Timothy Webb

THE VIOLET IN THE CRUCIBLE: SHELLEY'S THEORY OF TRANSLATION

I

A successful translator must be not only an able writer but a master of several languages. In the accounts which his friends have left us, Shelley appears as an eager and natural linguist. One of his school-friends has recorded the ease with which he produced Latin compositions,[1] and Jefferson Hogg, who knew him at Oxford, tells us that he would pick up a passage of Livy or Sallust and transform it to verse on the spot, mostly by altering the order of the words.[2] As early as 1810 he asked his bookseller for a Hebrew essay on the falseness of Christianity, translated into Greek, Latin, or any European language.[3] In 1810 he ordered Kant in Latin and a long list of Greek authors with translations either in Latin or in English.[4] According to Jefferson Hogg, he was always reading classical authors, and he read the text straightforward for hours, if not as readily as an English author, at least with as much facility as French, Italian, or Spanish.[5] Thus it is evident that from an early age he was multilingual and that he thought of his languages as functional, not as mere academic ornaments.

This ability to read or think in several languages was later to become even more noticeable. In 1816 Shelley negotiated with a publisher at Geneva on the possibility of his turning Godwin's *Political Justice* into French.[6] In 1821 he translated portions of his own *Prometheus Unbound* into Italian for the captive Emilia Viviani. By the time of his death he had already made translations from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and German and had planned to learn Arabic. The fluency of his oral translation was a wonder to his friends. For Lord Byron he sometimes translated orally-occasionally

---

[1] W. S. Halliday cited in *Life,* i. 42.
[2] *Life,* i. 133-4. The story is repeated by Medwin, who probably got it from Hogg.
[3] *Letters,*i. 18-19.
[4] Ibid. i. 341-2, 344.
[5] *Life,* i. 86.
[6] Letters, i. 512.

portions of *Faust,* 'to... impregnate Byron's brain',[7] and in 1816 the whole of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound.* This had such an effect that Byron composed his poem 'Prometheus' shortly after and later declared that *Prometheus* was at the back of almost everything he had written.[8] Shelley also translated *Prometheus* for his cousin in 1821-2. Medwin described him '...reading it as fluently as if written in French or Italian; and if there be any merit in my own version...it is much due to the recollection of his words, which often flowed on line after line in blank verse, into which very harmonious prose resolves itself naturally'.[9] On another occasion Medwin claims that he challenged Shelley to render Plato's epigram on Aster. Shelley 'took up the pen and improvised' a version suspiciously like the one which appears in the *Poetical Works.*[10] The story as it stands is unlikely to be true since the manuscript shows that Shelley had considerable trouble with this short translation which required three laborious drafts before he could piece it together. However, the significant point is that Medwin could believe that Shelley was able to translate in this way; presumably he was present on other occasions when Shelley made spontaneous translations. When the dashing Edward Trelawny first met Shelley, he too was impressed by Shelley's flow of words in an impromptu rendering of Calderón: 'The masterly manner in which he analyzed the genius of the author, his lucid interpretation of the story, and the ease with which he translated into our language the most subtle and imaginative passages of the Spanish poet, were marvellous, as was his command of the two languages.'[11] Trelawny also records Shelley's habit of making Greek puns at which he 'shrieked with laughter'.[12] At much the same time, Shelley made a similar impression on the young Thornton Hunt: 'I can recall his reading from an ancient author, translating as he went, a passage about the making of the first man; and I remember it from the subject and from the easy flow of his translation, but chiefly from the air of strength and cheerfulness which I noticed in his voice and manner.'[13] From these reminiscences we can see that Shelley's linguistic ability and the fluency of his oral translations made a remarkable impact on those around him. We can also see that he was in the habit of

[7] Cf. Medwin, *Life,* p. 161. See p. 145 below.
[8] *Letters and Journals,* 1898-1901, iv. 174-5.
[9] Medwin, *Life,* pp. 242-3.
[10] Ibid., pp. 349-50.
[11] *Recollections,* p. 172.
[12] Ibid., p. 203.
[13] 'Shelley' [by one who knew him], *Atlantic Monthly,* xi, 1863, pp. 191-2.

translating informally.

Another sign of Shelley's linguistic ability was his scorn for grammars and dictionaries. He preferred to learn a language by reading books and resorted to grammars only when absolutely necessary. In this way, says Medwin, he learnt Italian and Spanish.[14] Hogg corroborates:

> Bysshe, a king in intellect, had always at his command a short and royal road to knowledge. It seemed to a superficial observer, that he rejected and despised the grammar and the dictionary, and all the ordinary aids of a student; this to a certain extent was the case, but to a certain extent only; he was impatient of such tardy methods of progression; nevertheless he sometimes availed himself of them, and when he condescended to be taught, like a mere mortal, which assuredly he was not, his eagle glance, his comprehensive grasp, his inconceivable quickness, and miraculous powers and faculty of apprehension, enabled him to seize and to master in minutes what his less highly gifted fellow-learners acquired in hours, or days, or weeks.[15]

The evidence of Shelley's own letters supports these statements. In 1813 he was coaching Harriet in Latin: 'I do not teach her grammatically, but by the less laborious method of teaching her the English of Latin words, intending afterwards to give her a general idea of grammar.'[16] In 1818 he wrote from Italy, 'I have...made some Italian book my companion from my [desire] to learn the language, so as to speak it.'[17] Jefferson Hogg made some efforts to persuade him to use Scapula's Greek Lexicon:

> I do not hold that the turning over of dry brown mouldering leaves can teach the antient languages, for if that were so the autumnal wind would before the 8th of Nov. have become an admirable linguist; nor that if we can find the meaning entire in the translation we ought to seek it piecemeal in the Lexicon, but I maintain that the meaning cannot be found in the translation. I do not deny that the rude meaning of Homer might be learnt from Clarke's translation, as for instance that Achilles slew Hector, or even

[14] Medwin, *Life*, p. 351.
[15] *Life*, ii. 61-2.
[16] Letters, i. 353.

> enough to show that the Iliad is the most sublime production the world ever saw. I deny that the exact, full & just meaning can be learnt from a translation. In works of art 'il poco piu e il poco meno' constitute the merit. If a sheet of paper were carefully glued over a statue, or if the thickness of a sheet of paper were uniformly scraped off the surface, enough might remain to prove it an admirable work, yet the delicate, the exquisite, the 'Phidiacum' would perish, or even if they survived, the most delicate, the most exquisite, the 'Phidiacissimum' would be no more. So with languages: the Translator attends to general effect and is sometimes careless. Suppose him most diligent in every particular, the Latin demands an attention to style. Suppose it literal. It must at least be grammatical. The difference of idiom interposes, but the Lexicon exchanges one word at a time for another. But even suppose an intelligible translation as literal as the Lexicon, a small point only is gained. [18]

This letter is worth quoting at length because, as we shall see later, it contains a number of concepts central to Shelley's theory of translation. Shelley was not to be tempted into acquiring a lexicon; he replied to Hogg in a fine image:

> I am at this moment not very classically employed, nor have I summoned courage to accept Scapula 'as my mentor and guide thro' the bowers of Greek delight.
>
> Might I not, by a confidence in Scapula, lose the end while busied about the means; and exchange the embraces of a living and tangible Calypso for the image of a Penelope, who, though wise, can never again be young.[19]

Only in the excusably difficult cases of German and Arabic did he send for grammars and dictionaries.

A passage in the *Defence of Poetry* may help to explain this feeling. In discussing the early stages of society Shelley remarks that every language near to its source is in

---

[17] Ibid. ii. 15.

[18] *N.S.L.*, pp. 103-4. Cf. Cowper's image, 'The venerable Grecian is as much the worse for his new acquisitions of this kind, as a statue by Phidias, or Praxiteles would be for the painter's brush.' *The Gentleman's Magazine*, lv, 27 July 1785, p.611.

[19] *Letters*, i. 569.

itself the chaos of a cyclic poem; lexicography elaborates on these simple forms and grammar distinguishes them, but these are 'the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of poetry'.[20] Shelley believed that the reality of a language cannot be learnt from a set of rules, which can never be more than a skeleton. To study the rules would be to lose spontaneity, to destroy the 'unpremeditated' quality of language. He elaborates his reasons in another passage in the *Defence of Poetry* :

> A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons, and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry; and the choruses of Aeschylus, and the Book of Job, and Dante's Paradise, would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact...The creations of sculpture, painting, and music are illustrations still more decisive.[21]

The passage is somewhat hyperbolical. We must allow for the fieriness of Shelley's own spirit. Poetry without *any* grammatical distinctions would be unintelligible, but Shelley is thinking of poetry as an expression of beauty and of the transcendent realities. Such feelings can be conveyed by a minimum of grammatical effects, and they can, of course, be conveyed by arts such as music and sculpture which, although they have their own limitations, do not recognize the grammatical restrictions of language. Classical Chinese poetry, in which the functions of person, tense, and gender are negligible, is perhaps the nearest one can get to Shelley's ideal in language. What Shelley probably also had in mind was that great art should not be limited in its application. Thus, much of the work of Pliny the Elder has one application limited in time and space, but the choruses of Aeschylus or the Book of Job are largely symbolic and universal in their application. This would explain Shelley's statement about music, painting, and sculpture. The subject of a classical Greek statue, for instance, was once a living man, but the statue represents more than a particular man at a particular time. It represents Man. The Apollo Belvedere is not

[20] *Defence,* p. 26.
[21] *Defence,* p. 27.

just a youth, but Youth. This desire for universality in art may perhaps help to explain the lack of definition in Shelley's poetry which has angered so many of his critics.

