SHELLEY THE "ENCHANTED CHILD."*

On the death of Francis Thompson, in November of 1907, the world recognized that it had lost a poet great and unusual as to quality, though of scant production as to quantity. That Mr. Thompson was also a charming prose-writer was little known and scarcely mentioned. To add this to his preceding honors is left for us, the readers of his essay on Shelley, first published last fall in the "Dublin Review," and now issued separately as a small volume, with an Introduction by the Right Honorable George Wyndham.

The manuscript of this essay was found among the poet's papers after his death. It had been written nearly twenty years before, but being rejected by the editor of the "Dublin Review" was thrown aside by its discouraged author to lie until found by his literary executor after his death. A lapse of twenty years having brought about a change of editors to the magazine as well as fame to Mr. Thompson, the review for which it was originally intended was only too glad to print it; to this editor, and to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell, Mr. Thompson's literary executor, are we indebted for the recovery from oblivion of a manuscript worthy a place among English prose masterpieces.

From this point of view — as a brilliant, picturesque, glowing tribute from one poet to another and greater one to whom he was not a little akin in spirit — praise of the essay can hardly be too great. The reviewer need do little more than present copious extracts in proof. But if it is to be regarded as an addition to Shelley-criticism, if Thompson is to be entered in the list of leading Shelley critics with Stopford Brooke, Garnett, Forman, Symonds, and others, then the essay must take much lower rank, must be recognized, in fact, as scarcely more than superficial.

Mr. Thompson's introductory assertion, that in the present day Shelley has no lineal descendant in the poetical order, is one not likely to be gainsaid; nor, according to his prediction, are we likely to have one, since a poet abundingly spontaneous, like Shelley, could hardly flourish in a self-conscious age like our own. An age that is ceasing to produce child-like children cannot produce a Shelley. For, both as man and as poet, he was essentially a child — a word defined by Mr. Thompson in the following glowing fashion:

> "Know you what is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul; it is to live in a nutshell and to count yourself the king of infinite space; it is
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> To see a world in a grain of sand,
> And a heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And eternity in an hour;
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> it is to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life, nor petition that it be commuted into death. . . . To the last, in a degree uncommon among poets, Shelley retained the idiosyncrasy of childhood, expanded and matured without differentiation. To the last he was the enchanted child."

This doctrine of the "enchanted child" applied to Shelley is the main thesis of the essay, the one which Mr. Thompson continually reiterates and to which he returns at every point. Not only was Shelley child-like by nature, but this disposition was fostered by his early and long isolation among his fellows. The persecution which overclouded his school-days is hardly exaggerated in the picture given in "The Revolt of Islam." Escaping bodily violence for the most part, he was the victim of the most terrible weapon that boys have against their fellow-boy, who is powerless to shun it because, unlike the man, he has virtually no privacy. He was a little St. Sebastian, sinking under the incessant flight of shafts which skilfully avoid the vital parts.

The "magnified child" is again shown in his fondness for apparently futile amusements, such as the sailing of paper-boats. This was not childish, not a mindless triviality, though it was child-like; it showed the genuine child's power of investing little things with imaginative interest.

Even as a philosopher, Shelley was a child, "firmly expecting spiritual rest from each new

* SHELLEY. By Francis Thompson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

divinity, though it had found none from the divinities antecedent." The reserve and delicacy with which Mr. Thompson disposes of this stumbling-block in the path of many of Shelley's devotees are admirable, his conclusion being that certain episodes in Shelley's life were due to "no mere straying of the sensual appetite, but a straying, strange and deplorable, of the spirit"; that "he left a woman not because he was tired of her arms, but because he was tired of her soul." And he pays this beautiful tribute to Mary Shelley: "Few poets were so mated before, and no poet was so mated afterwards until Browning stooped and picked up a fair-coined soul that lay rusting in a pool of tears."

