



**HAL**  
open science

## Transparent Peaks – Shelley’s Imperialism

Madhu Benoit

► **To cite this version:**

Madhu Benoit. Transparent Peaks – Shelley’s Imperialism. Fabien Desset. *Transparence romantique*, PULIM, 2014, 978-2-84287-612-8. hal-02093082

**HAL Id: hal-02093082**

**<https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-02093082>**

Submitted on 8 Apr 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Transparent Peaks: Shelley's Imperialism

Madhu BENOIT

*Université de Grenoble 3, CEMRA*

*Those mountains towering as from waves of flame  
Around the vaporous sun, from which there came  
The inmost purple spirit of light, and made  
Their very peaks transparent  
'Julian and Maddalo'*

The clear thrust of Percy Bysshe Shelley's radical politics has generally been considered as stopping short of questioning Britain's imperial policies, and the poet has frequently been accused of latent, if not overt, imperialism. This paper on Shelley and imperialism attempts to 'clarify' Shelley's thoughts in the context of British imperialism. Shelley, as a second generation Romantic poet, was witness to the birth of Britain's imperialism, and although he did not live long enough to experience the heyday of the British Empire, his time was a period of transition. The philosophy of the Enlightenment had begun its gradual transformation into the rhetoric of imperialism, and as Europe moved into the nineteenth century, the cosmopolitanism of the philosophers was eroding into nationalism.

Thus, if Britain's great imperialistic project was still in the future in Shelley's time, the forces that were to underpin it were very much in the air – that curious blend of orientalism, evangelism, utilitarianism and nationalism that was to lend an aura of respectability to what is, all said and done, 'a question of thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.'<sup>1</sup>

That the poet was aware of these forces is evident in his writings. Few would question the orientalist influence on Shelley, and his essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820)<sup>2</sup> attests to his awareness of evangelism and utilitarianism. Yet the question remains as to whether he subscribed to these movements. It has been argued that he did. To consider but two examples: for Nigel Leask, *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) is 'a poem of inverted

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (1993), London, Vintage, 1994, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820), in *Shelley's Prose; or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy* (1954), ed. David Lee Clark, London, Fourth Estate, 1988, p 230-261.

imperialism' and Shelley's poem anticipates Kipling's 'White Man's Burden.' Leask writes that 'the colonial subject is represented as a tyrant and the colonizing power as a heroic martyr to its own idealism in struggling to enlighten the dark places of the earth.'<sup>3</sup> As for Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, she writes: 'Shelley [...] first absorbed a largely favorable-to-India legacy of orientalist renderings of the Subcontinent, only later to move to a more sobered evaluation, especially of India's Hindus.'<sup>4</sup>

Shelley's writings seem to lend themselves to these accusations: for example, in *A Philosophical View of Reform* he rather surprisingly declares: 'it cannot be doubted but the zeal of missionaries of what is called the Christian faith will produce beneficial innovation there [India].'<sup>5</sup> Did the writer of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) then feel that his utopian vision of a syncretic universe, based on East/West complementarities was indeed utopist, while nineteenth-century realpolitik required that the 'native' be civilized Kipling fashion?

In this paper I suggest that, on the contrary, Shelley's radical refutation of tyranny in every form and his commitment to humanity are transparently visible in every line he wrote. I propose to begin with an analysis of 'The Assassins' (1814), then to look at *A Philosophical View of Reform*, and to conclude with Shelley's deconstruction of imperialism in *Prometheus Unbound*.

## 1. 'The Assassins' and the Ethics of Violence

For Nigel Leask, the 'The Assassins', Shelley's unfinished oriental tale of 1814, can be read as 'an endorsement of colonialism'.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, such a reading does not appear coherent in the larger context of Shelley's work, or even in the micro context of the unfinished fragment. To begin with, the 'colonizers' are themselves oriental, albeit with Hellenic/Christian characteristics, but perhaps this is what Leask means when he speaks of the valley of the Assassins as the *beau ideal* of British India, in which European enlightenment joins hands with an idealised Hindu age to realize a new Utopia – which makes for a plausible reading.