This notion probably owes something to Godwin who had written in *The Enquirer* that one could learn more of the philosophy of language from Virgil and Horace than from a thousand books on grammar.[22] The same point was made by Felton in his *Dissertation on Reading the Classics,* a book which was included in Shelley's library.[23]

Shelley had little time for scholarship or pedantry. As Hogg says, although Shelley had read more Greek than many an aged pedant, he did not enter into the minutest critical niceties.[24] This impatience with scholars may in part have been due to the treatment he received from them at Oxford; it also owed much to the ideas of his friends, especially of Hogg and Peacock. Although Peacock was himself a considerable scholar, his views were not very different from those of the character Desmond in his novel *Melincourt:*

> I delighted in the poets of Greece and Rome, but I thought that the *igneus vigor et coelestis origo* of their conceptions and expressions was often utterly lost sight of, in the microscopic inspection of philological minutiae. I studied Greek, as the means of understanding Homer and Aeschylus: I did not look on them as mere secondary instruments to the attainment of a knowledge of their language.[25]

This impatience with scholars probably stemmed from the fact that they knew little or nothing of such favourite authors as Plato, Apuleius, or Nonnus. For Peacock, as for Shelley, Greek literature was not a storehouse of grammatical peculiarities, but almost a way of life. Shelley makes fun of the learned glosses of the scholiasts in a note to *Peter Bell the Third,* in which he comments on the words, 'And a polygamic Potter': 'The oldest

---

[22] 'Of the Study of the Classics', The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature, '797, p. 46.

[23] 'I am of Opinion, that Language may be attained by the Reverse of the Method that is generally taken, and a Youth taught to know Grammar by Books, instead of Books by Grammar.' Henry Felton, *A Dissertation on Reading the Classics and Forming a Just Style* [1713], 5th ed., 1753, pp. 39-40. For Shelley's possession of this book see autographed copy mentioned in *An Account of an Exhibition of Books and Manuscripts of Percy Bysshe Shelley: with something of their Literary History their Present Condition and their Provenance,* Austin, Texas, 1935, p. 39.

[24] *Life,* i. 86.

scholiasts read - A *dodecagamic* Potter. This is at once more descriptive and more megalophonous, - but the alliteration of the text had captivated the vulgar ear of the herd of later commentators.'[26] In fact, Shelley did not entirely ignore variant readings, but more often than not he employed editions in which the textual apparatus was reduced to a minimum. So that when it came to translation, he would not have agreed with the Earl of Roscommon's dictum :

> Take pains the *genuine* Meaning to explore,
> There *Sweat*, there *Strain*, tug the laborious *Oar*.
> Search *ev'ry Comment* that your Care can find,
> Some here, some there may hit the Poets *Mind*.[27]

This was exactly what the cautious William Cowper had done for his version of Homer and what Abraham Hayward was later to do for Goethe. Shelley was not in sympathy with this approach to the problem. Nor would he have approved George Chapman's practice of reading the scholiasts and then writing the most convincing of their glosses into the poem itself. For Shelley all these activities were near to the 'owl-eyed faculty of calculation' which dares not soar to the eternal regions from which poetry brings us light and fire.

It is only fair to remember that, living abroad, he would have found it hard to indulge a taste for the minutest critical niceties, even had he wished to do so. In fact, we know that Shelley sometimes did consult others when he was translating. For example, he consulted Hogg on the meaning of certain passages in Buffon[28] and collaborated with Mary on a version of Spinoza.[29] But this is uncharacteristic. More typical was the Shelley who wrote in a note to his translation of Euripides' *Cyclops:* 'I confess I do not understand this'[30] and did not bother to find out the meaning later. This was the Shelley

---

[25] Peacock, *Works*, ii. 132.
[26] 1.36.
[27] 'An Essay on Translated Verse' [1684], *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century,* ed. J. E. Spingarn, 3 vols., Oxford University Press, 1957, ii. 302, 11. 21-4.
[28] 'With one passage of the writer last-named [Buffon], Shelley was charmed; he translated it carefully, and, as I thought, elegantly and eloquently. We went over it patiently together, and he consulted me as to the meaning of certain passages.' *Life*,i. 263.
[29] *Journal,* pp. 130-2, 134.
[30] 1. 390.

who, stuck for a word and impatient to follow out his inspiration, often left a gap in the manuscript which he later omitted to fill in. His work as translator was often subject to the same impatience. According to Notopoulos, many of the errors in his version of Plato's *Symposium* are due to the fact that he did not consult the original with sufficient care, but often used an intermediate version to help him over difficult passages.[31]

Even if Shelley did not believe in scholarship, he did believe in the value of a comparative study of languages. According to Medwin:

> Shelley used to say that 'in interpreting a foreign tongue, it was a great mutual advantage to know several; for that hence synonymes, which failed in one, could be found in another;' and thus he would often give the exact meaning of a word in Italian, or Spanish, or Latin, or still more frequently in Greek, which he found the best medium as regarded the *Paradise Lost*…[32]

Obviously he was aware that to read and understand a book in our own language is, in a sense, to translate it, because reading involves transplanting the thoughts of another into our own mind. It requires imaginative sympathy. Probably he would have agreed with Emerson's belief that next in accomplishment to writing a great book is reading one.[33] He was also well aware that quite often there is no exact synonym between language and language, a point which had been discussed in the correspondence with Hogg about the 'interesting Scapula'.

The value of comparing language with language may have been brought home to him through the influence of William Godwin. In one of the essays in his *Enquirer* Godwin had underlined the intellectual value of the classics and especially of Latin.[34] Without language, said Godwin, one cannot communicate. The Romans were masters *of* communication and by studying their language we may acquire something of their power over language. Since Latin is an inflected language, we must exert ourselves to understand it and so may learn something of the philosophy of language. But Godwin does not recommend the use of grammars; the works of Virgil and Horace will teach us

---

[31] The Platonism of Shelley, pp. 390 ff.
[32] Medwin, *Life*, p. 263.
[33] Cf. Godwin's remark '...the study of other men's writings is strikingly analogous to the invention and arrangement of our own'. *The Enquirer*, p. 360.
[34] 'Of the Study of the Classics', *The Enquirer*, pp. 36 ff.

more about the philosophy of language than a thousand books on grammar. Finally, the power over words acquired by a study of Latin will help us to express ourselves forcibly, as it helped most of the great English writers. To express ideas one requires words and a study of languages gives us the power over words necessary to express these ideas.

> But it is perhaps impossible to understand one language, unless we are acquainted with more than one. It is by comparison only that we can enter into the philosophy of language...It is by collating one language with another, that we detect all the shades of meaning through the various inflections of words, and all the minute degradations of sense which the same word suffers, as it shall happen to be connected with different topics. He that is acquainted with only one language, will probably always remain in some degree the slave of language...[In contrast is the man who knows more than one language.] Language is not his master, but he is the master of language. Things hold their just order in his mind, ideas first, and then words. Words therefore are used by him as the means of communicating or giving permanence to his sentiments; and the whole magazine of his native tongue is subjected at his feet.[35]

Translations are never sufficient. They do not represent the graces of the original and they deprive us of the salutary linguistic exercise.

To Shelley, who was deeply concerned with the problems of communication, this passage on the power of words must have been an alluring one. All the same, he saw some flaws in the argument. In a letter to Godwin he pointed out that words are dangerous for the young, because they are signs for ideas and the young should be masters of ideas *before* they are masters of words.[36] Of Latin as a grammar he thought highly, but concluded: 'I cannot help considering it, as an affair of minor importance, inasmuch as the science of things is superior to the science of words.'[37] None the less, if we are to believe Medwin, Shelley did come round to the Godwinian view that one can only understand one language by means of another. Thus, he may have seen translation as, among other things, a means of becoming better acquainted with his own language

[35] *The Enquirer*, p. 43.
[36] *Letters*, i. 317.
[37] Ibid. i. 318.

and of learning to use it better.

There was a radical change in Shelley's outlook on literature between 1812 when he wrote this letter to Godwin and 1821 when he wrote the *Defence of Poetry* and eloquently acknowledged the vanity of translation. This change of view is very important for an understanding of Shelley as poet and as translator.[38] Shelley the political rebel began by thinking of literature almost solely as a channel for conveying ideas moral or political. Literary grace was irrelevant. As time went on and his political plans continued to fail, he began to take a greater interest in literature as literature. The science of words became increasingly important to him. In this shift of emphasis, the influence of his friends Hogg, Peacock, and Leigh Hunt was probably very important. Hogg and Peacock had no direct concern with politics, but both were the cultivators of aesthetic sensibilities. We have seen already Hogg's letter to Shelley on the inadequacy of translation as a conveyor of literary nuances; the whole tone of that letter indicates a greater concern for the delicacies of literature than for its use as a blunt instrument of propaganda. These ideas must have had some impact; so, presumably, did the refined literary taste of Leigh Hunt. In spite of his trenchant political journalism, Hunt was an enthusiastic exponent of *belles lettres,* a writer supremely concerned with refinements which were purely aesthetic.

