

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15336.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15336.001.0001)

# **Winds of Doctrine**

## **Studies in Contemporary Opinion**

**By: George Santayana**

**Edited by: David E Spiech, Martin A. Coleman,  
Faedra Lazar Weiss**

### **Citation:**

*Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion*

**By: George Santayana**

**Edited by: David E Spiech, Martin A. Coleman, Faedra Lazar Weiss**

**DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15336.001.0001**

**ISBN (electronic): 9780262377324**

**Publisher: The MIT Press**

**Published: 2023**



**The MIT Press**

## V

### SHELLEY: OR THE POETIC VALUE OF REVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES

IT is possible to advocate anarchy in criticism as in politics, and there is perhaps nothing coercive to urge against a man who maintains that any work of art is good enough, intrinsically and incommensurably, if it pleased anybody at any time for any reason. In practice, however, the ideal of anarchy is unstable. Irrefutable by argument, it is readily overcome by nature. It melts away before the dogmatic operation of the anarchist's own will, as soon as he allows himself the least creative endeavour. In spite of the infinite variety of what is merely possible, human nature and will have a somewhat definite constitution, and only what is harmonious with their actual constitution can long maintain itself in the moral world. Hence it is a safe principle in the criticism of art that technical proficiency, and brilliancy of fancy or execution, cannot avail to establish a great reputation. They may dazzle for a moment, but they cannot absolve an artist from the need of having an important subject-matter and a sane humanity.

If this principle is accepted, however, it might seem that certain artists, and perhaps the greatest, might not fare well at our hands. How would Shelley, for instance, stand such a test? Every one knows the judgment passed on Shelley by Matthew Arnold, a critic who evidently relied on this principle, even if he preferred to speak only in the name of his personal tact and literary experience. Shelley, Matthew Arnold said, was "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating his wings in a luminous void in vain." In consequence he declared that Shelley was not a classic, especially as his private circle had had an unsavoury morality, to be expressed only by the French word *sale*, and as moreover Shelley himself occasionally showed a distressing want of the

sense of humour, which could only be called *bête*. These strictures, if a bit incoherent, are separately remarkably just. They unmask essential weaknesses not only in Shelley, but in all revolutionary people. The life of reason is a heritage and exists only through tradition. Half of it is an art, an adjustment to an alien reality, which only a long experience can teach: and even the other half, the inward inspiration and ideal of reason, must be also a common inheritance in the race, if people are to work together or so much as to understand one another. Now the misfortune of revolutionists is that they are disinherited, and their folly is that they wish to be disinherited even more than they are. Hence, in the midst of their passionate and even heroic idealisms, there is commonly a strange poverty in their minds, many an ugly turn in their lives, and an ostentatious vileness in their manners. They wish to be the leaders of mankind, but they are wretched representatives of humanity. In the concert of nature it is hard to keep in tune with oneself if one is out of tune with everything.

We should not then be yielding to any private bias, but simply noting the conditions under which art may exist and may be appreciated, if we accepted the classical principle of criticism and asserted that substance, sanity, and even a sort of pervasive wisdom are requisite for supreme works of art. On the other hand—who can honestly doubt it?—the rebels and individualists are the men of direct insight and vital hope. The poetry of Shelley in particular is typically poetical. It is poetry divinely inspired; and Shelley himself is perhaps no more ineffectual or more lacking in humour than an angel properly should be. Nor is his greatness all a matter of æsthetic abstraction and wild music. It is a fact of capital importance in the development of human genius that the great revolution in Christendom against Christianity, a revolution that began with the Renaissance and is not yet completed, should have found angels to herald it, no less than that other revolution did which began at Bethlehem; and that among these new angels there should have been one so winsome, pure, and rapturous as Shelley. How shall we reconcile these conflicting impressions? Shall we force ourselves to call the genius of Shelley second rate because it was revolutionary, and shall we attribute all enthusiasm for him to literary affectation or political prejudice? Or shall we rather abandon the orthodox principle that an important subject-matter and a sane spirit are essential to great works? Or shall we look for a different issue out of our perplexity, by asking if the analysis and comprehension are not

perhaps at fault which declare that these things are not present in Shelley's poetry? This last is the direction in which I conceive the truth to lie. A little consideration will show us that Shelley really has a great subject-matter—what ought to be; and that he has a real humanity—though it is humanity in the seed, humanity in its internal principle, rather than in those deformed expressions of it which can flourish in the world.

Shelley seems hardly to have been brought up; he grew up in the nursery among his young sisters, at school among the rude boys, without any affectionate guidance, without imbibing any religious or social tradition. If he received any formal training or correction, he instantly rejected it inwardly, set it down as unjust and absurd, and turned instead to sailing paper boats, to reading romances or to writing them, or to watching with delight the magic of chemical experiments. Thus the mind of Shelley was thoroughly disinherited; but not, like the minds of most revolutionists, by accident and through the niggardliness of fortune, for few revolutionists would be such if they were heirs to a baronety. Shelley's mind disinherited itself out of allegiance to itself, because it was too sensitive and too highly endowed for the world into which it had descended. It rejected ordinary education, because it was incapable of assimilating it. Education is suitable to those few animals whose faculties are not completely innate, animals that, like most men, may be perfected by experience because they are born with various imperfect alternative instincts rooted equally in their system. But most animals, and a few men, are not of this sort. They cannot be educated, because they are born complete. Full of predeterminate intuitions, they are without intelligence, which is the power of seeing things as they are. Endowed with a specific, unshakable faith, they are impervious to experience: and as they burst the womb they bring ready-made with them their final and only possible system of philosophy.