However, 'The Assassins' is not a tale of colonisation *per se*, it is the story of an exiled people forced out of Jerusalem, in search of a place to live. Here again, a reading of the fragment as an endorsement of colonisation could be seen as plausible, the story of the Puritan settlers who fled to North America. However, one is confronted with a major problem when reading

---

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East – Anxieties of Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, *Shelley and the Development of English Imperialism – British India and England*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Romantic Reassessment, vol. 155, Lewiston, Queenstown, Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform, Shelley's Prose, op. cit.*, p 238.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers, op. cit.*, p. 76.

'The Assassins' as an analogy of colonisation: Bethzatanai, the hidden valley chosen by the Assassins to settle in, is, despite some vestiges of an earlier grand civilisation, empty of 'natives'. Thus the whole troublesome question of how to deal with the colonised subject is dismissed, whereas it is the very core of the imperial project.

Imperial projects, if they are to be successful, are inevitably constructed around the problematic issue of morally unjustifiable violence, which history has shown to be the only efficient way to deal with the colonised subject. Shelley does not shun the issue of violence in his story; on the contrary, his 'Assassins', true to their name, do not hesitate to 'feed the ravens' with the limbs of 'the perverse, and vile, and vicious'.<sup>7</sup> But Shelley is careful to present this as *morally justified violence*, and therefore at variance with imperial violence, which is difficult to justify on moral grounds.

Shelley follows Aristotle's theory of *phronesis*, outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (384-322 BC). For Aristotle, *phronesis*, or intellectual virtue, is the governing force which makes men discard ethically doubtful means, even in the service of an ethically justifiable cause.<sup>8</sup> The debate between means and ends is a constant in Shelley's work from *Queen Mab* (1813) to *The Triumph of Life* (1822). As early as 1812 he wrote to Miss Hitchener: 'I urged that the most fatal error that ever happened in the world was the separation of political and ethical science.'<sup>9</sup> It is possible that he did not finish his story on the 'Assassins' as it does not correspond to his basic premise: violence can only lead to violence in a never-ending cycle.

At any rate, Shelley was to discard the idea of violence – including morally justifiable violence – as a means to an end, returning to his earlier theories of non-violent revolution, outlined in *An Address to the Irish People* in 1812.<sup>10</sup> In his great revolutionary poems, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hellas* (1821) and of course *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819), political redemption is only possible through individual moral regeneration. *The Masque of Anarchy* is practically a blueprint for Mahatma Gandhi's strategies used in the course of de-colonisation some hundred years later, and Gandhi was fond of quoting from the poem when asked to define his strategy of non-violence.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> P.B. Shelley, 'The Assassins' (1814), *Shelley's Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> 'There is a sentiment in the human mind that regulates benevolence in its application as a principal of action. This is the sense of justice. Justice, as well as benevolence, is an elementary law of human nature.' P.B. Shelley, 'Treatise on Morals' (1812-1815), *Shelley's Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley's reply to Robert Southey (1812), *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, New York, Gordian Press, 1965, 10 vols., vol. VIII, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> 'Are you slaves or are you men? [...] But you are men; a real man is free [...] firmly, yet quietly, resist. When one cheek is struck, turn the other to the insulting crowd [...] you will resist and conquer' (P.B. Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People* [1812], *Shelley's Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 54-55).

<sup>11</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Delhi, Government of India, 1958-1984, 90 vols., vol. LXVIII, p. 201-204.