If we examine the list of works which Shelley translated, we can observe this change of attitude gradually taking place. Shelley began by translating authors who are valuable for their ideas and whose styles are usually less important than what they have to say: Buffon, Aristotle, and Pliny the Elder.[39] Pliny was a particular favourite and, if Medwin can be believed, Shelley devoted much of his time to translating parts of the *Natural History:*

> He proved himself also an excellent Latin scholar, by translating in his leisure hours, several books of Pliny the Elder, 'the enlightened and benevolent', as he styled him, that Encyclopaedist whose works he greatly admired, and whose chapter *De Deo* was the first germ of his ideas respecting the Nature of God. Shelley had intended to make a complete

[38] For a more complete discussion see my article, 'Public Shelley and Private Percy', *Approach Magazine,* i, June 1967, pp. 18-29.

[39] For Buffon see p. 20. The translation is not extant. For Aristotle see *Shelley and his Circle: 1773-1822,* vol. ii, ed. K. N. Cameron, 1961, pp. 659-67. See also p. 30 below.

> version of his Natural History, but stopped short at the chapters on Astronomy...[In spite of the difficulties Medwin himself experienced] Shelley's MS.-and what a MS! what a tree, splendid hand he wrote-was almost pure.[40]

(By a strange coincidence this very chapter *De Deo* is quoted and discussed in a scene from Calderón's *El Mágico Prodigioso* which Shelley was to translate many years later.) There was also Plutarch, whose two essays Περὶ τῆς σαρκοφαγίας (On the eating of flesh) were important to the vegetarian cause.[41] It is noticeable that all of these are prose writers and that few people study Aristotle or Pliny for the blandishments of their style. Soon he turned his hand to the epigrams of Moschus, poems which are notable more for their literary charms than for their moral profundity. From about 1817 philosophers more or less disappear and almost all the translations are from major poets: Euripides, Homer, Dante, Goethe, Calderón. It would be wrong to pretend that Shelley was not interested in the ideas of these great figures European literature: Euripides' treatment of religion in *The Cyclops* and Goethe's and Calderón's handling of the Devil must have been important to him. But there has been an important change of focus. Before, Shelley had looked to the ideas first and left the style to take care of itself; now he was excited by poets whose achievement was based on their undeniable greatness as masters of a literary medium and towards whose ideas he was attracted by their power over words rather than by the irrefutable patterns of their logic.

The one genuine philosopher who continued to demand translation was Plato and Plato, as Shelley declares, 'was essentially a poet - the truth and splendour of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive'.[42] It is clear that Shelley was drawn to Plato's work as much by his poetry as by his philosophy.

This switch from translating works admired for their ideas to translating works admired for their literary graces explains the apparent contradiction between the Shelley who claimed to be interested in the science of things, not words, and the Shelley who spoke of the violet in the crucible.[43] So long as Shelley was concerned with

---

[40] Medwin, *Life,* p. 37.
[41] *Letters,* i. 380. Shelley quotes a long passage in the Notes to *Queen Mab.* This passage is repeated as a footnote to the passage on vegetarianism in *A Refutation of Deism,* 1813.
[42] *Defence,* p. 29.
[43] Ibid. For the full quotation see below. p. 26.

communicating facts or ideas, translation was a perfectly adequate process. But the attempt to transmute poetry from one language to another is inevitably doomed to failure. This notion that poetry cannot be transferred from one language to another is closely linked to Shelley's belief that poetry was essentially as organic and natural as a flower. The particular beauty of a given flower cannot be recreated-it can only be imitated. The identity of a poem cannot be reproduced; as John Keble remarked, the translator must resort to analogy since the truths of poetry and the truths of history are radically different.

> The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it. A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. [44]

The truths of poetry can never be translated. To put it in the words of Robert Frost: poetry 'is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation'.[45] In his later years Shelley constantly spoke of the inadequacy of translations. For example, he was daunted by Goethe's *Faust* and was not satisfied with his own version of scenes from the play: '...I feel how imperfect a representation, even with all the licence I assume to figure to myself how Goethe wd. have written in English, my words convey.'[46] Indeed, he was so displeased with his version of the first twenty-eight lines that he also provided a literal prose translation and the following note: '...it is impossible to represent in another language the melody of the versification; even the volatile strength and delicacy of the ideas escape in the crucible of translation, and the reader is surprised to find a *caput*

[44] *Defence,* pp. go-I.
[45] *Interviews with Robert Frost,* ed. E. C. Latham, Cape, 1967, p. 203.
[46] *Letters,* ii. 407.

mortuum.'[47] He had read a recent English translation, published with etchings by Moritz Retzsch: 'What etchings those are! I am never satiated with looking at them, & I fear it is the only sort of translation of which Faust is susceptible - '.[48] Shelley recognizes that any effort to translate language into language is a compromise and can never be completely successful. Often a narrow adherence to the words of the original leads to a misrepresentation of its essential spirit. The inner meaning is evanescent and cannot be trapped in the net of words. By choosing a different medium, Moritz Retzsch had avoided the dangers of literalness, while recreating the spirit of the original. But the etchings are themselves a new creation inspired by Goethe's *Faust;* not the work of Goethe but an attempt to recreate the feelings produced by a reading of his work. A translation into another medium is therefore as valid as a translation from poetic form in one language into poetic form in another. Both actions require a dislocation of the original form since the poem can never be reproduced in its identity, in its essential isness. The inscape of the original admits of only one existence. The point is made by Borges's fable of a man translating *Don Q,uixote* into Spanish, sentence by sentence and word by word. This in effect is the only form of translation which is completely true to the original. Shelley expressed this very beautifully in the *Defence of Poetry* :

> Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thought. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower-and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.[49]

---

[47] *P. W.,* p. 749. The *caput mortuum* is the worthless residue left from an alchemical experiment.

[48] *Letters,* ii. 407.

[49] pp. 28-9.

We are reminded of his note to *Faust;* we are also reminded of a celebrated passage from Sir John Denham on the impossibility of making a literal translation: 'Poesie is of so subtile a spirit, that in pouring out of one Language into another, it will all evaporate; and if a new spirit be not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a *Caput mortuum,* there being certain Graces and Happinesses peculiar to every Language, which give life and energy to the words...'[50] Only a poet has the powers necessary to achieve the miracle of recreation. As Denham put it on another occasion: 'Nor ought a genius less than his that writ, / Attempt translation' because 'nothing can beget / A vital spirit, but a vital heat'.[51] Shelley was saying exactly the same in the words recorded by Medwin: 'There is no greater mistake than to suppose...that the knowledge of a language is all that is required in a translator. He must be a poet, and as great a one as his original, in order to do justice to him.'[52]

Of course, Shelley is thinking of translation in terms of its highest literary aspirations which aim at reproducing in one language the effect produced by combinations of words in another. He is not concerned with the mere transmission of facts:

> Facts are not what we want to know in poetry, in history, in the lives of individual men, in satire, or panegyric. They are the mere divisions, the arbitrary points on which we hang, and to which we refer those delicate and evanescent hues of mind, which language delights and instructs us in precise proportion as it expresses. What is a translation of Homer into English? A person who is ignorant of Greek need only look at 'Paradise Lost', or the tragedy of 'Lear' translated into French, to obtain an analogical conception of its worthless and miserable inadequacy. Tacitus, or Livius, or Herodotus, are equally undelightful and uninstructive in translation. [53]

Obviously facts *can* be transmitted by a competent translator - for example, the sequence of events in the *Odyssey,* or the history of the founding of Rome in Livy. What cannot be communicated is the combination of facts and the words in which they are described, the

[50] Preface to 'The Destruction of Troy', *Poetical Works,* ed. T. H. Banks, New Haven and London, 1928, p. 159.
[51] 'To Sir Richard Fanshaw upon his Translation of Pastor Fido', II. 9-10, 13-14.
[52] Medwin, *Life,* p. 385.
[53] *Letters,* ii. 277-8.

essential *quidditas* of an author. If, as Buffon claimed, the style is the man, then a translation must fail to present the man. To a poet such as Shelley, this loss in translation, inevitable though it must be, invalidates the whole process of translation. But it is obvious that in saying this, Shelley is thinking not of the effect on the translator himself but of the effect on potential readers. As Medwin tells us: 'Another of the canons of Shelley, was, that translations are intended for those who do not understand the originals, and that they should be purely English.'[54] For readers such as these the effect produced by a translation will obviously be different from the effect experienced by those who can read the original. In respect of an exact reproduction for the use of others, translation is therefore a failure.

