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SHELLEY'S LIFE AND WRITINGS.

TWO LECTURES,

BY WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI.

LECTURE II.

THE general line of division which I drew between the subject-matter of my two lectures was this. The first narrated the facts of Shelley's life and death, and dealt with his poems only in so far as they formed successive landmarks in his career, and were related to its other incidents. For the present lecture I held over anything in the nature of an estimate of the poems themselves; and along with that such details concerning Shelley's character, his person, and his opinions, as may assist us to form a right judgment of him, of his relation to his own and future generations, of his claims to our tribute of love and admiration.

The poems of which I spoke in my first lecture were "Queen Mab," "Alastor," "The Revolt of Islam," "Rosalind and Helen," "Julian and Maddalo," "Prometheus Unbound," "The Cenci," "The Witch of Atlas," "Epipsychidion," "Adonais," "Hellas," and "The Triumph of Life." These are his principal poems; but there are still some others of considerable scale: "Peter Bell the Third," "Cedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant," "The Masque of Anarchy," "The Sensitive Plant," the unfinished drama of "Charles I.," and the translations, espe-

cially those from Homer, Euripides, Calderon, and Göthe. Here is indeed, along with all the lyrical work that he produced, a great amount of poetical writing for a young man who died in his thirtieth year to have achieved; and this, if we regard merely the bulk apart from the quality. On the present occasion, I shall not dwell upon all these compositions individually, not even upon all of those that were cited in my previous discourse. I shall confine myself to eight of the number:—"Queen Mab," "Alastor," "The Revolt of Islam," "Julian and Maddalo," "Prometheus Unbound," "The Cenci," "Epipsychidion," and "The Triumph of Life."

But, if I cannot, in the short time at our disposal here, attempt to do anything like justice to the whole of that great series of works of poetical imagination, neither can I treat from various points of view, as they properly require to be treated, the eight selected compositions. I can but say a few words regarding them, by way of indicating the main ideas on which they are based, and their mutual analogies. "Queen Mab," the earliest of the number, was written at the period when Shelley was

more occupied with the notion of denouncing and reforming abuses, and of holding up a standard of abstract perfection, than with that of developing these conceptions in a dramatic or rightly poetical shape: he was then partly a didactic poet, using fanciful imagery very freely for illustrative and other purposes. Hence in "Queen Mab" we find a great deal of damnatory eloquence lavished upon tyrants, religious superstition, war, commerce, and other bugbears of the juvenile enthusiast, contrasted with the most unbounded hopes of future perfection for the moral, and even for the natural, world. Shelley was at this time a Materialist and a Necessitarian; believing, however, in the power of mind to rectify everything, if only the human intellect were set absolutely free, released from all coercive ideas in religion and in social regulation. The next poem, "Alastor," shews forth how the solitariness of a great mind becomes its own punishment: the youthful poet who is the hero of this composition craves for a splendid ideal perfection, to be revealed in some beautiful soul and body responsive to his own—a craving not fated to be satisfied in this perishable world. "The Revolt of Islam" has more of a directly national or patriotic subject-matter. It is the poem of glorious emancipation and noble martyrdom; of the equality of woman and man; of the struggle of a people against its tyrants, attaining for one splendid moment an absolute success by perfect practice of the law of love and of self-devotion, but immediately afterwards overwhelmed by the coalition of despotism, military slavery, and priestcraft; the patriots crushed down and slaughtered in tens of thousands, the land reeking with blood and ghastly

with famine, the great hero and heroine of the national up-rising, Laon and Cythna, burned at the stake, and everything hurled down the precipice of ruin. But it is here that the great-souled poet, the unconquerable devotee of all the divine in man, makes himself felt. He tells us that the loss of the sublime cause of human right is in truth its gain; the uttermost abasement of its champions is their triumph; their death for a moment of time is their life for ever; their torch quenched is their beacon relumed. Virtue and the Right—these are eternal and predestined to rule; Crime and Wrong blazon their own fall even in the act of apparent victory. The heroine of this poem, the beautiful and noble-minded Cythna, is a new creation of poetry, and a new, a specially modern, ideal of female character. She is the woman imbued with a great conception, and consecrating herself to great national objects; loving and beloved indeed, like any the most secluded of her sisters, those to whom their home and their immediate social circle are the world wherein they move and have their being,—yet animated by the largest enthusiasm, and risking, and at last losing, her life for the enfranchisement of her sex. She is imagined, in short, as the prophetic and the initiator of a change in that "Subjection of Women" of which we have heard so much of late years. On this subject of Shelley's Cythna, I might refer you to a very able article in the *Westminster Review*, written in 1870 by a lady of uncommon talent, Miss Mathilde Blind, who was the first to do full justice in print to the poet's originality and force of treatment in this character.

I shall venture to interrupt for a minute or two the course of this analysis of Shelley's poems.

for the purpose of indicating the very singular and striking resemblance which the invented story of the "Revolt of Islam," written in 1817, bears to some historical events of much more recent date in Persia. I refer to the career of the sect named the Bâbys, founded by a young man, a native of Shiraz—Mirza-Ali-Mohammed, who in 1843 was a student in a theological school. He was at first a rigid Mussulman; but a comment which he wrote on the Koran was deemed audacious and heretical; and a subsequent book of his develops a system which may be termed pantheistic. Into the more mystical or cabalistic features of this faith I cannot enter; the social doctrines pertaining to it are the most to our purpose. The Bâb (or Gate, as the prophet termed himself) was opposed to asceticism and ceremonial religion, and abridged the obligation of prayer to a minimum. He preached universal brotherly affection, and no retaliation; the emancipation of women, and their full equalisation with men, beyond even what prevails in European countries; no polygamy, or at any rate not more than two wives, and his successors have reduced this to a single one. The Bâbys spread rapidly, became formidable to Government, took up arms (contrary, it is believed, to the wishes of their founder), and were particularly powerful towards the close of the year 1848, performing memorable feats of valour. Finally the Government conquered; but the sect is still far from suppressed, and may perhaps at no distant date become again a terror to our jewelled guest of 1873, the Shah. As in the "Revolt of Islam," the prime leader of this great movement was put to death; and if he, Mirza-Ali-Mohammed, was the Laon of

the Bâbys, there was a Cythna too, commonly named Gourret oul Ayn, or Solace of the Eyes, on account of her extraordinary beauty. Like Cythna, she exercised an almost magical influence over large masses of the population, and, being seized, she, like Cythna, was burned to death; and about the same time horrid massacres took place of adherents of the new faith, who suffered torments and death with the most astonishing fortitude—

Women and babes and men slaughtered confusedly.

This is a digression—I hope not a wholly uninteresting one. We must now return to our brief account of Shelley's poems. "Julian and Maddalo" was previously mentioned as introducing, under fictitious names, Shelley himself and Lord Byron. This work touches again on the question of man's perfectibility; it is not, however, so remarkable on account of its leading conception as in virtue of its style. "Julian and Maddalo" is, I think, about the highest standard that we possess of the poetical treatment of ordinary things—two gentlemen meeting, going about the Venetian lagoon in their gondola, conversing and discussing. This is not the poetry (such as Wordsworth and some others give us) of humble life and homely or picturesque incident; but the beautifying, by poetic insight and aptitude, of what is already cultivated and refined, and thereby, be it noted, all the *less* readily available for the purposes of poetry. "Prometheus Unbound" is almost too great a work to be spoken of at all in this summary fashion. It represents the struggle of the Human Mind (for the Prometheus of Shelley is not, I apprehend, simply Man, but the *Mind* of Man), in its eternally