## 2. *A Philosophical View of Reform and the Nascent Forces of Imperialism*

Let us turn from 'The Assassins', a relatively minor piece, to passages from Shelley's revolutionary essay, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (written in 1820 and published in 1920). The *View* begins with a brief overview of atrocities committed under the double tyranny of corrupt political and religious systems, after which Shelley discusses rebellion in various parts of the world. When he comes to Asia, he talks about India:

*Revolutions* in the political and religious state of the Indian peninsula seem to be accomplishing, and it cannot be doubted but the zeal of missionaries of what is called the Christian faith will produce beneficial innovation there, even by the application of dogmas and forms of what is here an outworn encumbrance. The Indians have been enslaved and cramped in the most severe and paralyzing forms which were ever devised by man; some of this new enthusiasm ought to be kindled among them to consume it and leave them free, and even if the doctrines of Jesus do not penetrate through the darkness of that which those who profess to be his followers call Christianity, there will yet be a number of social forms modelled upon those European feelings from which it has taken its colour substituted to those according to which they are at present cramped, and from which, when the time for complete emancipation shall arrive, their disengagement may be less difficult, and under which their progress to it may be the less imperceptibly slow. Many native Indians have acquired, it is said, a competent knowledge in the arts and philosophy of Europe, and Locke and Hume and Rousseau are familiarly talked of in Brahminical society. But the thing to be sought is that they should as they would if they were free attain to a system of arts and literature of their own.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage, one recognizes Shelley's easy familiarity with the various movements which were at the time paving the way for imperial control in India: the utilitarian doctrines of James Mill, the orientalism of the Hastings circle, the evangelism of Charles Grant, and last but not least, the British decision to 'anglicize' the natives. I propose to analyse Shelley's stance on these issues.

Let us begin with utilitarianism. In his remarks on Hinduism, Shelley is practically quoting verbatim from Mill. Compare Shelley's remarks with Mill:

We have already seen, in reviewing the Hindu form of government that despotism, in one of its simplest and least artificial shapes, was established in Hindustan, and confirmed by laws of Divine authority. We have seen likewise, that by the division of the people into castes, and the prejudices which the detestable views of the Brahmans raised to separate them, a degrading and pernicious system of subordination was established among the Hindus, and that the vices of such a system were there carried to a more destructive height than among any other people. And we have seen that by a

---

<sup>12</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform, Shelley's Prose, op. cit.*, p. 238.

*Transparent Peaks: Shelley's Imperialism*

system of priestcraft, built upon the most enormous and tormented superstition that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind, their minds were enchained more intolerably than their bodies; in short that, despotism and priestcraft taken together, the Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved portion of the human race.<sup>13</sup>

Shelley follows the utilitarian, both in castigating Brahmanism and in advocating education in indigenous languages. But there the similarity ends. There is a major difference between the utilitarian and the romantic poet; Shelley did not consider British India as a *tabula rasa* to be inscribed with rational policies of social reform. For Mill, India's culture and philosophy were at best a valueless amalgam of myths and legends, an edifice to be pulled down to make way for the new rational utilitarian structure, whereas, on the contrary, Indian thought and doctrines underpin much of Shelley's work. Take for example the following lines from his elegy on the death of Keats:

Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
Through time and change, unquenchably the same.<sup>14</sup>

And perhaps even more strikingly, lines 460-63,

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity, [...]

Raymond Schwab has rightly noted:

Mais de Shelley, c'est l'*Adonais* (1821) surtout qui nous importe avec son panthéisme à cœur ouvert : non plus exploitation d'un décor, extension d'un vocabulaire ; par-delà les jeux de l'imagination, une doctrine est cherchée dans un nouveau climat spirituel. [...] on ne saurait croire que l'écho du védantisme n'ait pas ici vivifié quelque apport de métaphysique allemande.<sup>15</sup>

If Shelley's 'pantheism,' as remarked by Schwab, be not the language of utilitarianism, is it then the language of orientalism? Certainly, William Jones's work is easily traceable in *Adonais*, and visible in many of Shelley's

---

<sup>13</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India* (1818), New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1968, 4 volumes, II, p. 131-132 ('Of the Hindus').