Shelley's idea that no translator could adequately transmute another's poetry into his own may owe a good deal to Plato. For Plato the world of visible forms is but a shadow of the reality, the world of ideal forms. Art, which takes as its objects the forms of the visible world, is thus an imitation of an imitation. It follows that translation is at yet another remove from reality. Shelley was aware of the Platonic objections to poetry; his *Defence of Poetry* was as much a reply to Plato as to Peacock. But if Shelley defended poetry because, like Plotinus, he felt that it alone could penetrate to the underlying realities, he must also have felt that most translations could only fail to achieve this. Poetry, says Shelley, 'strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms'.[55] But translation works in a manner exactly opposite to that of poetry. In a letter of November 1819, to Leigh Hunt, Shelley describes how he has been tempted to translate: '...the Greek plays, and some of the ideal dramas of Calderón...are perpetually tempting me to throw over their perfect and glowing forms the grey veil of my own words'.[56] Medwin also mentions a plan which Shelley had of 'dedicating his time to throwing the grey veil of his own words...over the perfect and glowing forms of other writers'.[57] It is quite possible that Medwin had read the letter previously quoted but it is also possible that this, or something like it, was a phrase employed by Shelley on more than one occasion to express his feelings about translation. The Platonic implications are clear. The veil is a Platonic symbol often employed by

[54] Medwin, *Life*, p. 246.
[55] *Defence*, p. 56.
[56] *Letters*, ii. 153.
[57] Medwin, *Life*, p. 249.

Shelley to signify the way in which the appearances of life conceal the eternal realities, or Forms. 'The perfect and glowing forms' reads very like a description of the eternal Forms, in this case the original poem. Shelley's image here comes fairly close to the image selected by Hogg in his long letter on Scapula, in which he compared the effect of translation to glueing a sheet of paper over a statue.[58]

Another Platonic symbol occurs in his deprecatory preface to his version of Plato's *Symposium:* 'He [the translator] despairs of having communicated to the English language any portion of the surpassing graces of the composition, or having done more than present an imperfect shadow of the language and the sentiment of this astonishing production.'[59] The shadow is a common Platonic symbol, occurring for example in the Myth of the Cave; a shadow expresses only a small and deceptive part of the reality of that which it seems to represent. Just like the veil, it is used by Shelley to indicate that a translation can only be an imperfect representation of the original.

Such were Shelley's reflections on the difficulties and inadequacies of the process of translation.

II

Why then did Shelley bother to translate? Naturally, there is no simple answer. One can suggest a number of possible motives, some of which may always have been operative, others only at certain periods of his life. First, there was the natural desire felt by many poets and men of letters to test their skill by translating. Since the age of Cowley, translation had been commonly regarded as a polite accomplishment at which the gentleman poet would try his hand as an amusing exercise. In Shelley's own case this interest may have been fostered by his classical education. We know that he was set passages for Latin composition both at school and at Oxford. At school, it is recorded that he had to compose two lines of Latin elegiac verse on the subject of 'Tempestas',[60] and we actually possess a short (and unimpressive) verse exercise addressed to a watch,

---

[58] *N.S.L.*, pp. 103-4. Cf. 'You may give the meaning, but the charm, the simplicity, - is lost. You might as well clothe a statue, as attempt to translate Dante.
He is better, as an Italian said, "nuda che vestito".' *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. E. J. Lovell Jr., Princeton, N.J., 1966, p. 160.

[59] Notopoulos, The Platonism of Shelley, p. 402.

which presumably dates from this period.[61] At Oxford, he had weekly Latin exercises, which usually involved translating passages from the *Spectator*.[62] For anyone trained in this English classical tradition, the practice of translating to or from English soon became quite natural. Other English poets showed traces of the same training: John Keats translated the *Aeneid* into prose while still at school,[63] Leigh Hunt produced many translations from the classics at an early age,[64] and H. F. Cary and his school-friends planned a translation of the *Corpus Poetarum Graecorum*.[65] It was probably the same background which inspired the far from scholarly Byron to his early versions from the Greek.

After the school influence had faded, Byron did little more translating from the classics, while for Shelley it became increasingly important. At first, this was because of the ideas contained in the works he chose to translate. Whether he ultimately hoped to publish these translations is not certain, but the young Shelley was terribly earnest in his efforts to communicate ideas; one has only to remember his bottles in the Bristol Channel, his air balloons, his distribution of pamphlets in Dublin. The ideas may also have been important to his own mental development. For example, his translation from Aristotle's *Ethics* (about three-quarters of Chapter Eight of Book Nine) which was probably made during the winter of 1810-11 may have been assigned in the first place as an exercise by his Oxford tutor but it also related very closely to his own current concern with the problems of virtue, self-love, and friendship.[66] Plutarch's essays on meat-eating and Pliny's denial of the existence of God would have provided influential support at a difficult time. Yet it seems more likely that he intended to publish these works in whole or in part to substantiate the charges he was variously making against carnivores and against Christianity. He could understand them well enough in the original and there seems to be no motive for translation if not to create a means for spreading their respective messages. As we have noticed before, the attraction of literary graces was, at

---

[60] Medwin, *Life*, p. 21.
[61] *R. W.*, p. 839.
[62] *Life*, i. 134.
[63] W. J. Bate, *John Keats*, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 26.
[64] Louis Landre, Leigh Hunt (1784-1859): Contribution a l'histoire du romantisme anglais, Paris, 1935-6, ii. 212.
[65] R. W. King, *The Translator of Dante*, 1925, p. 19.
[66] *Shelley and his Circle*, ii. 659-67.

this period, strictly negligible. The young Shelley had openly declared with a fine puritanical zeal that his interest was in things and not in words.

This practice of translating for the purposes of disseminating ideas was continued by Shelley on and off till his death, although, as we have seen, the balance of his interest had tilted from the ideas themselves towards their literary embodiment, somewhere around 1817-18. In 1813 he completed a work 'on the Perfectibility of the Human Species'. This may well have been d'Holbach's *System of Nature,* which he was 'about translating' in August 1812.[67] In 1816 he was negotiating with a publisher in Geneva to translate Godwin's *Political Justice* (presumably into French).[68] At various times between 1817 and 1821 he attempted to translate Spinoza. He began in October 1817, then apparently dropped the idea till 1820 when Mary started to translate it on her own. This soon became a joint effort which lasted sporadically for several months. In November 1821 he took up the task again. From Edwards Williams we know that it was the *Tractatus* which he was working on, though unfortunately only a few pages are extant.[69] In each case, the appeal of the ideas to Shelley is obvious: the materialism of d'Holbach whose book he described as 'one of the most eloquent vindications of Atheism',[70] the political optimism of Godwin, and Spinoza's attacks on superstition, prophecy, and miracles. In each case, Shelley must have been thinking of the beneficial effect which these ideas might have on the reading public.

Perhaps the clearest example is his attempt to spread the gospel of Plato. Of Plato's works, Shelley translated in full the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium* and passages from the *Ion, Menexenus, Republic,* and *Crito.*[71] Plato was at that time more or less ignored by the universities and the reading public. Writing in 1818 Peacock remarks, 'he certainly wants patronage in these days, when philosophy sleeps and classical literature seems destined to

[67] *Life,* ii. 21; *Letters,* i. 325.
[68] *Letters,* i. 512.
[69] *Works,* vii. 272-4. See *Journal,* pp. 85, 127-8, 130-2, 134, 161, and *Gisborne and Williams,* pp. 1 I 1-12.
[70] Clark, *Prose,* p. 135 n.
[71] The *Phaedo* was probably translated in September/November 1820 (Notopoulos, *Platonism,* p. 514). For texts of the other translations see *Platonism,* pp. 414-60; 468-81, 482; 487-9; 495-501; 504, and Notopoulos, 'New Texts of Shelley's Plato', *K.-S.J.* xv, 1966, pp. 99-115.

participate in its repose',[72] and three years later Hogg was to say, 'Plato is unfortunately little read, even by scholars'.[73] The reason for this neglect is suggested by Dr. Folliott in Peacock's *Crotchet Castle:*

> I am aware, sir, that Plato in his Symposium discourseth very eloquently touching the Uranian and Pandemian Venus: but you must remember that, in our Universities, Plato is held to be little better than a misleader of youth; and they have shown their contempt for him, not only by never reading him...but even by never printing a complete edition of him.[74]

Shelley believed that this was due to a narrow view of homosexuality, a subject which is central to Plato's work. Indeed, he produced an introductory essay to his translation of the *Symposium,* the purpose of which was 'to induce the reader to cast off the cloak of his self-flattering prejudices and forbid the distinction of manners...interfere with his delight or his instruction'.[75]

The forces at work against this kind of moral enlightenment were undeniably strong. Shelley himself acknowledged the force of the popular view when he changed the name Agathon to Helena in his translation of Plato's love poem which is now entitled 'Kissing Helena' in Hutchinson's edition of the *Poetical Works.* In fact it was not till Shelley reached the third draft that Agathon finally disappeared from the manuscript. He also substituted the feminine Stella for Aster (star) in the epigram 'To Stella' .

Two other indications of the moral climate in which Shelley was working are worth recording. In 1833 Shelley's cousin and friend Medwin published *The Shelley Papers.*[76] Among other things this contained a 'text' of Shelley's essay *On Love.* In the course of this essay Shelley defines love as a 'sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists', an unexceptionable sentiment one would have thought, springing from a deeply Christian sense of altruism. Medwin, however, was frightened by the conjunction of man with man and so he published a safer version of his own which read 'sanction which connects not only the two sexes, but everything that

---

[72] *Works,* viii. 203.
[73] Letter of 15 June 1821, *Shelley and Mary,* 4 vols., 1882, iii. 642.
[74] *Works,* iv. 95.
[75] *Platonism,* p. 413.
[76] R. A. Duerksen, 'Unidentified Shelley Texts in Medwin's *Shelley Papers', P.Q.* xliv, July 1965, p. 409.

exists'. The second example concerns the *Symposium* itself. Unfortunately, both for Shelley and for Plato, when Mary Shelley decided to publish the translation in 1840 she was persuaded by Leigh Hunt and others that certain passages would not be acceptable in print and so, with Hunt's assistance but against her own better instincts, she produced a version in which some passages were omitted and others had their meanings changed in the interests of modesty. It was not till 1931 that the full version appeared in print and even this was in a limited edition.

