The Peterloo Massacre and Shelley

Part 2: Shelley's politics and his Peterloo poems

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This year marks the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, a critical event in British history. On August 16, 1819, a crowd of 60,000 to 100,000 protestors gathered peacefully on Manchester's St Peter's Field. They came to appeal for adult suffrage and the reform of parliamentary representation. The disenfranchised working class—cotton workers, many of them women, with a large contingent of Irish workers—who made up the crowd were struggling with the increasingly dire economic conditions following the end of the Napoleonic Wars four years earlier.

Shortly after the meeting began, local magistrates called on the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry to arrest the speakers and sent in a cavalry of Yeomanry and a regular army regiment to attack the crowd. They charged with sabres drawn. Eighteen people were killed and up to 700 injured.

On August 16, the WSWS published an appraisal of the massacre.

The following is the concluding part of a two-part article focusing on the response to the massacre by the great poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The first part was posted on September 30.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's childhood and education were typical of his class. But bullied and unhappy at Eton, he was already developing an independence of thought and the germs of egalitarian feeling. Opposed to the school's fagging system (making younger pupils beholden as servants to older boys), he was also enthusiastically pursuing science experiments.

He was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for publishing a tract titled "The Necessity of Atheism." That year he also published anonymously an anti-war "Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things." This was a fundraiser for Irish journalist Peter Finnerty, imprisoned for libel after accusing Viscount Castlereagh of mistreating United Irish prisoners. Long thought lost, a copy was found in 2006 and made available by the Bodleian Library in 2015.

Ireland was a pressing concern. Shelley visited Ireland between February and April 1812, and his "Address to the Irish People" from that year called for Catholic emancipation and a repeal of the 1800 Union Act passed after the 1798 rebellions. Shelley called the act "the most successful engine that England ever wielded over the misery of fallen Ireland."

Shelley's formative radicalism was informed by the French Revolution. That bourgeois revolution raised the prospect of future socialist revolutionary struggles, the material basis for which—the growth of the industrial working class—was only just emerging.

Many older Romantic poets who had, even ambivalently, welcomed the French Revolution as progressive reacted to its limitations by rejecting further strivings for liberty. Shelley denounced this, writing of William Wordsworth in 1816:

> In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
> Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, —
> Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
> Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

In 1811, Shelley visited the reactionary future poet laureate Robert Southey. He had admired Southey's poetry, but not his politics, writing, "[H]e to whom Bigotry, Tyranny, Law was hateful, has become the votary of those idols in a form most disgusting." Southey furnished Shelley with his introduction to William Godwin, whose daughter Mary would become Shelley's wife.

Godwin's anarchism reflects the utopianism of a period before the emergence of a mass working class, although his novel *Caleb Williams* (1794) remains powerful. Shelley learned from Godwin, but was also attuned to social, political and technological developments.

Shelley's 1813 philosophical poem *Queen Mab*, incorporating the atheism pamphlet in its notes, sought to synthesise Godwin's conception of political necessity with his own thinking about continuing changes in nature. Where some had abandoned ideas of revolutionary change because of the emergence of Napoleon after the French Revolution, Shelley strove to formulate a gradual transformation of society that would still be total.

He summarised his views on the progress of the French Revolution in 1816, addressing the "fallen tyrant" Napoleon:

> I did groan
> To think that a most unambitious slave,
> Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave
> Of Liberty.

He concluded:

> That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
> Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime.
> And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time.

This was a statement of continued commitment to radical change and an overhaul of society. *Queen Mab*'s radicalism was recognised and feared. In George Cruikshank's 1821 cartoon, "The Revolutionary Association," one placard reads "Queen Mab or Killing no Murder."

What marks Shelley as revolutionary is his ongoing assessment of political and social developments. He was neither politically demoralised by the trajectory of the French Revolution nor tied to outmoded ways of thinking about it. He was able to some extent to carry the utopian revolutionary optimism forward into a period that saw the material emergence of the social force capable of realising the envisaged change, the working class.

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His commitment to revolutionary change was "more than the vague striving after freedom in the abstract," as Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling wrote in 1888. It was a concrete striving that had to find direct political expression.

This is what makes Shelley's response to Peterloo significant. Hearing the "terrible and important news" he wrote, "These are, as it were, the distant thunders of the terrible storm which is approaching. The tyrants here, as in the French Revolution, have first shed blood. May their execrable lessons not be learnt with equal docility!"

He began work immediately on a series of poems and essays, which he intended to be published together. In *The Masque of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester*, he identified Murder with "a mask like Castlereagh," (Lord Castlereagh, the leader of the House of Commons, responsible for defending government policy), Fraud as Lord Eldon, the lord chancellor, and Hypocrisy ("Clothed with the Bible, as with light, / And the shadows of the night") as Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth. The poem's Anarchy is "God, and King, and Law!" Shelley's "Anarchy we are all so afraid of is very present with us," wrote Marx and Aveling, "[A]nd let us add is Capitalism."