Shelley was one of these spokesmen of the *a priori*, one of these nurslings of the womb, like a bee or a butterfly; a dogmatic, inspired, perfect, and incorrigible creature. He was innocent and cruel, swift and wayward, illuminated and blind. Being a finished child of nature, not a joint product, like most of us, of nature, history, and society, he abounded miraculously in his own clear sense, but was obtuse to the droll, miscellaneous lessons of fortune. The cannonade of hard, inexplicable facts that knocks into most of us what little wisdom we have

left Shelley dazed and sore, perhaps, but uninstructed. When the storm was over, he began chirping again his own natural note. If the world continued to confine and obsess him, he hated the world, and gasped for freedom. Being incapable of understanding reality, he revelled in creating world after world in idea. For his nature was not merely pre-determined and obdurate, it was also sensitive, vehement, and fertile. With the soul of a bird, he had the senses of a man-child; the instinct of the butterfly was united in him with the instinct of the brooding fowl and of the pelican. This winged spirit had a heart. It darted swiftly on its appointed course, neither expecting nor understanding opposition; but when it met opposition it did not merely flutter and collapse; it was inwardly outraged, it protested proudly against fate, it cried aloud for liberty and justice.

The consequence was that Shelley, having a nature preformed but at the same time tender, passionate, and moral, was exposed to early and continual suffering. When the world violated the ideal which lay so clear before his eyes, that violation filled him with horror. If to the irrepressible gushing of life from within we add the suffering and horror that continually checked it, we shall have in hand, I think, the chief elements of his genius.

Love of the ideal, passionate apprehension of what ought to be, has for its necessary counterpart condemnation of the actual, wherever the actual does not conform to that ideal. The spontaneous soul, the soul of the child, is naturally revolutionary; and when the revolution fails, the soul of the youth becomes naturally pessimistic. All moral life and moral judgment have this deeply romantic character; they venture to assert a private ideal in the face of an intractable and omnipotent world. Some moralists begin by feeling the attraction of untasted and ideal perfection. These, like Plato, excel in elevation, and they are apt to despise rather than to reform the world. Other moralists begin by a revolt against the actual, at some point where they find the actual particularly galling. These excel in sincerity; their purblind conscience is urgent, and they are reformers in intent and sometimes even in action. But the ideals they frame are fragmentary and shallow, often mere provisional vague watchwords, like liberty, equality, and fraternity; they possess no positive visions or plans for moral life as a whole, like Plato's *Republic*. The utopian or visionary moralists are often rather dazed by this wicked world; being well-intentioned but impotent, they often take comfort in fancying that the ideal they pine for is already

actually embodied on earth, or is about to be embodied on earth in a decade or two, or at least is embodied eternally in a sphere immediately above the earth, to which we shall presently climb, and be happy for ever.

Lovers of the ideal who thus hastily believe in its reality are called idealists, and Shelley was an idealist in almost every sense of that hard-used word. He early became an idealist after Berkeley's fashion, in that he discredited the existence of matter and embraced a psychological or (as it was called) intellectual system of the universe. In his drama *Hellas* he puts this view with evident approval into the mouth of Ahasuerus:

“This whole  
Of suns and worlds and men and beasts and flowers,  
With all the silent or tempestuous workings  
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,  
Is but a vision;—all that it inherits  
Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams.  
Thought is its cradle and its grave; nor less  
The future and the past are idle shadows  
Of thought's eternal flight—they have no being:  
Nought is but that which feels itself to be.”

But Shelley was even more deeply and constantly an idealist after the manner of Plato; for he regarded the good as a magnet (inexplicably not working for the moment) that draws all life and motion after it; and he looked on the types and ideals of things as on eternal realities that subsist, beautiful and untarnished, when the glimmerings that reveal them to our senses have died away. From the infinite potentialities of beauty in the abstract, articulate mind draws certain bright forms—the Platonic ideas—“the gathered rays which are reality,” as Shelley called them: and it is the light of these ideals cast on objects of sense that lends to these objects some degree of reality and value, making out of them “lovely apparitions, dim at first, then radiant . . . the progeny immortal of painting, sculpture, and rapt poesy.”

The only kind of idealism that Shelley had nothing to do with is the kind that prevails in some universities, that Hegelian idealism which teaches that perfect good is a vicious abstraction, and maintains that all the evil that has been, is, and ever shall be is indispensable to make the universe as good as it possibly could be. In this form, idealism is