It was against this kind of prudery that Shelley's introductory essay had been directed. Shelley had hoped that he could influence public opinion to the extent that it might consent to listen to Plato's views on the subject of love, views which Shelley believed could help to redeem society. For him the poet/philosopher was the legislator of mankind. Plato was a great poet and it was the great poets who had moulded society. 'The great instrument of moral good is the imagination' and it is poetry which exercises and strengthens man's imagination. In one of the most characteristic passages in the *Defence of Poetry* Shelley reflects that all human progress must be attributed to poets:

> ...it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderón, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the ancient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.[77]

Thus in making available to the English people the 'poetry' of Plato in their own language, he would be helping to achieve that which he hoped for most of all, the moral

[77] *Defence,* p. 51.

reformation of society. In proportion as he failed to do justice to Plato, he would fail in the reformation of society.

This conception of translation as a public duty has an honourable place in the history of English literature. Most of the earliest English translators were spurred on by patriotic motives:[78] Chapman considered it a duty to the state,[79] Nicholas Udall declared 'a translator travaileth not to his own private commodity, but to the benefit and public use of his country'.[80] Philemon Holland translated Livy for his ethical value.[81] The translators of the Bible performed their work so that the word of God might be spread among the people. In Shelley's own day, Cary translated Dante 'to facilitate the study of one of the most sublime and moral, but certainly one of the most obscure writers in any language',[82] and Leigh Hunt hoped to give his readers a better idea of Homer.[83] John Keble saw the functions of translation in a very elevated light:

> Its influence...has doubtless done much towards spreading sound principles of judgment, both critical and moral; towards scattering among the

---

[78] 'The translator's work was an act of patriotism.' F. O. Mathiessen, *Translation, An Elizabethan Art,* Cambridge, Mass., 1931, p. 3. Cf. '...the translators were not dilettantes of leisure but Renaissance humanists with a mission'. Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century, I600-I660,* 2nd ed., Oxford, 1962, p. 60.

[79] 'And if Italian, French and Spanish have not made it daintie, not thought it any presumption, to turne him into their language, but a fit and honourable labour and (in respect of their countrie's profit and their poesie's credit) almost necessarie, what curious, proud and poore shamefastnesse should let an English muse to traduce him...?' 'To The Most Honored Earle', Dedication of *Achilles' Shield, Chapman's Homer,* ed. Allardyce Nicoll, 1957, i. 544-5.

[80] Dedication of *Paraphrase upon the Newe Testament* (1549), cited by Mathiessen, *Translation,* p. 25.

[81] Holland said that he wished to perform 'that which is profitable to the most, namely, an english Historie of that C[ommon] W[ealth] which of all others...affourdeth most plenteous examples of devout zeale in their kind, of wisedome, pollicie, iustice, valour, and all vertues whatsoever'. Preface to *The Romane Historie, Written by T. Livius of Padua,* 1600, cited by Mathiessen, *Translation,* p. 177. Mathiessen remarks: 'This is the full flowering of the cardinal belief of the sixteenth-century humanists: that the great classics of Greece and Rome were to be read for their ethical values.'

[82] Preface to *The Infimo of Dante Alighieri,* 1805, p. v.

[83] *Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism,* ed. L. H. and C. W. Houtchens, New York and London, 1956, p. 138.

> multitude those fruits of reason, and those flowers of fancy, which before grew beyond their reach: at the same time that it provides chaster and more permanent models than are usually supplied by modern compositions.[84]

While Shelley's morality was not quite the same as Keble's, and his motives less triumphantly patriotic than those of the great Elizabethans, he certainly did believe that his translations of Plato could alter the moral tone of society. One of his favourite notions was that mind becomes like that which it contemplates. This is derived from Plato himself, probably by way of Thomas Paine.[85] To have access to great works of art is insensibly to alter one's way of living. In one of his letters from Florence he remarks on the good fortune of those who live near the statues of Niobe and Apollo: '...I am deeply impressed with the great difference of happiness enjoyed by those who live at a distance from these incarnations of all that the finest minds have conceived of beauty, & those who can resort to their company at pleasure.'[86] In a similar way a good translation of Plato should help to improve the general happiness.

Faced with so great a task, Shelley was painfully conscious of his inadequacy and of his inferiority to Plato and the other great authors he translated. Had he not said that in order to translate a poem successfully, one must be as great a poet as the author of the original? And had not the history of his own works proved that he was not great enough for such a task? All his poems had failed disastrously with the general public. The reviewers had subjected him to bitter attack. His greatest success had been the worthless Gothic novel *Zastrozzi,* written while he was still a schoolboy at Eton. Could such a man be worthy to translate Plato or Homer? As Shelley ruefully reflected when he considered his lack of poetic success, 'I have confidence in my moral sense alone...'[87]

In this factor we have, I think, one of the most significant forces which made him a translator. Shelley was always conscious of the public for whom he was writing, and the failure of even his best poems to impress that public was a fact of which he was always painfully aware. He knew that *Queen Mab* would be unsuccessful: 'I expect no

---

[84] 'On Translation from Dead Languages', *Oxford English Prize Essays,* Oxford, 1830, iii. 33.

[85] The idea occurs in *Prince Athanase,* I. 139; 'Marenghi', I. 135; *Prometheus Unbound,* I. 450. For the debts to Plato and Paine see Notopoulos, *Platonism,* p. 227.

[86] *Letters,* ii. 313.

[87] Ibid. ii. 153.

success.'[88] In 1817 he discussed at length the reception of his 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. He was, he said, 'undec[e]ived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest, or substantially to improve, mankind'.[89] The unhappy record both of this poem and of *Alastor* (which he afterwards thought had received its just deserts) he attributed to his own reputation in society as rebel, atheist, and profligate. Shelley wished that his works could be judged on their own merits. Of his next major work, *Laon and Cythna*, he wrote to Godwin: 'I never presumed indeed to consider it any thing approaching to faultless, but when I considered contemporary productions of the same apparent pretensions, I will own that I was filled with confidence.'[90] But *Laon and Cythna* ran into difficulties over censorship, and when it was published, it failed. So much failure had its effect on the sensitive Shelley, who was constantly analysing the reasons for his lack of success. In 1818 he turned to translating the *Symposium;* in his own words: 'I am employed just now having little better to do, in translating into my fainting & inefficient periods the divine eloquence of Plato's Symposium...'[91] Of the same and other translations he says, '...I exercised myself in the despair of producing any thing original'[92] and again, 'I have lately found myself totally incapable of original composition. I employed my mornings, therefore, in translating the *Symposium*...'[93] Somewhat later he reports that he has been reading Calderón, '& I have some thoughts, if I find that I cannot do anything better, of translating some of his plays'.[94]

But for the moment Shelley did have hopes of something better to do. When he returned to original composition with *Prometheus Unbound,* he did not even intend it to be read by the public. It was, as he later admitted, a poem for the Σύνετοι (the intelligent and appreciative) and 'was never intended for more than 5 or 6 persons'.[95] However, *The Cenci* (like his *Address to the Irish People)* was consciously simplified and written in a popular style to catch the public ear. Shelley's letters are full of contrasts between the arcaneness of *Prometheus* and the popular style of the *Cenci* and full of hope for the

[88] Ibid. i. 361.
[89] Ibid.i.517.
[90] Ibid. i. 577.
[91] Ibid. ii. 20 (10 July).
[92] *Letters,* ii. 22.
[93] Ibid. ii. 26.
[94] Ibid. ii. l15.
[95] Ibid. ii. 388.

success of the *Cenci*. It met with an outraged reception and although Shelley knew that the incestuous subject was partly responsible, he could not forget that he had written it 'partly to please those whom my other writings displeased's and had not succeeded in pleasing them. Shelley expressed his deep disappointment in a letter to Maria Gisborne:

> I am, speaking literarily, infirm of purpose. I have great designs, and feeble hopes of ever accomplishing them. I read books, and, though I am ignorant enough, they seem to teach me nothing. To be sure, the reception the public have given me might [go] far enough to damp any man's enthusiasm. They teach you, it may be said, only what is true. Very true, I doubt not, and the more true the less agreeable. I can compare my experience in this respect to nothing but a series of wet blankets.[96]

Although he claimed that the encouragement of those who knew was all that he needed, he confessed shortly after: '...I doubt whether I *shall* write more. I could be content either with the Hell or the Paradise of poetry; but the torments of its purgatory vex me, without exciting my power sufficiently to put an end to the vexation.'[97] The *Cenci* fiasco still rankled: '...nothing is so difficult and unwelcome as to write without a confidence of finding readers; and if my play of "The Cenci" found none or few, I despair of ever producing anything that shall merit them.'[98]