Child-like also, because so irrational, was Shelley's unhappiness and discontent with life. The pity due to his outward circumstances has been strangely exaggerated. Poverty never dictated to his pen; the designs on his bright imagination were never etched by the sharp fumes of necessity; as compared with Keats, Coleridge, and De Quincey, his was a highly favored lot.

Coming to Shelley's poetry, we peep over the wild mask of revolutionary metaphysics and again we see the winsome face of the child. "The Cloud," most typically Shelleyan of all the poems, is "the child's faculty of make-believe raised to the *n*th power.

"He is still at play, save only that his play is such as manhood stops to watch, and his playthings are those which the gods give their children. The universe is his box of toys. He dabbles his fingers in the day-fall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amidst the stars. He makes bright mischief with the moon. The meteors nuzzle their noses in his hand. He teases into growling the kennelled thunder, and laughs at the shaking of its fiery chain. He dances in and out of the gates of heaven; its floor is littered with his broken fancies. He runs wild over the fields of ether. He chases the rolling world. He gets between the feet of the horses of the sun. He stands in the lap of patient Nature, and twines her loosened tresses after a hundred wilful fashions, to see how she will look nicest in his song."

It was Shelley's childlike quality that assimilated him to the childlike peoples among whom mythologies have their rise. This made him in the truest sense a mythological poet, as in "Prometheus Unbound" — a veritable poet of nature, but not in the Wordsworthian sense. He delighted in imagery, not merely as a means of expression nor even as adornment, but in imagery for its own sake. Shelley *is* what the Metaphysical School of poetry tried to be.

"The Metaphysical School failed, not because it toyed with imagery, but because it toyed with it frostily. To sport with the tangles of Neæra's hair may be trivial idleness or caressing tenderness, exactly as your relation to Neæra is that of heartless gallantry or of love. So you may toy with imagery in mere intellectual ingenuity, and then you might as well go write acrostics; or you may toy with it in raptures and then you may write a 'Sensitive Plant.' In fact, the Metaphysical poets when they went astray cannot be said to have done anything so dainty as is implied by *toying* with imagery. They cut it into shapes with a pair of scissors. From all such danger Shelley was saved by his passionate spontaneity; no trappings are too splendid for the swift steeds of sunrise. His sword-hilt may be rough with jewels, but it is the hilt of an Excalibur. His thoughts scorch through all the folds of expression. His cloth of gold bursts at the flexures, and shows the naked poetry."

In estimating individual poems, Mr. Thompson calls the "Prometheus Unbound" the "most comprehensive storehouse of Shelley's power"; "Adonais" "the most perfect of his longer efforts"; the lyrics and shorter poems the most "absolute virgin-gold of song."

In conclusion, Mr. Thompson asks the oft-propounded question why it is that the poets most "skyey" in grain have ever the saddest lives.

"Is it that (by some subtile mystery of analogy) sorrow, passion and fantasy are indissolubly connected, like water, fire and cloud; that as from sun and dew are born the vapours, so from fire and tears ascend the 'visions of aërial joy'; that the harvest waves richest over the battlefields of the soul; that the heart, like the earth, smells sweetest after rain; that the spell on which depend such necromantic castles is some spirit of pain, charm-poisoned at their base? . . . Less tragic in its merely temporal aspect than the life of Keats or Coleridge, the life of Shelley in its moral aspect is, perhaps, more tragical than that of either; his dying seems a myth, a figure of his living; the material shipwreck a figure of the immaterial.

"Enchanted child, born into a world unchildlike; spoiled darling of Nature, playmate of her elemental daughters; 'pard-like spirit, beautiful and swift,' laired amidst the burning fastnesses of his own fervid mind; bold foot along the verges of precipitous dream; light leaper from crag to crag of inaccessible fancies; towering Genius, whose soul rose like a ladder between heaven and earth with the angels of song ascending and descending it; — he is shrunken into the little vessel of death, and sealed with the unshatterable seal of doom, and cast down deep below the rolling tides of Time. Mighty meat for little guests, when the heart of Shelley was laid in the cemetery of Caius Cestius! Beauty, music, sweetness, tears — the mouth of the worm has fed them all. Into that sacred bridal-gloom of death where he holds his nuptials with eternity let not our rash speculations follow him."