simply contempt for all ideals, and a hearty adoration of things as they are; and as such it appeals mightily to the powers that be, in church and in state; but in that capacity it would have been as hateful to Shelley as the powers that be always were, and as the philosophy was that flattered them. For his moral feeling was based on suffering and horror at what is actual, no less than on love of a visioned good. His conscience was, to a most unusual degree, at once elevated and sincere. It was inspired in equal measure by prophecy and by indignation. He was carried away in turn by enthusiasm for what his ethereal and fertile fancy pictured as possible, and by detestation of the reality forced upon him instead. Hence that extraordinary moral fervour which is the soul of his poetry. His imagination is no playful undirected kaleidoscope; the images, often so tenuous and metaphysical, that crowd upon him, are all sparks thrown off at white heat, embodiments of a fervent, definite, unswerving inspiration. If we think that the *Cloud* or the *West Wind* or the *Witch of the Atlas* are mere fireworks, poetic dust, a sort of *bataille des fleurs* in which we are pelted by a shower of images—we have not understood the passion that overflows in them, as any long-nursed passion may, in any of us, suddenly overflow in an unwonted profusion of words. This is a point at which Francis Thompson's understanding of Shelley, generally so perfect, seems to me to go astray. The universe, Thompson tells us, was Shelley's box of toys. "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." This last is not, I think, Shelley's motive; it is not the truth about the spring of his genius. He undoubtedly shatters the world to bits, but only to build it nearer to the heart's desire, only to make out of its coloured fragments some more Elysian home for love, or some more dazzling symbol for that infinite beauty which is the need—the profound, aching, imperative need—of the human soul. This recreative impulse of the poet's is not wilful, as Thompson calls it: it is moral. Like the *Sensitive Plant*

"It loves even like Love, — its deep heart is full;  
It desires what it has not, the beautiful."

The question for Shelley is not at all what will look nicest in his song; that is the preoccupation of mincing rhymesters, whose well is

soon dry. Shelley's abundance has a more generous source; it springs from his passion for picturing what would be best, not in the picture, but in the world. Hence, when he feels he has pictured or divined it, he can exclaim:

“The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness,  
The boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness,  
The vaporous exultation, not to be confined!  
Ha! Ha! the animation of delight,  
Which wraps me like an atmosphere of light,  
And bears me as a cloud is borne by its own wind!”

To match this gift of bodying forth the ideal Shelley had his vehement sense of wrong; and as he seized upon and recast all images of beauty, to make them more perfectly beautiful, so, to vent his infinite horror of evil, he seized on all the worst images of crime or torture that he could find, and recast them so as to reach the quintessence of distilled badness. His pictures of war, famine, lust, and cruelty are, or seem, forced, although perhaps, as in the *Cenci*, he might urge that he had historical warrant for his descriptions, far better historical warrant, no doubt, than the beauty and happiness actually to be found in the world could give him for his *Skylark*, his *Epipsychidion*, or his *Prometheus*. But to exaggerate good is to vivify, to enhance our sense of moral coherence and beautiful naturalness; it is to render things more graceful, intelligible, and congenial to the spirit which they ought to serve. To aggravate evil, on the contrary, is to darken counsel—already dark enough—and the want of truth to nature in this pessimistic sort of exaggeration is not compensated for by any advantage. The violence and, to my feeling, the wantonness of these invectives—for they are invectives in intention and in effect—may have seemed justified to Shelley by his political purpose. He was thirsting to destroy kings, priests, soldiers, parents, and heads of colleges—to destroy them, I mean, in their official capacity; and the exhibition of their vileness in all its diabolical purity might serve to remove scruples in the half-hearted. We, whom the nineteenth century has left so tender to historical rights and historical beauties, may wonder that a poet, an impassioned lover of the beautiful, could have been such a leveller, and such a vandal in his theoretical destructiveness. But here the legacy of the eighteenth century was speaking in Shelley, as that



of the nineteenth is speaking in us: and moreover, in his own person, the very fertility of imagination could be a cause of blindness to the past and its contingent sanctities. Shelley was not left standing aghast, like a Philistine, before the threatened destruction of all traditional order. He had, and knew he had, the seeds of a far lovelier order in his own soul; there he found the plan or memory of a perfect commonwealth of nature ready to rise at once on the ruins of this sad world, and to make regret for it impossible.

So much for what I take to be the double foundation of Shelley's genius, a vivid love of ideal good on the one hand, and on the other, what is complementary to that vivid love, much suffering and horror at the touch of actual evils. On this double foundation he based an opinion which had the greatest influence on his poetry, not merely on the subject-matter of it, but also on the exuberance and urgency of emotion which suffuses it. This opinion was that all that caused suffering and horror in the world could be readily destroyed: it was the belief in perfectibility.

An animal that has rigid instincts and an *a priori* mind is probably very imperfectly adapted to the world he comes into: his organs cannot be moulded by experience and use; unless they are fitted by some miraculous pre-established harmony, or by natural selection, to things as they are, they will never be reconciled with them, and an eternal war will ensue between what the animal needs, loves, and can understand and what the outer reality offers. So long as such a creature lives—and his life will be difficult and short—events will continually disconcert and puzzle him; everything will seem to him unaccountable, inexplicable, unnatural. He will not be able to conceive the real order and connection of things sympathetically, by assimilating his habits of thought to their habits of evolution. His faculties being innate and unadaptable will not allow him to correct his presumptions and axioms; he will never be able to make nature the standard of naturalness. What contradicts his private impulses will seem to him to contradict reason, beauty, and necessity. In this paradoxical situation he will probably take refuge in the conviction that what he finds to exist is an illusion, or at least not a fair sample of reality. Being so perverse, absurd, and repugnant, the given state of things must be, he will say, only accidental and temporary. He will be sure that his own *a priori* imagination is the mirror of all the eternal proprieties, and that as his mind can move only in one predetermined way, things cannot be

prevented from moving in that same way save by some strange violence done to their nature. It would be easy, therefore, to set everything right again: nay, everything must be on the point of righting itself spontaneously. Wrong, of its very essence, must be in unstable equilibrium. The conflict between what such a man feels ought to exist and what he finds actually existing must, he will feel sure, end by a speedy revolution in things, and by the removal of all scandals; that it should end by the speedy removal of his own person, or by such a revolution in his demands as might reconcile him to existence, will never occur to him; or, if the thought occurs to him, it will seem too horrible to be true.