Epipsychidion again was a composition for the esoteric few, but in *Adonais* Shelley thought that he had at last written a poem which would move the hearts of his readers.[99] The comparative failure of this, which he regarded as perhaps the best of his poems, plunged him finally into a despair from which he never recovered. Perhaps the greatest sorrow which Shelley had to bear was that, while his own works were failing, those of his friend and occasional neighbour Lord Byron were achieving immortality. Shelley generously acknowledged Byron's achievement, although it probably aggravated an inferiority complex. His pretext for writing a sonnet to Byron is that 'The worm

---

[96] Ibid. ii. 244-5 (8 Nov. 1820).
[97] Ibid. ii. 258 (20 Jan. 1821).
[98] Ibid. ii. 262 (15 Feb. 1821).
[99] e.g. ibid. ii. 296.

beneath the sod / May lift itself in homage of the God.'[100] His last letters are full of the achievements of Byron and though the contrast between him and Shelley is not always stated it is almost always implicit. In a letter of 8 August 1821 he does make the contrast explicitly: 'I despair of rivalling Lord Byron, as well I may; and there is no other with whom it is worth contending.'[101] The glow-worm had been extinguished by the sun. The strain was too much. Shelley declares, 'I write nothing and probably shall write no more',s and consoles himself with the reflection, 'I am, and I desire to be, nothing.'[102] When *Adonais* fails, Shelley is wounded: 'My faculties are shaken to atoms & torpid. I can write nothing, & if Adonais had no success & excited no interest what incentive can I have to write?'[103] Again, he asks himself, 'What motives have I to write[?]'[104]

Haunted as he was throughout his life by feelings of inadequacy, it is not surprising that he often felt himself without inspiration and resorted to translation either to stir the creative process or to pass the intervals between inspirations. According to Medwin, he even thought of giving up original composition altogether:

> Shelley was conscious of his talent for Translation and told me that disheartened as he was with the success of his Original composition, he thought of dedicating his time to throwing the grey veil of his own words over the perfect and glowing forms of other writers, and it is not impossible that he might have had it in his mind to translate the *Divina Commedia.*[105]

We have seen what he said in 1818 about his lack of original powers and how he had translated when he was 'totally incapable of original composition'. In August 1819, while enthusing over Calderón, he added, '...I have some thoughts, if I find that I cannot do anything better, of translating some of his plays. - and some Greek ones besides.'[106] In November of the same year he remarked that he had only done his version of *The*

[100] 'Sonnet to Byron', n. 13-14.
[101] *Letters*, ii. 323. cr. ibid. ii. 376, 405, 423.
[102] Ibid. ii. 344 (26 Aug. 1821).
[103] Ibid. ii. 382 (25 Jan. 1822).
[104] Ibid. ii. 394 (2 Mar. 1822).
[105] Medwin, *Life*, p. 249.
[106] *Letters*, ii. 115.

Cyclops when he 'could absolutely do nothing else'.[107] This is a significant admission. It comes in a letter written to Leigh Hunt between 14-18 November, 1819. Hunt had told Shelley that he was translating the *Amyntas* of Tasso and Shelley, though not doubting the success of the translation, reproved him: 'You ought to write Amintas. You ought to exercise your fancy in the perpetual creation of new forms of gentleness and beauty. You are formed to be a living fountain and not a canal however clear...I envy Tasso his translator, because it deprives us of a poet.'[108] Perhaps he was thinking of the critical commonplace that the great poet is a fountain whose influence radiates over others, while the minor poet or translator is a cistern which has no informing energy of its own. Having made this distinction as a compliment, Shelley goes on to contrast himself unfavourably with Hunt:

> With respect to translation, even *I* will not be seduced by it...And you know me too well to suspect that I refrain from the belief that what I would substitute for them [the works he is tempted to translate] would deserve the regret which yours would deserve if suppressed. I have confidence in my moral sense alone; but that is a kind of originality.[109]

What emerges from this letter is that Shelley thought of translation as inferior to original work but was sometimes forced to it through lack of original inspiration. Translation was a way of filling in the gaps between inspirations.

This concept bears an obvious relation to the most celebrated passage in the *Defence of Poetry*. '...the mind in creation', says Shelley, 'is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness...'[110] Since the source of poetry is involuntary, labour and study will not produce great poetry.

> The toil and the delay recommended by critics, can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an

[107] Ibid. ii. 153. cr. 'I have been translating the hymns of Homer, for want of spirit to invent…' (ibid.ii. 218)
[108] Ibid. ii. 152.
[109] Ibid. ii. 153.
[110] *Defence*, p. 53.

> artificial connexion of the spaces between their suggestions, by the intertexture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself...Compositions so produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting.[111]

Just as these passages form an artificial connection between the moments of inspiration within a poem, so the process of translation forms a bridge between poem and poem.

It seems likely that this lack of inspiration can be traced to a number of causes in addition to Shelley's dispiriting series of failures with the reading public. Throughout his life Shelley suffered from frequent depressions, often because of ill health, but also because of his many domestic troubles and not least because of the failure of his political ideals. If at these times he sometimes felt incapable of original composition, it would come as no surprise. In such a case, he might well have turned to translation. Although it is impossible to be certain, it seems that the translation of *The Cyclops* was made at just such a time, after the death of his son William and before the great creative burst of October and November 1819.[112] An even clearer example can be found in his translating of the *Symposium*, because we know exactly when it was written and so have an opportunity of reconstructing the circumstances in which it was composed. Mary's *Journal* records that Shelley translated the *Symposium* between 9 and 17 July 1818. We have already seen several statements by Shelley that he only did this because he was incapable of original composition. His letters give us some idea of the complete depression which gripped him at this time. On 25 July, a few days after finishing the translation, he wrote: 'I wish that I had health or spirits that would enable me to enter into public affairs, or that I could find words to express all that I feel & now.'[113] Later in the same letter he says, '...I still [have] busy thoughts & dispiriting cares which I would shake off...'[114] This is the state of mind described in 'Stanzas Written in Dejection', which was composed in the same year. But there is evidence yet more direct about the translating of the *Symposium.*

---

111 Ibid., p. 54.
112 For a discussion of the date of *The Cyclops,* see pp. 79-89.
113 *Letters,* ii. 22.
114 Ibid. ii. 23.

On 22 October 1821 Shelley wrote: 'I have employed Greek in large doses, & I consider it the only sure remedy for diseases of the mind. I read the tragedians, Homer & Plato perpetually; & have translated the Symposium, the Ion, & part of the Phaedon.'[115] Now this is a curious statement. Shelley had translated the *Symposium* in July 1818, the *Phaedo* some time in 1820, and the *Ion* quite recently.[116] Yet in the letter he classes them together as if he had recently translated all three, instead of just the *Ion.* It seems clear that he was thinking in general terms of the anodynes he had employed for diseases of the mind over a number of years. His translations of Plato, although made at long intervals, can thus be seen as parts of the same process. The same passage continues: 'I selected the first piece on account of the surpassing graces of the composition, but I have no intention of publishing it.' This is another significant admission. Although we know that Shelley did hope eventually to publish the *Symposium,* it is clear that when he wrote this letter he was thinking of his translation as a private exercise, undertaken to tide him over a difficult period. In later chapters we shall see that his versions of Goethe and Calderón fit into this pattern since they were both made during a period when he was almost continually dejected for a wide variety of reasons. Here too the act of translation seems to have offered a substitute for original creation, the attraction of a different world, and the refreshing benefits of a therapeutic exercise.

Unfortunately we do not possess very much evidence about the relation between the decision to translate and the private problems of the writer but we do know of several instances where the exercise of translation has served as an anodyne for other poets. The classic example is William Cowper. In this letter he describes how he began his enormous undertaking:

> One day, being in such distress of mind as was hardly supportable, I took up the *Iliad;* and merely to divert attention, and with no more preconception of what I was then entering upon, than I have at this moment of what I shall be doing this day twenty years hence, translated the twelve first lines of it. The same necessity pressing me again, I had recourse to the same expedient, and translated more. Every day bringing its occasion for

[115] Ibid. ii. 360.
[116] For dating see Notopoulos, *Platonism,* pp. 382, 514, 462.

> employment with it, every day consequently added something to the work...many other considerations, but especially *a mind that abhorred a vacuum as its chief bane*, impelled me...to the work…[117]

We also have the word of his cousin, J. Johnson, that 'Its progress in our private hours was singularly medicinal to his mind...'.[118] But Cowper was not an isolated case. In despair after the death of his brother, Charles Lloyd (the friend of Coleridge and Lamb) turned his hand to a version of Alfieri.[119] Cary was subject to severe depressions after the death of his wife; it was during this period that most of his translation of Dante was written.[120] Like Shelley, these writers used translation as a means of achieving some kind of stability. But for Shelley the process of translation was not a merely negative activity; it obviously did a good deal more than tide him over his bad moments. In realizing some of the other functions which translation performed for the translator, Shelley was probably unique in his day.

