ideal, as according to him "Love is the expansive power within the individual which takes out the individual out of himself and into contact with other individuals both singly and collectively [...] in a wider sense it is love for humanity; and in its widest sense it is the oneness of man and nature."¹⁸

Shelley rewrites the Greek drama by Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* in his work *Prometheus Unbound*. Prometheus is the hero that defies the will of the Gods, a symbol of the absolutist leaders of the Romantic age which the Romantics sought to defy. Cameron¹⁹ concludes that "The play [...] is essentially a political drama dealing with the transformation of society, and the central core of meaning is sociopolitical." For Shelley, Prometheus is a hero figure, a "defiant 'champion of mankind'"²⁰, similar to the figure of the Byronic hero, Childe Harold. The *Prometheus Unbound* by Shelley is not an attempted rewriting of the lost play of Aeschylus: "He is using the classic Greek dramatic machinery and figures for his own purpose, giving them a new symbolic meaning"²¹. Namely, "The main historical action is the same as that of *A Philosophical View of Reform*, which he was writing at about the same time,

British Romantic Poetry (Cambridge Collections Online, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13.

14 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xi.

15 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xi.

16 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xi.

17 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xi.

18 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xii.

19 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.

20 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xx.

21 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.

namely a symbolic description of the age from the French Revolution to the establishment of the tyranny of the Quadruple Alliance and a projection of that age into the future."²². Symbolically, thus, "Prometheus is the type of intellectual rebel and Jupiter the type of tyrant", and, reaching further, "Prometheus is the intellectual revolutionary of Shelley's own age and Jupiter the tyrants of the Quadruple Alliance"²³. Prometheus is the image of Shelley when he gives the call to revolution, a "rebel and sufferer"²⁴. The main purpose of *Prometheus Unbound* is a call to political action: "His object in writing the drama was to arouse his fellow liberals to action"²⁵.

Liberalism, in Shelley's view, is a call to revolutionary action, to change for what is best, to the action of the individual in favour of the whole community that thinks alike. To Shelley, Liberalism is a liberation from the oppressive action of government. It is a call towards a democratic frame of mind which is radical due to the emergency of taking such an action and due to the perceived emergency for change.

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22 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.

23 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.

24 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.

25 Cameron, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, xxi.