Such a creature cannot adapt himself to things by education, and consequently he cannot adapt things to himself by industry. His choice lies absolutely between victory and martyrdom. But at the very moment of martyrdom, martyrs, as is well known, usually feel assured of victory. The *a priori* spirit will therefore be always a prophet of victory, so long as it subsists at all. The vision of a better world at hand absorbed the Israelites in exile, St. John the Baptist in the desert, and Christ on the cross. The martyred spirit always says to the world it leaves, "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise."

In just this way, Shelley believed in perfectibility. In his latest poems—in *Hellas*, in *Adonais*—he was perhaps a little inclined to remove the scene of perfectibility to a metaphysical region, as the Christian church soon removed it to the other world. Indeed, an earth really made perfect is hardly distinguishable from a posthumous heaven: so profoundly must everything in it be changed, and so angel-like must every one in it become. Shelley's earthly paradise, as described in *Prometheus* and in *Epipsychidion*, is too festival-like, too much of a mere culmination, not to be fugitive: it cries aloud to be translated into a changeless and metaphysical heaven, which to Shelley's mind could be nothing but the realm of Platonic ideas, where "life, like a dome of many-coloured glass," no longer "stains the white radiance of eternity." But the age had been an age of revolution and, in spite of disappointments, retained its faith in revolution; and the young Shelley was not satisfied with a paradise removed to the intangible realms of poetry or of religion; he hoped, like the old Hebrews, for a paradise on earth. His notion was that eloquence could change the heart of man, and that love, kindled there by the force of reason and of example, would transform society. He believed, Mrs. Shelley

tells us, "that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none." And she adds: "That man could be so perfectionised as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the greater part of creation, was the cardinal point of his system." This cosmic extension of the conversion of men reminds one of the cosmic extension of the Fall conceived by St. Augustine; and in the *Prometheus* Shelley has allowed his fancy, half in symbol, half in glorious physical hyperbole, to carry the warm contagion of love into the very bowels of the earth, and even the moon, by reflection, to catch the light of love, and be alive again.

Shelley, we may safely say, did not understand the real constitution of nature. It was hidden from him by a cloud, all woven of shifting rainbows and bright tears. Only his emotional haste made it possible for him to entertain such opinions as he did entertain; or rather, it was inevitable that the mechanism of nature, as it is in its depths, should remain in his pictures only the shadowiest of backgrounds. His poetry is accordingly a part of the poetry of illusion; the poetry of truth, if we have the courage to hope for such a thing, is reserved for far different and yet unborn poets. But it is only fair to Shelley to remember that the moral being of mankind is as yet in its childhood; all poets play with images not understood; they touch on emotions sharply, at random, as in a dream; they suffer each successive vision, each poignant sentiment, to evaporate into nothing, or to leave behind only a heart vaguely softened and fatigued, a gentle languor, or a tearful hope. Every modern school of poets, once out of fashion, proves itself to have been sadly romantic and sentimental. None has done better than to spangle a confused sensuous pageant with some sparks of truth, or to give it some symbolic relation to moral experience. And this Shelley has done as well as anybody: all other poets also have been poets of illusion. The distinction of Shelley is that his illusions are so wonderfully fine, subtle, and palpitating; that they betray passions and mental habits so singularly generous and pure. And why? Because he did not believe in the necessity of what is vulgar, and did not pay that demoralising respect to it, under the title of fact or of custom, which it exacts from most of us. The past seemed to him no valid precedent, the present no final instance. As he believed in the imminence of an over-turn that should make all things new, he was not checked by any divided allegiance, by any sense that he was straying into the vapid or fanciful, when he created what he justly calls "Beautiful idealisms of moral excellence."

That is what his poems are fundamentally—the *Skylark*, and the *Witch of the Atlas*, and the *Sensitive Plant* no less than the grander pieces. He infused into his gossamer world the strength of his heroic conscience. He felt that what his imagination pictured was a true symbol of what human experience should and might pass into. Otherwise he would have been aware of playing with idle images; his poetry would have been mere millinery and his politics mere business; he would have been a worldling in art and in morals. The clear fire, the sustained breath, the fervent accent of his poetry are due to his faith in his philosophy. As Mrs. Shelley expressed it, he “had no care for any of his poems that did not emanate from the depths of his mind, and develop some high and abstruse truth.” Had his poetry not dealt with what was supreme in his own eyes, and dearest to his heart, it could never have been the exquisite and entrancing poetry that it is. It would not have had an adequate subject-matter, as, in spite of Matthew Arnold, I think it had; for nothing can be empty that contains such a soul. An angel cannot be ineffectual if the standard of efficiency is moral; he is what all other things bring about, when they are effectual. And a void that is alive with the beating of luminous wings, and of a luminous heart, is quite sufficiently peopled. Shelley’s mind was angelic not merely in its purity and fervour, but also in its moral authority, in its prophetic strain. What was conscience in his generation was life in him.