<sup>14</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Adonais* (1821), l. 338-341, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1904), ed. Thomas Hutchinson, London, Oxford University Press, p. 440, and for what follows, p. 442.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance Orientale*, Preface by Louis Renou, Payot, 1950, p. 211.

writings, but as with utilitarianism, Shelley follows orientalist thought to a point. For example, would Shelley, with his emphasis on the link between ethical and political science, ever have cautioned the following passage taken from Jones's 'Tenth Discourse on Asiatick History', where Jones notes the superiority of the British Constitution over all other forms of government, and laments the inferiority of the Asian nations?

He [a reader of history] could not but remark the constant effect of *despotism* in benumbing and debasing all those faculties, which distinguish men from the herd, that grazes; and to that cause he would impute the decided inferiority of most *Asiatick* nations, ancient and modern, to those in *Europe*, who are blest with happier governments.<sup>16</sup>

Jones then notes that such a reader would then:

[...] fix on our *British* constitution (I mean our *publick law*, not the actual *state of things* in any given period) as the best form ever established, though we can only make distant approaches to its theoretical perfection. In these Indian territories, which providence has thrown into the arms of *Britain* for their protection and welfare, the religion, manners, and laws of the natives preclude even the idea of political freedom; but their histories may possibly suggest hints for their prosperity, while our country derives essential benefit from the diligence of a placid and submissive people, who multiply with such increase, even after the ravages of famine. [...] in all *India* there cannot now be fewer than *thirty millions* of black *British* subjects.<sup>17</sup>

This clearly imperialistic discourse with its cool reference to 'placid submissive people who multiply' despite the 'ravages of famine' – ravages which, all historians now agree, were to a large extent the result of inadequate British administration – is a far cry from the passage below taken from chapter three of *A Philosophical View of Reform*:

The broad principle of political reform is the natural equality of men, not with relation to their property but to their rights. That equality in possessions which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than a political truth and is such as social institutions cannot without mischief inflexibly secure. Morals and politics can only be considered as portions of the same science [...]. Equality in possessions must be the last result of the utmost refinements of civilization; it is one of the conditions of that system of society towards which [...] it is our duty to tend.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, Shelley accepted the orientalist theory of contemporary degeneration of Asians as opposed to their glorious past. In his essay, Shelley refers to the nations of Asia as reduced to a 'blank in the history of man'.

---

<sup>16</sup> William Jones, *The Collected Works of Sir William Jones* (1799), ed. Cannon Garland, New York, New York University Press, 1993, 13 vols., III, p. 215-221.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform, Shelley's Prose, op. cit.*, p. 253.

*Transparent Peaks: Shelley's Imperialism*

[...] the Hindoos and the Chinese, who were once men as they [the English] are [...]. It was principally the [effect on] a similar quietism that the populous and extensive nations of Asia have fallen into their existing decrepitude; and that anarchy, insecurity, ignorance, and barbarism, the symptoms of the confirmed disease of monarchy, have reduced nations of the most delicate physical and intellectual organization and under the most fortunate climates of the globe to a blank in the history of man.<sup>19</sup>

Here Shelley is following the prevailing discourse at the time in Britain, a discourse born of orientalist theory, and which allowed reconciliation between the needs of imperialism and a genuine admiration for Asian culture: Asia needed the British to retrieve her ancient glory. Still, Shelley's remedy is not the British Constitution, as per Jones, but Jesus Christ.

Was Shelley therefore in agreement with the evangelists? Shelley's disparaging remarks quoted above on Hinduism and the possible good that might be brought to India by British missionaries raise several questions. Harrington-Austin asks: 'Can he be a poet inspired by the Orient, a radical reformer speaking for worldwide equality and an anti-Hindu, all at the same moment?'<sup>20</sup> However, such a question does not take into consideration the fact that Shelley, following in the wake of Volney's exposure of the equivalence of all religious systems in *The Ruins* (1791), systematically castigates all forms of priestcraft, be it Catholicism in Ireland or Brahmanism in India.<sup>21</sup>

When Shelley speaks out against the evils of the caste system – 'will you [the men of England] render by your torpid endurance this condition of things as permanent as the system of castes in India by which the same horrible injustice is perpetrated under another form?'<sup>22</sup> – he is not equating Hinduism with caste. In point of fact, Shelley's message is remarkably similar to the Mahatma Gandhi's. The eradication of caste inequalities was the cornerstone of Gandhian strategy and Shelley observes the same distinction between Hinduism and caste as the Mahatma was to do. Interestingly, recent historical studies have given support to these views. Caste was a part of Brahminical hierarchy, and not an intrinsic element of ancient Indian tradition.