These other functions must be related to Shelley's theories on imitation. To understand them, we must first go back to Aristotle. Aristotle's theory of imitation had been much abused by writers and critics since the Renaissance. It was often taken to imply a more or less mechanical reproduction of ancient technique. This, of course, was not what Aristotle had meant. When he spoke of imitation he was concerned not with literary models but with the subject-matter of poetry. Literary imitation, in the sense of following a model, had been recommended by the ancient critics, but in no slavish manner:

> To them it stood rather for a process of the spirit, an imaginative stimulus derived from contact with works of genius; or again for a process of recreation, in which were assimilated, not the mere forms, but the spirit and methods, of ancient workmanship, with a view to the production of something new out of the old, something adapted to changes of medium

---

[117] *Correspondence of William Cowper,* ed. T. Wright, 4 vols., Hodder and Stoughton, 1904, ii. 393-4.
[118] *The Iliad of Homer,* 2nd ed., 1802, 'Preface by the Editor', p. xviii. He also describes how the translation 'appeared to me an instrument of divine mercy to mitigate the sufferings of my excellent Relation'.
[119] Lucas, *Charles Lamb and the Lloyds,* Smith Elder, 1898, p. 250.
[120] King, The Translator of Dante, pp. 94-5.

and environment.[121]

Perhaps the idea was best expressed by Longinus, who compared the imitator to the Pythian priestess inhaling the divine vapours from the cleft at Delphi, and also to a young contestant entering the ring with an established champion.[122] This passage appealed to John Dryden, who quoted it in his preface to *Troilus and Cressida.*[123]

Shelley's view was much the same. In the prefaces to *Laon and Cythna* and to *Prometheus* he speaks of imitation of contemporaries which may often be unconscious. It would be foolish for a poet to close his mind to the world around him whether in life or in literature. Shelley defends imitation in his most impassioned manner:

> As to imitation, poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them: one great poet is a masterpiece of nature which another not only ought to study but must study. He might as wisely and as easily determine that his mind should no longer be the mirror of all that is lovely in the visible universe, as exclude from his contemplation the beautiful which exists in the writings of a great contemporary.[124]

Now it is true that he was thinking here particularly of the influence of contemporaries and of imitation in a broader sense than the limits of translation could ever allow. But the implication must surely be extended. 'Poets,' said Shelley, 'the best of them - are a very camaeleonic race: they take the colour not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass'[125] and again, 'The mind becomes like that which it

---

[121] J. W. H. Atkins, English Literary Criticism: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, repr. 1954, p. 15.
[122] 'Longinus', *On the Sublime,* ed. D. A. Russell, Oxford, 1964, 13.2,4.
[123] *Of Dramatic Poesy and other Critical Essays,* ed. George Watson, 2 vols., Dent (London) and Dutton (New York), 1962, i. 242.
[124] *P. W.*, p. 206.
[125] *Letters,* ii. 308.

contemplates.'[126] This is a doctrine which implies a more willed activity than that of Keats who had also compared the poet to a chameleon. Keats's chameleon-poet is closely related to the doctrine of negative capability. For Keats the poet in himself is nothing. He is always ready to assume the character or ideas of the people around him; 'he is continually in for-and filling, some other Body'.[127] Shelley's poet is not so passive, nor so self-effacing as that of Keats: he accepts the colouring of his environment and employs it to create something new.

By translating, for example, he can study a writer in a peculiarly close way so that the writer becomes a part of his own consciousness. The significance of this process for the poet is excellently illustrated by J. A. Notopoulos in his book *The Platonism of Shelley.* He points out that, before making a translation, the translator must assimilate the insight of the writer whose work he is attempting to recreate. Translation is not an exact imitation. It is more like an equation *(a+b) (a+b) = a2+2ab+b2.*

> The meaning is identical on both sides of the equation though the form of the expression is different. Identity of 'meaning' expressed through the difference of 'form' is the essence of translation from Greek into English. It is this re-creation of form which is a creative factor in the art of translation.[128]

Thus, the translator has to understand the meaning and then to translate it into a new form. This in itself is an act of creation, and in Shelley's case it 'ignited the creative process'.[129] Notopoulos demonstrates in detail the importance for Shelley's original work of the Platonic dialogues which he translated. His version of the *Symposium,* says Notopoulos, 'marks the birth of an intellectual love which became in Shelley's life "a light kindled from a leaping fire"'.[130] 'The allusions to it in his poetry and prose are

---

[126] See p. 34.
[127] *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821,* ed. H. E. Rollins, Cambridge (Mass.), 1958, i. 387. The text is almost certainly corrupt: *in for* might be emended to *informing.*
[128] Notopoulos, *Platonism,* pp. 393-4. 4 Ibid., p. 401.
[129] Ibid. p. 392.
[130] Ibid., p. 401.

unparalleled in number and importance.'[131] Other examples of the influence of his translations are numerous. One good illustration is provided by the word *lampless,* which Shelley used in his poetry on ten occasions. This is almost certainly derived from the Greek phrase ἀλάμπετος ἀήρ (lampless air) which Shelley read in Homer's *Hymn to the Moon* and translated in the line, 'The lampless air glows round her golden crown.' This gave rise to some striking images in his own work, notably the 'lampless deep' and the 'lampless cave of being' *(P.U.,* IV. 245, 378) and the 'lampless deep of song' ('Ode to Heaven', cancelled version, 1.3). On a larger scale, Shelley's oral translation of *Prometheus Bound* was probably a major stimulus towards the conception of *Prometheus Unbound;* the *Hymn to Mercury* inspired *The Witch of Atlas* and considerable portions of 'With a Guitar, to Jane';[132] Dante's *Convito* inspired portions of *Epipsychidion,* as did Shelley's Italian translation of parts of his own *Prometheus;*[133] Plato's Aster epigram was important both for *Adonais* and for *The Triumph of Life;*[134] Bion's *Lamentfor Adonis* was the basis of *Adonais;*[135] Shelley's reading and translation of Dante influenced the versification and ideas of *The Triumph of Life.* Thus, as Neville Rogers claims, 'directly or indirectly his translations usually connect somehow with his compositions'.[136]

The process of translation performed at least two other related functions for Shelley. First, it compelled him to pay attention to detail, to correct frequently and with care. At various times throughout his career, Shelley had expressed his distaste for the process of correction. 'Compositions so produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting.'[137] So much for those who allege the fifty-six readings of the first line of *Orlando Furioso.*[138] So much for Wordsworth who 'informs us he was nineteen years /

---

[131] Ibid.
[132] For a fuller discussion, see pp. 73-4. Cf. *Mercury,* 11. 645-58, and 'With a Guitar, to Jane', 11.59-61,79-86.
[133] For *Convito,* see pp. 291 if. The influence of Shelley's Italian translations of his own work is discussed on pp. 307-9. See also *S.A. W,* Appendix V(c), pp. 342-3.
[134] The epigram is quoted as epigraph to *Adonais.* See also Rogers, *S.A. W.,* pp. 269-70; *The Triumph of Life,* 1. 256.
[135] For a list of parallels, see H. W. L. Hime, *The Greek Materials of Shelley's Adonais,* 1888; George Norlin, 'Greek Sources of Shelley's *Adonais', Univ. of Colorado Studies,* i. 1902-3, pp. 305-21.
[136] *S.A.W,* p. 233.
[137] *Defence,* p. 54.
[138] Ibid.

Considering and retouching Peter Bell',[139] which caused Shelley to remark, 'Heaven and Earth conspire to foil / The over-busy gardener's blundering toil.'[140] From such remarks many of his critics have assumed that Shelley scarcely bothered to correct his own work. We now know from the irrefutable evidence of the manuscripts that he devoted great care to the correction of his own poetry. 'The source of poetry is native and involuntary,' he once told Medwin, 'but it requires severe labour in the development.'[141] Nowhere did this apply more than in his translations. Obviously, in translating the work of others, the search for the *mot juste* will be peculiarly important. The ideas are already before you; the exercise is to express those thoughts as fully, as accurately, and as appropriately as our language allows. This then is to a large extent a linguistic exercise, which should produce some of the salutary effects assigned to it by Pliny the Younger:

> It is a very advantageous practice (and what many recommend) to translate either from Greek into Latin, or from Latin into Greek. By this sort of exercise one acquires noble and proper expressions, variety of figures, and a forcible turn of exposition. Besides, to imitate the most approved authors gives one aptitude to invent after their manner, and at the same time, things which you might have overlooked in reading, cannot escape you in translating...[142]

For Shelley, with his natural tendencies to imprecision and vagueness of expression, the practice must have been valuable. This point is made by Jefferson Hogg. Hogg is discussing the belief that Shelley was careless in composition, a belief which he refutes: '...his carelessness is usually apparent only; he had really applied himself as strenuously to conquer all the other difficulties of his art, as he patiently laboured to penetrate the mysteries of metre in the state wherein it exists entire and can alone be attained-in one of the classical languages.'[143] The evidence of the manuscripts shows that Shelley did take the greatest pains with many of his translations. Even such an apparently simple epigram as 'To Stella' went through three complicated drafts before Shelley was satisfied. Since he

---

[139] 'To Mary', *The Witch of Atlas,* 11. 25-6.
[140] Ibid., 11. 31-2.
[141] Medwin, *Life,* p. 347.
[142] *Letters,* VII. Dc. 1-2 (Loeb tr. by William Melmoth, revised Hutchinson, 1935).
[143] *Life,* i. 134.

translated so often and from such a wide range of authors, his original work must inevitably have been affected by the discipline. Some at least of the maturity and some of the greater clarity of his latest work may be attributed to this exercise.