The mind of man is not merely a sensorium. His intelligence is not merely an instrument for adaptation. There is a germ within, a nucleus of force and organisation, which can be unfolded, under favourable circumstances, into a perfection inwardly determined. Man’s constitution is a fountain from which to draw an infinity of gushing music, not representing anything external, yet not unmeaning on that account, since it represents the capacities and passions latent in him from the beginning. These potentialities, however, are no oracles of truth. Being innate they are arbitrary; being *a priori* they are subjective; but they are good principles for fiction, for poetry, for morals, for religion. They are principles for the true expression of man, but not for the true description of the universe. When they are taken for the latter, fiction becomes deception, poetry illusion, morals fanaticism, and religion bad science. The orgy of delusion into which we are then plunged comes from supposing the *a priori* to be capable of controlling the actual, and the innate to be a standard for the true. That rich and

definite endowment which might have made the distinction of the poet, then makes the narrowness of the philosopher. So Shelley, with a sort of tyranny of which he does not suspect the possible cruelty, would impose his ideal of love and equality upon all creatures; he would make enthusiasts of clowns and doves of vultures. In him, as in many people, too intense a need of loving excludes the capacity for intelligent sympathy. His feeling cannot accommodate itself to the inequalities of human nature: his good will is a geyser, and will not consent to grow cool, and to water the flat and vulgar reaches of life. Shelley is blind to the excellences of what he despises, as he is blind to the impossibility of realising what he wants. His sympathies are narrow as his politics are visionary, so that there is a certain moral incompetence in his moral intensity. Yet his abstraction from half of life, or from nine-tenths of it, was perhaps necessary if silence and space were to be won in his mind for its own upwelling, ecstatic harmonies. The world we have always with us, but such spirits we have not always. And the spirit has fire enough within to make a second stellar universe.

An instance of Shelley's moral incompetence in moral intensity is to be found in his view of selfishness and evil. From the point of view of pure spirit, selfishness is quite absurd. As a contemporary of ours has put it: "It is so evident that it is better to secure a greater good for A than a lesser good for B that it is hard to find any still more evident principle by which to prove this. And if A happens to be some one else, and B to be myself, that cannot affect the question." It is very foolish not to love your neighbour as yourself, since his good is no less good than yours. Convince people of this—and who can resist such perfect logic?—and *presto* all property in things has disappeared, all jealousy in love, and all rivalry in honour. How happy and secure every one will suddenly be, and how much richer than in our mean, blind, competitive society! The single word love—and we have just seen that love is a logical necessity—offers an easy and final solution to all moral and political problems. Shelley cannot imagine why this solution is not accepted, and why logic does not produce love. He can only wonder and grieve that it does not; and since selfishness and ill-will seem to him quite gratuitous, his ire is aroused; he thinks them unnatural and monstrous. He could not in the least understand evil, even when he did it himself; all villainy seemed to him wanton, all lust frigid, all hatred insane. All was an abomination alike that was not the lovely spirit of love.

Now this is a very unintelligent view of evil; and if Shelley had had time to read Spinoza—an author with whom he would have found himself largely in sympathy—he might have learned that nothing is evil in itself, and that what is evil in things is not due to any accident in creation, nor to groundless malice in man. Evil is an inevitable aspect which things put on when they are struggling to preserve themselves in the same habitat, in which there is not room or matter enough for them to prosper equally side by side. Under these circumstances the partial success of any creature—say, the cancer-microbe—is an evil from the point of view of those other creatures—say, men—to whom that success is a defeat. Shelley sometimes half perceived this inevitable tragedy. So he says of the fair lady in the *Sensitive Plant*:

“All killing insects and gnawing worms,  
And things of obscene and unlovely forms,  
She bore in a basket of Indian woof,  
Into the rough woods far aloof—  
In a basket of grasses and wild flowers full,  
The freshest her gentle hands could pull  
For the poor banished insects, whose intent,  
Although they did ill, was innocent.”

Now it is all very well to ask cancer-microbes to be reasonable, and go feed on oak-leaves, if the oak-leaves do not object; oak-leaves might be poison for them, and in any case cancer-microbes cannot listen to reason; they must go on propagating where they are, unless they are quickly and utterly exterminated. And fundamentally men are subject to the same fatality exactly; they cannot listen to reason unless they are reasonable; and it is unreasonable to expect that, being animals, they should be reasonable exclusively. Imagination is indeed at work in them, and makes them capable of sacrificing themselves for any idea that appeals to them, for their children, perhaps, or for their religion. But they are not more capable of sacrificing themselves to what does not interest them than the cancer-microbes are of sacrificing themselves to men.