Christopher A. Bayly, in his study *Indian society and the making of the British Empire* (1988), points out that some of the more rigid orientalist interpretations, like caste, were not an immutable 'given' of Indian society. Castes were constantly in the process of formation and change, notably in periods such as the eighteenth century when political authority was very

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, *Shelley and... Imperialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Leask points out Shelley's debt to Volney's *Ruins* in *Queen Mab* (1813): 'they [Brahmins] epitomize the universal conspiracy of priesthood and credulity against liberty of thought and action.' (Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers*, *op. cit.*, p. 114)

<sup>22</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in *Shelley's Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 256.



fluid.<sup>23</sup> Bayly explains that the period 1750 to 1850 witnessed a clear move towards Brahminical hierarchy, which was partly due to complex movements within Indian society, with the decline of the Mughal empire, and partly speeded up by British codification. The result was that caste hierarchy and the Brahmin interpretation of Hindu society, which was theoretical rather than actual over much of India as late as 1750, were firmly established a century later.<sup>24</sup> Not that there is any question of laying the caste system at the colonial door – that would be ridiculous – but with its emphasis on Sanskrit, the language of the Brahmins, orientalism gave Brahmanism an official status lacking in pre-colonial Indian society.

Perhaps the most surprising line in the passage quoted above is Shelley's remark concerning the possible good that might be brought to India by British missionaries. These lines become less surprising when one realizes that Shelley does not have conversions to Christianity in mind, which he writes off as 'an outworn encumbrance'. Rather, he is thinking of the Christ, the rebel to the religion of his birth, the man who rose against Judaic traditions and exposed the law of retaliation as both absurd and immoral, the man who dared to 'trample upon all received opinions'.<sup>25</sup>

Shelley's remarks on the liberating effects of the doctrine of Jesus Christ correspond to his vision of Christ as a radical reformer: 'Jesus Christ opposed with earnest eloquence the panic fears and hateful superstitions which have enslaved mankind for ages.'<sup>26</sup> Harrington-Austin points out:

What Shelley seeks for Indians (Hindus in particular) is their ability to see in Jesus a strong radical, revolutionary personality and to adopt him as a destabilizing force, a model who will teach them how to mount their own revolution against the [...] despotic Hindu caste system.<sup>27</sup>

Here again, a return to Gandhi is inevitable. The Mahatma protested to missionaries visiting him: 'Make us better Hindus, that would be more Christian.'<sup>28</sup> I have always read Shelley's comment as being in the same spirit – because Shelley, the author of *Adonais* and *Prometheus Unbound*, could not have thought in terms of the evangelist project for India outlined by Charles Grant and Thomas Macaulay, and which aimed at replacing the religions of India with wholesale conversion to Christianity.

---

<sup>23</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India – Indian society and the making of the British Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 4 vols., II, p. 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Madhu Benoit, *Sir William Jones et la représentation de l'Inde*, Grenoble, Ellug, 2011, p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> P.B. Shelley, 'Essay on Christianity' (1817), *Shelley's Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>27</sup> Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, *Shelley and... Imperialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 274-275.

<sup>28</sup> Larry Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1951), London, Granada, 1982, p. 418.