One lays down the little volume, stirred and thrilled by the magic of words and images not unlike Shelley's own. But when emotion has cooled, the conviction arises and persists that at bottom Mr. Thompson's interpretation is lacking in real comprehension of the most essential parts of Shelley's nature. The "enchanted child" theory is pretty, and true as far as it

goes, but it is too limited to satisfy those who have known and loved Shelley throughout a lifetime. Two things in Shelley were as deep in him as his poetry: his passion for reforming the world, and his essential faith in spiritual things. Both of these, Mr. Thompson either ignores or implicitly denies. Almost from his birth, Shelley's chief characteristics were those of a reformer. As a schoolboy at Eton, it was shown by his resistance of the atrocious fagging system then in full force; at Oxford, it appeared in the form of intellectual revolt against church dogma, causing his expulsion at the age of eighteen; in the political field it manifested itself in his papers on Catholic Emancipation; returning from his Irish campaign, he struck out bravely for free thought and free speech by attacking Lord Ellenborough, and then wrote "Queen Mab" embodying his knight-errant spirit in verse. Especially does it seem inadequate to consider "Prometheus Unbound" mainly as a mythological poem. That its real subject is the redemption of humanity, personified in the character of Prometheus — a redemption accomplished not only through the uprooting of evil, but through the active force of good — is something which seems to have been unsuspected by Mr. Thompson.

Another implication of the essay that cannot pass without protest is that Shelley was lacking in religious faith. We shall have to grant that in Shelley's early writing there are passages that seem to justify such an implication, especially a notable one in "Queen Mab" (Part VI.), in which he calls Religion to account for being the guilty cause of all the evils in the world. But read the passage carefully and you discover that when he says Religion he really means Dogma. And even if the passage were much more damaging than it is, we should still say that it is unfair to lay too much stress on the utterance of a boy of eighteen. It is like dwelling upon Shakespeare's boyish pranks, such as poaching and deer-stealing, and omitting to call attention to "Hamlet" or "Lear." We judge a man by his man's work, not by his boy efforts. Shelley never published "Queen Mab" by his own wish; he printed privately 250 copies, distributing them among his friends. After leaving England, when he heard it was to be published he wrote back and tried to stop it, saying he had forgotten what it was but had no doubt it was "villainous trash."

If we want really to get at Shelley's ideas of the Unknowable we must take his maturer work: "Prometheus," "Adonais," "The Boat on the Serchio," "Hellas." What Shelley's views were the year before his death we may get in two lines of "The Boat on the Serchio:"

> "All rose to do the task He set to each,
> Who shaped us to His end and not our own."

Throughout the whole of his mature work there is unassailable evidence that he believed in the existence of a God. Even as early as "Laon and Cythna," he says in the "Preface": "The erroneous and degrading idea which men have conceived of a Supreme Being is spoken against, but not the Supreme Being itself." Just as Religion is above all creeds, dogmas, and theologies whatsoever, so was Shelley's faith above those articles and doctrines that many accept in place of Religion. Shelley believed in the Eternal Goodness, in the Eternal Truth, and in the Eternal Love. In his essay "On Life" he says: "What is Love? Ask him who lives, What is Life? Ask him who adores, What is God?"

For these reasons it must be said that this book about Shelley fails to take the same high place in criticism that it takes in mastery of English prose. Perchance Mr. Thompson's attitude as a Roman Catholic writing for a Roman Catholic publication kept him from recognizing what has been so explicitly expressed by an English clergyman (Stopford Brooke): "There are more clergymen and more religious laymen than we imagine who trace to the emotion awakened in them when they were young, their wider and better views of God." Without such recognition of Shelley's spiritual message to his generation and to our own, no criticism of him can be considered as really adequate.

ANNA BENNESON MCMAHAN.