When Shelley marvels at the perversity of the world, he shows his ignorance of the world. The illusion he suffers from is constitutional, and such as larks and sensitive plants are possibly subject to in their way: what he is marvelling at is really that anything should exist at all

not a creature of his own moral disposition. Consequently the more he misunderstands the world and bids it change its nature, the more he expresses his own nature: so that all is not vanity in his illusion, nor night in his blindness. The poet sees most clearly what his ideal is; he suffers no illusion in the expression of his own soul. His political utopias, his belief in the power of love, and his cryingly subjective and inconstant way of judging people are one side of the picture; the other is his lyrical power, wealth, and ecstasy. If he had understood universal nature, he would not have so glorified in his own. And his own nature was worth glorifying; it was, I think, the purest, tenderest, richest, most rational nature ever poured forth in verse. I have not read in any language such a full expression of the unadulterated instincts of the mind. The world of Shelley is that which the vital monad within many of us—I will not say within all, for who shall set bounds to the variations of human nature?—the world which the vital monad within many of us, I say, would gladly live in if it could have its way.

Matthew Arnold said that Shelley was not quite sane; and certainly he was not quite sane, if we place sanity in justness of external perception, adaptation to matter, and docility to the facts; but his lack of sanity was not due to any internal corruption; it was not even an internal eccentricity. He was like a child, like a Platonic soul just fallen from the Empyrean; and the child may be dazed, credulous, and fanciful; but he is not mad. On the contrary, his earnest playfulness, the constant distraction of his attention from observation to day-dreams, is the sign of an inward order and fecundity appropriate to his age. If children did not see visions, good men would have nothing to work for. It is the soul of observant persons, like Matthew Arnold, that is apt not to be quite sane and whole inwardly, but somewhat warped by familiarity with the perversities of real things, and forced to misrepresent its true ideal, like a tree bent by too prevalent a wind. Half the fertility of such a soul is lost, and the other half is denaturalised. No doubt, in its sturdy deformity, the practical mind is an instructive and not unpleasing object, an excellent, if somewhat pathetic, expression of the climate in which it is condemned to grow, and of its dogged clinging to an ingrate soil; but it is a wretched expression of its innate possibilities. Shelley, on the contrary, is like a palm-tree in the desert or a star in the sky; he is perfect in the midst of the void. His obtuseness to things dynamic—to the material order—leaves his whole mind free to develop things æsthetic after their own kind; his abstraction permits

purity, his playfulness makes room for creative freedom, his ethereal quality is only humanity having its way.

We perhaps do ourselves an injustice when we think that the heart of us is sordid; what is sordid is rather the situation that cramps or stifles the heart. In itself our generative principle is surely no less fertile and generous than the generative principle of crystals or flowers. As it can produce a more complex body, it is capable of producing a more complex mind; and the beauty and life of this mind, like that of the body, is all predetermined in the seed. Circumstances may suffer the organism to develop, or prevent it from doing so; they cannot change its plan without making it ugly and deformed. What Shelley's mind draws from the outside, its fund of images, is like what the germ of the body draws from the outside, its food – a mass of mere materials to transform and reorganise. With these images Shelley constructs a world determined by his native genius, as the seed organises out of its food a predetermined system of nerves and muscles. Shelley's poetry shows us the perfect but naked body of human happiness. What clothes circumstances may compel most of us to add may be a necessary concession to climate, to custom, or to shame; they can hardly add a new vitality or any beauty comparable to that which they hide.

When the soul, as in Shelley's case, is all goodness, and when the world seems all illegitimacy and obstruction, we need not wonder that *freedom* should be regarded as a panacea. Even if freedom had not been the idol of Shelley's times, he would have made an idol of it for himself. "I never could discern in him," says his friend Hogg, "any more than two principles. The first was a strong, irrepressible love of liberty. . . . The second was an equally ardent love of toleration . . . and . . . an intense abhorrence of persecution." We all fancy nowadays that we believe in liberty and abhor persecution; but the liberty we approve of is usually only a variation in social compulsions, to make them less galling to our latest sentiments than the old compulsions would be if we retained them. Liberty of the press and liberty to vote do not greatly help us in living after our own mind, which is, I suppose, the only positive sort of liberty. From the point of view of a poet, there can be little essential freedom so long as he is forbidden to live with the people he likes, and compelled to live with the people he does not like. This, to Shelley, seemed the most galling of tyrannies; and free love was, to his feeling, the essence and test of freedom. Love



must be spontaneous to be a spiritual bond in the beginning and it must remain spontaneous if it is to remain spiritual. To be bound by one's past is as great a tyranny to pure spirit as to be bound by the sin of Adam, or by the laws of Artaxerxes; and those of us who do not believe in the possibility of free love ought to declare frankly that we do not, at bottom, believe in the possibility of freedom.

“I never was attached to that great sect  
 Whose doctrine is that each one should select,  
 Out of the crowd, a mistress or a friend  
 And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend  
 To cold oblivion; though it is the code  
 Of modern morals, and the beaten road  
 Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread  
 Who travel to their home among the dead  
 By the broad highway of the world, and so  
 With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,  
 The dreariest and the longest journey go.  
 True love in this differs from gold and clay,  
 That to divide is not to take away.  
 Love is like understanding that grows bright  
 Gazing on many truths. . . . Narrow  
 The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,  
 The life that wears, the spirit that creates  
 One object and one form, and builds thereby  
 A sepulchre for its eternity!”