### **3. Macaulayism Versus 'a system of arts and literature of their own'**

In his concluding sentence Shelley neatly sidesteps the entire quarrel of utilitarian politics versus orientalism versus evangelism, and deprives imperialism of all positive connotations: 'But the thing to be sought is that they should as they would if they were free attain to a system of arts and literature of their own.' To argue, as has been done, that this statement is ambiguous, is to miss the point. The orientalist school of Warren Hastings and Jones had taught that Indians had their own culture, but that this had degenerated with Muslim rule. Hindu learning was, in their eyes, a thing of the past, but it existed, and Indian civilizations could be returned to their former glory thanks to British presence.

For Charles Grant and James Mill, Indian art, literature and religions were foolish and even pernicious, and it was the duty of the British to stamp out all three, replacing them by Christianity and European learning. Lord Macaulay's 'Minute' (1835), in accordance with the utilitarian school of thinking, stipulated that English be installed as the chief language of instruction in the Indian schools, where Western literature and science were the main subjects within a Christian framework, at the expense of the Sanskrit heritage and the vernaculars.

Shelley does not follow either of these schools; for the poet, the answer to the dilemma ('the thing to be sought') is the absence of the colonizer. To fully appreciate the import of Shelley's lines, it is interesting to compare them to the clearly imperialistic discourse of William Wilberforce:

[...] let us endeavor to strike our roots into the [Indian] soil by the gradual introduction and establishment of our own principles and opinions; of our laws, institutions, and manners; above all, as the source of every other improvement, of our religion, and consequently of our morals.<sup>29</sup>

Compare with Shelley's ' [...] they should as they would if they were free [...].' Shelley's statement nullifies the very notion of the 'White Man's Burden'.

To conclude the analysis of this passage, one can say that the text shows Shelley's knowledge of the two seedbeds of English imperial rationalization – utilitarianism and evangelism – but reformulates the prevailing discourse to suit his own project for liberating the world of the twofold tyranny of corrupt political and religious systems. He objects to the plan for anglicizing Indian education, rejects institutionalized religion in whatever form it may take, and plans to free India and Indians, not of Hinduism, but of priestcraft, not through Christianity (in its institutionalized form) but through the idealism of Jesus Christ.

For Shelley, a revolution, to be truly successful, comes from within. Harrington-Austin notes:

---

<sup>29</sup> Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, *Shelley and... Imperialism, op. cit.*, p. 188.

Madhu BENOIT

Shelley locates the possibilities of rupture – of dis-location – not in the external, here imperialism cannot be directly combated, but in the internal, in the ‘empire’ of each individual’s mind. Both personal and societal reformation must begin in the individual’s discovery of personal autonomy and the control of self.<sup>30</sup>

Shelley goes beyond a simplistic East/West divide; for the poet, despotism is despotism, be it located in the East or the West, the Sultan in *The Revolt of Islam*, Brahminical sway in India, Jupiter in Greece. Kipling’s poem certainly does not correspond to such a view, anymore than Asia in *Prometheus Unbound* could, by any stretch of imagination, be considered ‘half devil and half child’.

#### 4. *Prometheus Unbound* and the Deconstruction of Imperialism

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the East/West divide ceases to exist. His imaginative reworking of Aeschylus’s play reframes the original Greek drama into an intricate allegory that consciously deconstructs conventional geo-political barriers. I quote Stuart Curran: ‘Shelley’s learned fusion of occidental and oriental mythic structures in *Prometheus Unbound* constitutes a complex extrapolation of the marriage of east and west symbolized by Prometheus and Asia.’<sup>31</sup> Under Shelley’s pen, Hellenic, Christian and Hindu myths intertwine: the Titan’s greatest anguish is the sight of Christ’s torments on the cross; the mysterious Demogorgon strangely resembles *Seshnaga* (‘the snake-like Doom coiled underneath his [the Eternal] throne’) »; Io is transformed into Asia, who lives in an idyllic valley reminiscent of Bernier’s Kashmir, but who was born in a shell floating near the Aegean isles, to take just a few examples.<sup>32</sup>

