

HYMN
TO
INTELLECTUAL BEAUTY.^[1]
Percy Bysshe Shelley

1.

THE awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats tho' unseen amongst^[2] us,—visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower,—
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,

It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
Like memory of music fled,—
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

2.

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost^[3] consecrate
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
Ask why the sunlight not forever
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river;
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shewn;
Why fear and dream^[4] and death and birth
Cast on the daylight of this earth
Such gloom, why man has such a scope
For love and hate, despondency and hope?

3.

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever
To sage or poet these responses given:
Therefore the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,
Remain the records of their vain endeavour:
Frail spells, whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
From all we hear and all we see.
Doubt, chance, and mutability.
Thy light alone, like mist o'er mountains driven,

Or music by the night wind sent
Thro' strings of some still instrument,

Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

4.^[5]

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds, depart
And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
Man were immortal, and omnipotent,
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.
Thou messenger of sympathies
That wax and wane in lovers'^[6] eyes—
Thou—that to human thought art^[7] nourishment,
Like darkness to a dying flame!
Depart not as thy shadow came,
Depart not—lest the grave should be,
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

5.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Thro' many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed:
I was not heard—I saw them not—
When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
All vital things that wake to bring
News of birds and blossoming,—

Sudden, thy shadow fell on me:
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!^[8]

6.

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers
Of studious zeal or love's^[9] delight
Outwatched with me the envious night—
They know that never joy illumed my brow,
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
This world from its dark slavery,
That thou—O awful LOVELINESS,
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.^[10]

7.

The day becomes more solemn and serene
When noon is past—there is a harmony
In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
Which thro' the summer is not heard or seen,
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!

Thus let thy power, which like the truth
 Of nature on my passive youth
 Descended, to my onward life supply
 Its calm—to one who worships thee,
 And every form containing thee,^[1]
 Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind
 To fear himself, and love all human kind.

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1. ↑ This poem was published in *The Examiner* for 19 January, 1817 (No. 473), having been, as the Editor remarks, "originally announced under the signature of the *Elfin Knight*." In the meantime the authorship had become known to the editor; and the poem was duly signed, on its appearance, with the name PERCY B. SHELLEY. I suspect that Shelley read a proof of this poem before it appeared in *The Examiner*, or else that it was pretty correctly printed from a very careful copy. The punctuation is wholly different in system from that of the version in the *Rosalind and Helen* volume; and, referring to the remark made in a former note (p. 57) as to Peacock's practice of removing the pauses so constantly used by Shelley, it should be observed that this *Hymn*, as printed in *The Examiner*, has no less than twenty-one pauses in it, while the other version has not a single one left, the whole being replaced by more orthodox points. Moreover Shelley was in England when the *Examiner* version appeared, while, from the preface to the *Rosalind* volume, it would seem that he did not even know the *Hymn* was to be in that volume,—so that he is not likely to have prepared that version. On the whole therefore, I think it safer to give the earlier version, which presents no important difference from the other, except in this matter of punctuation, and in the few particulars specified in the following notes. Mrs. Shelley tells us in her note on Poems of 1816 that the *Hymn* "was conceived during his voyage round the Lake [of Geneva] with Lord Byron."
2. ↑ In the version of 1819, *among*, instead of *amongst*,—one point in which that version seems to me preferable to the other,—more Shelley-like in instinct for sound.
3. ↑ In *The Examiner*, *dost*; but *dothin* the *Rosalind and Helen* volume.
4. ↑ Mr. Garnett tells me an interesting MS. variation in this line,—*care and pain for fear and dream*,—is shewn by Sir Percy Shelley's MS.
5. ↑ Mr. Garnett tells me this stanza is not in the original draft.
6. ↑ In both the *Examiner* version and that of 1819, this word is *lover's* instead of *lovers'*.
7. ↑ In the *Rosalind and Helen* version, we read *are* for *art*.
8. ↑ Spelt *extacy* in both versions.
9. ↑ We read *loves* instead of *love's*, both in the version printed in *The Examiner*, and in that published with *Rosalind and Helen*.
10. ↑ There can be but little doubt that these two stanzas (5 and 6) have reference to the same awakening of Shelley's spirit to its sublime mission, referred to in another passage of like autobiographic value, namely stanzas 3, 4, and 5 of the Dedication to *Leon and Cythna* (pp. 102 and 103). In a note on those stanzas the question whether the awakening was at Eton or at Brentford is referred to; and whichever be the correct version as to period and locality in that case is also correct as to this. The passage in Sir John Rennie's Autobiography alluded to there seems to me to correspond still more strikingly with these two stanzas of the *Hymn* than with the version of the same spiritual situation in the Dedication; and I have therefore reserved the following extract from the Autobiography as more fitting to be given here than there:—"During the time that I was there the most remarkable scholar was the celebrated poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was then about twelve or thirteen (as far as I can remember), and even at that early age exhibited considerable poetical talent, accompanied by a violent and extremely excitable temper, which manifested itself in all kinds of eccentricities. ...His imagination was always roving upon something romantic and extraordinary, such as spirits, fairies, fighting, volcanoes, &c., and he not unfrequently astonished his schoolfellows by blowing up the boundary palings of the playground with gunpowder, also the lid of his desk in the middle of schooltime, to the great surprise of Dr. Greenlaw himself and the whole school. In fact, at times he was considered to be almost upon the borders of insanity; yet with all this, when treated with kindness, he was very amiable, noble, high-spirited, and generous; he used to write verse, English and Latin, with considerable facility, and attained a high position in the school before he left for Eton where I understand, he was equally, if not more, extraordinary and eccentric." In reading this beside the two stanzas in the *Hymn*, allowance must of course be made for the difference between a poet's conception of incidents in his sensitive and persecuted boyhood, and another man's conception of those same incidents as seen by a schoolfellow, who probably, like most of the schoolfellows that any of us can recall, would have no sympathy whatever with a boy like Shelley. The dryly recorded fact that he wrote "verse, English and Latin, with considerable facility," is probably the best corroborative evidence we can get of that vowed service to the spirit of Intellectual Beauty recorded by the poet in the words

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
 To thee and thine.

11. ↑ The repetition here of the word *thee*, instead of finding a rhyme, is highly significant of deliberate intention, and certainly tends to confirm the view expressed in some of the notes on analogous and similar instances throughout *Laon and Cythna*, that it is not safe to regard such cases as "metric irregularities." In this case there could have been no possible difficulty (as there sometimes would be in the complex stanzas of *Laon and Cythna*); and I should look upon it as almost certain that here, at all events, the repetition of the word was well considered with regard to effect.