The difficulties in reducing this charming theory of love to practice are well exemplified in Shelley's own life. He ran away with his first wife not because she inspired any uncontrollable passion, but because she declared she was a victim of domestic oppression and threw herself upon him for protection. Nevertheless, when he discovered that his best friend was making love to her, in spite of his free-love principles, he was very seriously annoyed. When he presently abandoned her, feeling a spiritual affinity in another direction, she drowned herself in the Serpentine: and his second wife needed all her natural sweetness and all her inherited philosophy to reconcile her to the waves of Platonic enthusiasm for other ladies which periodically swept the too sensitive heart of her husband. Free love would not, then,

secure freedom from complications; it would not remove the present occasion for jealousy, reproaches, tragedies, and the dragging of a lengthening chain. Freedom of spirit cannot be translated into freedom of action; you may amend laws, and customs, and social entanglements, but you will still have them; for this world is a lumbering mechanism and not, like love, a plastic dream. Wisdom is very old and therefore often ironical, and it has long taught that it is well for those who would live in the spirit to keep as clear as possible of the world: and that marriage, especially a free-love marriage, is a snare for poets. Let them endure to love freely, hopelessly, and infinitely, after the manner of Plato and Dante, and even of Goethe, when Goethe really loved: that exquisite sacrifice will improve their verse, and it will not kill them. Let them follow in the traces of Shelley when he wrote in his youth: "I have been most of the night pacing a church-yard. I must now engage in scenes of strong interest. . . . I expect to gratify some of this insatiable feeling in poetry. . . . I slept with a loaded pistol and some poison last night, but did not die." Happy man if he had been able to add, "And did not marry!"

Last among the elements of Shelley's thought I may perhaps mention his atheism. Shelley called himself an atheist in his youth; his biographers and critics usually say that he was, or that he became, a pantheist. He was an atheist in the sense that he denied the orthodox conception of a deity who is a voluntary creator, a legislator, and a judge; but his aversion to Christianity was not founded on any sympathetic or imaginative knowledge of it; and a man who preferred the *Paradiso* of Dante to almost any other poem, and preferred it to the popular *Inferno* itself, could evidently be attracted by Christian ideas and sentiment the moment they were presented to him as expressions of moral truth rather than as gratuitous dogmas. A pantheist he was in the sense that he felt how fluid and vital this whole world is; but he seems to have had no tendency to conceive any conscious plan or logical necessity connecting the different parts of the whole; so that rather than a pantheist he might be called a panpsychist; especially as he did not subordinate morally the individual to the cosmos. He did not surrender the authority of moral ideals in the face of physical necessity, which is properly the essence of pantheism. He did the exact opposite; so much so that the chief characteristic of his philosophy is its Promethean spirit. He maintained that the basis of moral authority was internal, diffused among all individuals; that it was the

natural love of the beautiful and the good wherever it might spring, and however fate might oppose it.

“To suffer . . .  
 To forgive . . .  
 To defy Power . . .  
 To love and bear; to hope, till hope creates  
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
 This . . . is to be  
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free.”

Shelley was also removed from any ordinary atheism by his truly speculative sense for eternity. He was a thorough Platonist. All metaphysics perhaps is poetry, but Platonic metaphysics is good poetry, and to this class Shelley's belongs. For instance:

“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.  
 Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep!  
 He hath awakened from the dream of life.  
 'Tis we who, lost in stormy visions, keep  
 With phantoms an unprofitable strife.

“He is made one with Nature. There is heard  
 His voice in all her music, from the moan  
 Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird.

“He is a portion of the loveliness  
 Which once he made more lovely.

“The splendours of the firmament of time  
 May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not:  
 Like stars to their appointed height they climb,  
 And death is a low mist which cannot blot  
 The brightness it may veil. When lofty thought  
 Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,  
 . . . the dead live there.”

Atheism or pantheism of this stamp cannot be taxed with being gross or materialistic; the trouble is rather that it is too hazy in its sublimity. The poet has not perceived the natural relation between facts and ideals so clearly or correctly as he has felt the moral relation between them. But his allegiance to the intuition which defies, for the sake of felt excellence, every form of idolatry or cowardice wearing the mask of religion – this allegiance is itself the purest religion; and it is capable of inspiring the sweetest and most absolute poetry. In daring to lay bare the truths of fate, the poet creates for himself the subtlest and most heroic harmonies; and he is comforted for the illusions he has lost by being made incapable of desiring them.

We have seen that Shelley, being unteachable, could never put together any just idea of the world: he merely collected images and emotions, and out of them made worlds of his own. His poetry accordingly does not well express history, nor human character, nor the constitution of nature. What he unrolls before us instead is, in a sense, fantastic; it is a series of landscapes, passions, and cataclysms such as never were on earth, and never will be. If you are seriously interested only in what belongs to earth you will not be seriously interested in Shelley. Literature, according to Matthew Arnold, should be criticism of life, and Shelley did not criticise life; so that his poetry had no solidity. But is life, we may ask, the same thing as the circumstances of life on earth? Is the spirit of life, that marks and judges those circumstances, itself nothing? Music is surely no description of the circumstances of life; yet it is relevant to life unmistakably, for it stimulates by means of a torrent of abstract movements and images the formal and emotional possibilities of living which lie in the spirit. By so doing music becomes a part of life, a congruous addition, a parallel life, as it were, to the vulgar one. I see no reason, in the analogies of the natural world, for supposing that the circumstances of human life are the only circumstances in which the spirit of life can disport itself. Even on this planet, there are sea-animals and air-animals, ephemeral beings and self-centred beings, as well as persons who can grow as old as Matthew Arnold, and be as fond as he was of classifying other people. And beyond this planet, and in the interstices of what our limited senses can perceive, there are probably many forms of life not criticised in any of the books which Matthew Arnold said we should read in order to know the best that has been thought and said in the world. The future, too, even among men, may contain, as Shelley puts it, many