With the transformation of the Georgian Caucasus into the Indian Caucasus, Shelley blurs both spatial and cultural boundaries. Drew perceptively remarks that Shelley’s Prometheus is unique because ‘he is not simply a defiant Greek figure who has been moved geographically east. His re-orientation, his re-location in the Orient, in Shelley’s poem is indicative of a corresponding [...] psychological shift in his character.’<sup>33</sup> This is apparent in his relationship with Asia. Asia, who represents the east and is the embodiment of imagination and love, is assigned the active role; it is she who seeks out Demogorgon, thus instigating the rebellion; whereas Prometheus, representing European rationality, has the more passive (if equally vital) role of revoking the curse. For Leask, *Prometheus Unbound* functions ‘by an

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263-264.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*, San Marino, Huntington, 1975, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), I, 584-602, II, iii, 96 and II, v, 23-25 respectively, *Poetical Works*, p. 221, 236 and 240.

<sup>33</sup> John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 259.

antithetical movement, namely in the orientalizing of Greek myth, a reverse acculturation which frees the Orient from its formerly negative or supplementary connotations.<sup>34</sup>

Christian La Cassagnère has explored the complex fusion of platonic, neo-platonic and Indian thought in *Prometheus Unbound*.<sup>35</sup> He notes that the Indian strand of philosophical thought in Shelley's play goes back to ancient India, to the Vedas. La Cassagnère is referring to the *advaita Vedanta*, or the doctrine of non-dualism, formulated by Adi Shankara.<sup>36</sup> That Shelley, wholly free of Christian dualism, should have responded to the non-duality of the Vedanta doctrine is hardly surprising, for the latter underpins Demogorgon's famous reply to Asia:

[...] the deep truth is imageless;  
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze  
On the revolving world? What to bid speak  
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these  
All things are subject but eternal Love.<sup>37</sup>

I have elsewhere analysed the Indian theology which props up Shelley's poem 'The Indian Serenade' (1819),<sup>38</sup> so here I will only mention the poem's subtext, the merging of the individual self into the divine unity with the typical Shelleyan reversal of roles: the mistress has become the divine being, and the lover is the human individual, who seeks erotic and spiritual blending or the Ultimate Unity. In this poem, as is the case in *Prometheus Unbound*, the Christian framework has disappeared, as Shelley celebrates a divine union in explicitly sexual terms, a union which allows the self to transcend the physical world, or *Maya* or, to use Shelleyan imagery, 'the painted veil'.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the notion of Ultimate Unity is alluded to at the close of Act III by the Spirit of the Hour, when 'The painted veil, by those who were, called life, / Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread, / All men believed or hoped, is torn aside,'<sup>39</sup> thus inaugurating a new pain/guilt-free era, in which, the human spirit, but for 'chance, and death and mutability', would '[...] oversoar / The loftiest star of unascended heaven, / Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.'<sup>40</sup> I quote Denis Bonnecase:

Ce premier terme du poème porte la transcendance à un point ultime, proprement inouï, voire insensé (par-delà la vision utopique [...]), jusqu'à la métamorphose de l'âme elle-même, prête à se fondre dans l'Être, presque

<sup>34</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers*, op. cit., p. 143.

<sup>35</sup> Christian La Cassagnère, *La mystique du Prometheus Unbound de Shelley*, Minard, 1970.

<sup>36</sup> The teachings of Adi Shankara are based on the unity of the *atman* (the soul) and *Brahman* (the universal spirit).

<sup>37</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, II, iv, 116-120, *Poetical Works*, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>38</sup> Madhu Benoit, *Sir William Jones*, op. cit., p. 223-225.

<sup>39</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 190-193, *Poetical Works* op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 202-203.

Madhu BENOIT

libérée, nous dit le texte, de ces entraves que sont « chance, and death, and mutability » [III, 4, 201].<sup>41</sup>

Could Shelley, the atheist, have had some form of *Moksha* in mind?