Its 91 stanzas are a devastating indictment of Regency Britain and the poem's ringing final words—regularly trotted out by Labour leaders, with current party leader Jeremy Corbyn adapting its last line as his main slogan—still reads magnificently despite all such attempts at neutering:

> And that slaughter to the Nation
> Shall steam up like inspiration,
> Eloquent, oracular;
> A volcano heard afar.
> And these words shall then become
> Like Oppression's thundered doom
> Ringing through each heart and brain,
> Heard again—again—again—
> Rise like Lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number—
> Shake your chains to earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you—
> Ye are many—they are few.

Shelley was not making holiday speeches. The shaking off of chains is found across the Peterloo poems, and Shelley was grappling with how this might be achieved. In the unfinished essay "A Philosophical View of Reform" he tries to understand the sources of political oppression and the obstacles to its removal. There are indications he was moving away from the gradualism of *Queen Mab* —"[S]o dear is power that the tyrants themselves neither then, nor now, nor ever, left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood."

This is a revolutionary appraisal.

Shelley saw the poet's role in that process. In the "Philosophical View," he advanced the position, "Poets and philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." He later incorporated this into "A Defence of Poetry" (1820), explaining, "[A]s the plowman prepares the soil for the seed, so does the poet prepare mind and heart for the reception of new ideas, and thus for change."

The Peterloo poems adopt various popular forms and styles. Addressing a popular audience with his attempt at a revolutionary understanding suggests a sympathetic response to the emergence of the working class as a political force, and the poems are acute on economic relations. As Marx and Aveling said: "… undoubtedly, he knew the real economic value of private property in the means of production and distribution." In *Song to the Men of England* (1819), he asked:

> Men of England, wherefore plough
> For the lords who lay ye low?
> Wherefore weave with toil and care
> Those rich robes your tyrants wear?

Shelley sent the collection to his friend Leigh Hunt's journal, but Hunt did not publish it. Publication would, of course, have inevitably resulted in prosecution, although other publishers were risking that. When Hunt did finally publish *The Mask of Anarchy* in 1832, he justified earlier non-publication by arguing that "the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the spirit that walked in this flaming robe of verse."

Advanced sections of the working class, however, understood the poems as they were intended. Shelley's poetry was read and championed by a different audience than Hunt's radical middle class.

As Friedrich Engels wrote in 1843 to the *Swiss Republican* newspaper: "Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes; no 'respectable' person could have the works of the latter on his desk without his coming into the most terrible disrepute. It remains true: blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and, however long it may take, the kingdom of this earth as well."

The next major upsurge of the British working class, Chartism, drew explicitly on Shelley's inspiration and work. The direct connection between the generation of Peterloo and the Chartists, many of whom were socialists, found a shared voice in the works of Shelley.

Engels continued:

> While the Church of England lived in luxury, the Socialists did an incredible amount to educate the working classes in England. At first one cannot get over one's surprise on hearing in the [Manchester] Hall of Science the most ordinary workers speaking with a clear understanding on political, religious and social affairs; but when one comes across the remarkable popular pamphlets and hears the lecturers of the Socialists, for example [James] Watts in Manchester, one ceases to be surprised. The workers now have good, cheap editions of translations of the French philosophical works of the last century, chiefly Rousseau's *Contrat social*, the *Système de la Nature* and various works by Voltaire, and in addition the exposition of communist principles in penny and twopenny pamphlets and in the journals. The workers also have in their hands cheap editions of the writings of Thomas Paine and Shelley. Furthermore, there are also the Sunday lectures, which are very diligently attended; thus during my stay in Manchester I saw the Communist Hall, which holds about 3,000 people, crowded every Sunday, and I heard there speeches which have a direct effect, which are made from the special viewpoint of the people, and in which witty remarks against the clergy occur. It happens frequently that Christianity is directly attacked and Christians are called 'our enemies.'" (ibid.)

Richard Carlile published *Queen Mab* in the 1820s, and pirated editions produced by workers led to it being called a "bible of Chartism."

Chartist literary criticism provides the most moving and generous testament to Shelley's legacy in the working class. *The Chartist Circular* (October 19, 1839) said Shelley's "noble and benevolent soul… shone forth in its strength and beauty the foremost advocate of Liberty to the despised people," seeing this in directly political terms: "He believed that, sooner or later, a clash between the two classes was inevitable, and, without hesitation, he ranged himself on the people's side."

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Engels was a contributor to the Chartist *Northern Star*, which had a peak circulation of 80,000. In 1847, Thomas Frost wrote in its pages of Shelley as “the representative and exponent of the future… the most highly gifted harbinger of the coming brightness.” Where Walter Scott wrote of the past, and Byron of the present, Shelley “directed his whole thoughts and aspirations towards the future.” Shelley had summed up that revolutionary optimism in *Ode to the West Wind* (1820): “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

Shelley found his champions in the working class, quite rightly, so it is worth concluding with the stanza Frost quoted from *Revolt of Islam* (1817) as a marker of what should be championed in Shelley’s work, and the continued good reasons for reading him today:

> This is the winter of the world;—and here
> We die, even as the winds of Autumn fade,
> Expiring in the frore and foggy air.—
> Behold! Spring comes, though we must pass, who made
> The promise of its birth—even as the shade
> Which from our death, as from a mountain, flings
> The future, a broad sunrise; thus arrayed
> As with the plumes of overshadowing wings,
> From its dark gulf of chains, Earth like an eagle springs.

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