“arts, though unimagined, yet to be.” The divination of poets cannot, of course, be expected to reveal any of these hidden regions as they actually exist or will exist; but what would be the advantage of revealing them? It could only be what the advantage of criticising human life would be also, to improve subsequent life indirectly by turning it towards attainable goods, and is it not as important a thing to improve life directly and in the present, if one has the gift, by enriching rather than criticising it? Besides, there is need of fixing the ideal by which criticism is to be guided. If you have no image of happiness or beauty or perfect goodness before you, how are you to judge what portions of life are important, and what rendering of them is appropriate?

Being a singer inwardly inspired, Shelley could picture the ideal goals of life, the ultimate joys of experience, better than a discursive critic or observer could have done. The circumstances of life are only the bases or instruments of life: the fruition of life is not in retrospect, not in description of the instruments, but in expression of the spirit itself, to which those instruments may prove useful; as music is not a criticism of violins, but a playing upon them. This expression need not resemble its ground. Experience is diversified by colours that are not produced by colours, sounds that are not conditioned by sounds, names that are not symbols for other names, fixed ideal objects that stand for ever-changing material processes. The mind is fundamentally lyrical, inventive, redundant. Its visions are its own offspring, hatched in the warmth of some favourable cosmic gale. The ambient weather may vary, and these visions be scattered; but the ideal world they pictured may some day be revealed again to some other poet similarly inspired; the possibility of restoring it, or something like it, is perpetual. It is precisely because Shelley’s sense for things is so fluid, so illusive, that it opens to us emotionally what is a serious scientific probability; namely, that human life is not all life, nor the landscape of earth the only admired landscape in the universe; that the ancients who believed in gods and spirits were nearer the virtual truth (however anthropomorphically they may have expressed themselves) than any philosophy or religion that makes human affairs the centre and aim of the world. Such moral imagination is to be gained by sinking into oneself, rather than by observing remote happenings, because it is at its heart, not at its finger-tips, that the human soul touches matter, and is akin to whatever other centres of life may people the infinite.

For this reason the masters of spontaneity, the prophets, the inspired poets, the saints, the mystics, the musicians are welcome and most appealing companions. In their simplicity and abstraction from the world they come very near the heart. They say little and help much. They do not picture life, but have life, and give it. So we may say, I think, of Shelley's magic universe what he said of Greece; if it

“Must be  
A wreck, yet shall its fragments re-assemble,  
And build themselves again impregnably

In a diviner clime,  
To Amphionic music, on some cape sublime  
Which frowns above the idle foam of time.”

“Frowns,” says Shelley rhetorically, as if he thought that something timeless, something merely ideal, could be formidable, or could threaten existing things with any but an ideal defeat. Tremendous error! Eternal possibilities may indeed beckon; they may attract those who instinctively pursue them as a star may guide those who wish to reach the place over which it happens to shine. But an eternal possibility has no material power. It is only one of an infinity of other things equally possible intrinsically, yet most of them quite unrealisable in this world of blood and mire. The realm of eternal essences rains down no Jovian thunderbolts, but only a ghostly Uranian calm. There is no frown there; rather, a passive and universal welcome to any who may have in them the will and the power to climb. Whether any one has the will depends on his material constitution, and whether he has the power depends on the firm texture of that constitution and on circumstances happening to be favourable to its operation. Otherwise what the rebel or the visionary hails as his ideal will be no picture of his destiny or of that of the world. It will be, and will always remain, merely a picture of his heart. This picture, indestructible in its ideal essence, will mirror also the hearts of those who may share, or may have shared, the nature of the poet who drew it. So purely ideal and so deeply human are the visions of Shelley. So truly does he deserve the epitaph which a clear-sighted friend wrote upon his tomb: *cor cordium*, the heart of hearts.





This publication has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency which supports the study of such fields as history, philosophy, literature, and languages.

In honor of James Gouinlock, additional funds for the publication of *Winds of Doctrine* have been provided by Frederick and Nancy Marcus.

*Winds of Doctrine* was first published in 1913 by Charles Scribner's Sons.

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Santayana, George, 1863-1952, author. | Spiech, David E., editor. | Coleman, Martin A., editor. | Weiss, Faedra Lazar, editor.

Title: *Winds of doctrine : studies in contemporary opinion* / by George Santayana ; edited by David E. Spiech, Martin A. Coleman, and Faedra Lazar Weiss with an introduction by Paul Forster.

Description: Critical edition. | Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Series: The works of George Santayana; volume IX | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023000210 (print) | LCCN 2023000211 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262048675 | ISBN 9780262377331 (epub) | ISBN 9780262377324 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy, Modern. | Spiritual life.

Classification: LCC B945.S23 W7 2023 (print) | LCC B945.S23 (ebook) | DDC 111/.85--dc23/eng/20230328

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023000210>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023000211>

Manufactured in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48 1984. ∞™