### Conclusion

The analyses of some of Shelley's writings, his unfinished story 'The Assassins', his essay *A Philosophical View of Reform* and his masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound*, make it clear that he did not write in an ivory tower; his familiarity with the major currents of thought prevalent in the United Kingdom at the turn of the century, utilitarianism, evangelism and orientalism, is transparent in his work. His awareness of the burgeoning imperialistic process is also clear. However, to transform this familiarity, this awareness of the colonial project into support for the colonising power as inferred by Nigel Leask, or to consider Shelley's clear-eyed condemnation of Brahmanism as an indictment of the colonised subject, as suggested by Eleanor J. Harrington-Austin, is to mistake his thinking.

As I have suggested in my reading of *Prometheus Unbound*, in Shelley's work the geographical divide ceases to exist; Shelley therefore could hardly have embraced the imperial project which is dependent for its existence on such a divide. The same can be said of his condemnation of social evils: he attacks priestcraft in Great Britain ('Young Parson Richards', 1820, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 1819), and he attacks it in India. The poet was so far ahead of his times that he anticipated M.K. Gandhi's analysis of caste as the overwhelming curse of Indian society. The subtlety of Shelley's thought process is such that it cannot be apprehended unless his writings are analyzed as a whole.

To conclude this discussion of Shelley and imperialism, I would like to return to my title: 'Transparent Peaks', when Shelley's writings have been taken in their entirety – or 'dissolved into one lake of fire' – then can be seen the poet's ideology, 'towering as from waves of flame', made transparent by its own 'inmost purple spirit of light':

*And then – as if the Earth and Sea had been  
Dissolved into one lake of fire, were seen  
Those mountains towering as from waves of flame  
Around the vaporous sun, from which there came  
The inmost purple spirit of light, and made  
Their very peaks transparent  
'Julian and Maddalo'*<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Denis Bonnecase, 'L'Acte IV du Prométhée Délivré ou le désir d'une parole totale,' *Shelley: Lectures du Prométhée*, ed. Christian La Cassagnère, Fascicule 35, Clermont-Ferrand, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université Blaise Pascal, 1991, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> P.B. Shelley, 'Julian and Maddalo' (1819), l. 80-85, *Poetical Works, op. cit.*, p. 192.

### **Bibliography**

- BAYLY, Christopher Allan. *The New Cambridge History of India – Indian society and the making of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 4 vols. Vol. II.
- BENOIT, Madhu. *Sir William Jones et la représentation de l'Inde*. Grenoble: Ellug, 2011.
- BONNECASE, Denis. 'L'Acte IV du Prométhée Délivré ou le désir d'une parole totale.' *Shelley: Lectures du Prométhée*. Ed. Christian La Cassagnère. Fascicule 35. Clermont-Ferrand: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université Blaise Pascal, 1991, p. 113-132.
- CURRAN, Stuart. *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision*. San Marino: Huntington, 1975.
- DREW, John. *India and the Romantic Imagination*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- GANDHI, Mohandas Karamchand. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi: Government of India, 1958-1984. 90 vols. Vol. LXVIII.
- HARRINGTON-AUSTIN, Eleanor J. *Shelley and the Development of English Imperialism – British India and England*. Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Romantic Reassessment, Vol. 155. Lewiston, Queenstown, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999.
- JONES, William. *The Collected Works of Sir William Jones (1799)*. Ed. Cannon Garland. New York: New York University Press, 1993. 13 vols.
- LA CASSAGNERE, Christian. *La mystique du Prometheus Unbound de Shelley*. Minard, 1970.
- LEASK, Nigel. *British Romantic Writers and the East – Anxieties of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- MILL, James. *The History of British India (1818)*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1968. 4 vols. II.
- SAID, Edward W. *Culture & Imperialism (1993)*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- SCHWAB, Raymond. *La Renaissance Orientale*. Preface by Louis Renou. Payot, 1950.
- SHELLEY, Percy Bysshe. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. New York: Gordian Press, 1965. 10 vols.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Complete Poetical Works (1904)*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Shelley's Prose; or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy (1954)*. Ed. David Lee Clark. London: Fourth Estate, 1988.