The remaining function of translation was this: it provided Shelley with a framework on which to hang 'those delicate and evanescent hues of mind, which language delights and instructs us in precise proportion as it expresses'.[144] One of his early critics claimed, not entirely unjustly, that Shelley's best work was based on Greek myth. When Shelley created his own framework, his poetry usually remained vague and unsatisfying. But when he used a skeleton borrowed from Greek myth and clothed it in the flesh and blood of his own imagination, the result was often very effective: 'The vague and idle allegories in which he delighted, to say nothing of *dulcia vitia* of a worse kind, were banished for the moment from his fancy; and his verse, at once chastened and inspired by the continued contemplation of consummate art, was capable not only of reaching a classical gracefulness, but of reflecting vividly the strength of genius and the projection of its language.'[145] In this connection one may quote another and more elaborate passage from the ill-fated biography by Hogg:

> Shelley was fugitive, volatile; he evaporated like ether, his nature being etherial; he suddenly escaped, like some fragrant essence; evanescent as a quintessence. He was a lovely, a graceful image, but fading, vanishing speedily from our sight, being portrayed in flying colours. He was a climber, a creeper, an elegant, beautiful, odoriferous parasitical plant; he could not support himself; he must be tied up fast to something of a firmer texture, harder and more rigid than his own, pliant, yielding structure; to some person of a less flexible formation: he always required a prop.[146]

---

[144] *Letters,* ii. 277.

[145] '...when he had a model of style before him, and the ideas were supplied; when he translated...he had every requisite for the attainment of excellence.' J. G. Lockhart in *Quarterly Review*, xxxiv, 1826, p. 148. The reviewer is identified as Lockhart in *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900,* ed. Walter E. Houghton *et al.,* University of Toronto Press and Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 705

[146] *Life,* i. 301.

Hogg wrote this description as a justification for using the events of his own life as a prop to the unpredictable comings and goings of the volatile Shelley. It is an unfortunate passage in the history of Shelley biography because it helped to create a false impression of Shelley's character. (How ironical too that Shelley who had mortgaged so much of his expectations in order to help his friends with gifts of money should be described as 'unable to support himself'!) However, taken as an analysis of Shelley's constructional weakness *as a poet,* Hogg's description is not without point. Provided we do not accept the full implications behind the comments of Hogg and Lockhart, the implications that Shelley was vague and confused, incapable of sustained original achievement, we may grant that translation did provide him with a temporary prop. On occasions it also supplied him directly with the backbone for an original work. In addition, within the translations themselves, he was provided with a framework around which to weave the 'fine threads of rare and subtle thought'. Clearly then the functions of translation were as much private as public.

This prompts the question, to what extent were Shelley's translations undertaken as a private exercise and how did this qualify his desire to communicate with a wider public? Shelley's relations with the reading public were often ambiguous. As we have seen, he began by writing with a wide audience in mind, and ended by writing ostensibly for himself or for a few friends. In September 1819 he admitted, '...I write less for the public than for myself.'[147] Yet he still hoped that *The Cenci* would succeed with a wider public and was disappointed at the failure of *Adonais.* He translated Plato for the moral enlightenment of his countrymen; yet even in this case it must be doubted whether Shelley seriously intended his translations to reach a wide public. In one letter he says that he has finished his translation of the *Symposium* but does not at present intend to publish it.[148] This was because Shelley knew that the *Symposium* in its full form would be unacceptable to the public of the day and to publish it in less than its full form would be to destroy the very effect which he had hoped to make by translating it. So although his ultimate purpose must have been to see it published, there were other more personal motives to keep him at work. Some of these motives he makes quite clear. For instance, he admits that he selected the *Symposium* for translation 'on account of the surpassing

[147] *Letters,* ii. 116.
[148] Ibid. ii. 29, 360.

graces of the composition'.[149] In another letter he says that he has made his translation 'only as an exercise or perhaps to give Mary some idea of the manners & feelings of the Athenians...'.[150] Yet, if we can believe Medwin (who was speaking of his later days), 'Another of the canons of Shelley, was that translations are intended for those who do not understand the originals...'[151]

Thus we may conclude that, though Shelley did not always design his translations for a wide reading public, he must have hoped that they would eventually find as many readers as possible. From time to time, through sheer despair at his previous failures, he was forced to dispense with hopes of a wider audience. Even translations first made to satisfy some private need were probably later intended for a greater range of readers. Or perhaps Shelley consciously tried to achieve both ends at once, to satisfy both himself and the public. His theory of imitation reflects this duality of approach. Imitation (or translation) was valuable to the public because it provided them with food for their moral imagination; it was valuable to the poet because no poet should be unaware of the achievement of another, and imitation is the best way of becoming aware of that achievement. T.S. Eliot has said that the poet rarely speaks to himself without, in intention at least, addressing himself to a larger audience.[152] This, I think, is true of Shelley as translator. That he did have a wider audience in mind can be seen for example in his fragmentary prefaces to the *Symposium* and the *Hymn to Mercury*.[153] If these had been exercises performed only for his own purposes he need not have bothered to justify his methods.

In writing for a large audience, Shelley was like most of the translators whose motives we have examined. His originality lay in the importance which he attributed to it as a private exercise. In his recognition of the functions of translation for the translator, Shelley was unusual not only among translators but especially among the poets of his own day. For Shelley, translation was in part a propaedeutic, a poetic exercise which helped to ignite his creative faculties. As we have seen, many of the great translators have had an external motive to spur them to their work. Those whose motives were essentially personal, Cowper for instance, also had their eyes on the possible reading public. But few

[149] Ibid. ii. 360.
[150] Ibid. ii. 20.
[151] Medwin, *Life*, p. 246.
[152] 'The Three Voices of Poetry', *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 89 fr.

used translation for private purposes as systematically and as widely as Shelley. He translated from Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English. The authors included Pliny, Buffon, Aristotle, Spinoza, Plutarch, Tacitus, Plato, Virgil, Latini,[154] Euripides, Bion, Moschus, Dante, Calvalcanti, Goethe, Calderón, Aeschylus, and tiomer.[155] tie also projected translations from d'Holbach and Godwin, and he even rendered some of his work into Italian. From the time when he translated Pliny at school, he seems to have done some translation at regular intervals till his death. This is an achievement which none of the other Romantics can rival. Translation was generally left to minor figures likes Charles Lloyd, Francis Wrangham, and J. H. Frere. At first sight it might seem strange that a poet for whom the poetic experience centred around a moment of inspired intuition should translate so widely, but I think it has been sufficiently indicated that it was precisely because Shelley did believe in inspiration that he translated so often. It was because inspiration was so evanescent that the creative process had to be set in motion again so often, by artificial means if necessary. A phrase from A. C. Benson's biography of Edward FitzGerald comes to mind: '...with his deficiency of intellectual initiative, he used the authors whom he read somewhat like beaters, to start game in the coverts of his own mind'.[156] The cases are not entirely parallel since Shelley had no lasting deficiency of intellectual initiative yet in his case it is clear that translation not only inspired him to works of his own, but that, even in the course of his translating, the sparks of inspiration were often kindled by the poetry of the original. Such moments can sometimes be traced by a search for comparatively clear patches in the tangled undergrowth of the manuscripts.

---

[153] Notopoulos, *Platonism,* pp. 402-3; p. 126 below.

[154] 'Love, Hope, Desire, and Fear': A. C. Bradley first drew attention to the fact that this poem is based on *Tessoretto,* II. 81-154, cap. xix of Latini. For Tacitus, see 'On the Jews', *Works,* vii. 267-70. pp. 89 fr.

[155] Several translations from the Greek Anthology have been attributed to Shelley but I am not convinced by the arguments for their authenticity. See Appendix II. The version from Aeschylus (which has not previously been identified as a translation) is entitled 'The viewless and invisible Consequence'. It is a version of a fragment (253 in *Aeschylus,* ed. H. Weir Smyth and H. Lloyd-Jones, 1957, ii. 512). It appears in Bod. MS. Shelley adds. e. 9, p. 368, a notebook which was used in 1820 and especially in 1821. From the *Journal* (p. 145) we know that Shelley read the Fragments of Aeschylus on IOJanuary 1821, so we may assume a date early in 1821.

[156] *Edward FitzGerald,* MacMillan, 19°5, p. 163.

To sum up, then, for Shelley translation fulfilled a number of personal needs. It soothed him in time of distress. It tided him over periods barren of inspiration. It provided valuable poetic exercise. It gave him a framework for his poetry. Sometimes it offered direct inspiration. The importance of Shelley's translations is to be seen not only in the translations themselves, but also in much of his original work. In thus realizing the value of translation, Shelley was unique among the great original poets of his generation. Edward FitzGerald and, later, Ezra Pound were to employ translation to provide them with a persona for the expression of views relevant to their own problems and ways of life. Shelley never attempted to depart from the stricter principles of translation in this way. On the other hand, he was not afraid to depart from the principles of literalness favoured by many of his contemporaries. Like most of the leading writers and critics of the day, he realized that a good translation must be a fresh work of art: a Pope or a Chapman was always preferable to a Cary or a Cowper. Shelley had the poetic gifts necessary to put these ideas successfully into action: the following chapters will attempt to examine the background to the translations and to provide some idea of their results.

Source: *The Violet in the Crucible,* 1976, p. 14-50