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Understanding

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# Means and Ends

## Textual Scholarship and Literary Understanding

*Donald H. Reiman*

### ABSTRACT

*The author, reviewing his encounters with great literature since he was young—especially with the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley—concludes that he was unable to unlock the secrets of such great artistry until he applied himself to textual analysis of the poet's manuscripts. By following the poet's drafts and revisions letter by letter and word by word and questioning the reasons for textual anomalies and changes in the text, he first came to understand many aspects of the poetry that had gone over his head or that he had misread while reading for content alone. Reiman has, therefore, come to the conclusion that although critical, aesthetic understanding is the ultimate goal of literary study, textual analysis is one of the most direct means to such enlightenment.*

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WHEN I WAS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN NINE AND TWELVE YEARS OLD, MY father bought me as a Christmas stocking-stuffer a slim paperback book entitled *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*.<sup>1</sup> My parents were secondary school history teachers, and until then my favorite subject had been history. Not only did I read histories and biographies, but when I was in the sixth grade I made my first attempt at scholarly research by undertaking a “book” to be entitled “Lives of the World’s Great Generals”. After preparing a list of twenty or thirty names, I drew enough material from various world-history text books in our home to compose short accounts of Alexander the Great and Hannibal and I was working on Julius Caesar when something else caught my interest and I abandoned the project—now, alas, lost to posterity. One likely reason why I never returned to that project was that my imagination was captured by those

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1. The copy of *One Hundred Famous Poems* I received as a child sometime in the 1940s has long since been lost, given away by my parents when they moved to a new city while I was in college. I bought a new copy in the 1980s; see COOK 1958.

*Famous Poems*, all of which I read and perhaps a third of which I memorized in whole or in part during the next four or five years.

In retrospect I realize why those poems held my attention. First, I delighted in the richness of the English language and prosody and beyond that I felt the power of literary tropes that linked the poets' lives and experiences to mine and that broadened and deepened my immature thoughts and feelings. At the College of Wooster, I decided to major in English, but my teachers there were a mature group who taught the appreciation of literature more than its analysis. Even the best of my grad-school teachers at Illinois centered their attention on cultural history or on critical judgments à la F. R. Leavis, without probing to explain how language can transmit life across time. In those years of higher education I did, however, learn to love additional poems and poets and to feel more than ever that "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life".<sup>2</sup> Still wondering how master-spirits from previous centuries were able to speak to me in the midst of other joys and woes, I almost came to regard great poets as magicians who refused to share their secrets with such lesser beings as the routine realistic novelists who filled their narratives with lengthy descriptions of dinner parties and travelogues, while squeezing a cup of moral insight out of tons of sociological pulp.

Throughout this period, one poet who failed to take hold of my imagination was Percy Bysshe Shelley, even though an image from one of his poems had impressed me very early, when Miss Hoon, my second-grade teacher, quoted to the class these beautiful words—"That orb'd maiden with white fire laden / Whom mortals call the Moon" (COOK 1958, 43)—words that I remembered long enough to discover them again in *The Cloud*, one of the three poems by Shelley in *Famous Poems* (42–43). (The other two were *Ode to the West Wind*, and *To a Sky-lark*.) But I was unable to identify with Shelley partly because the picture of the poet that accompanied each of his poems was a terrible copy of the Amelia Curran portrait, which made Shelley look especially weak and ineffectual. When I took a course in the English Romantic poets at Wooster, Mary Rebecca Thayer, then in her final year before compulsory retirement, taught them with a somewhat Victorian perspective. She did admire Shelley, and I learned more about his life and ideas, but when she assigned two acts of *Prometheus Unbound* for each of two class discussions, I was so baffled (and bored) by the third act that I did not read Act IV—the only assignment that I failed to complete on any subject in college or grad school. At Illinois, Royal A. Gettmann used the end of one class in his course in the Romantics to tell us what was wrong with Shelley as a poet and a man. Then at our next

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2. Milton, *Areopagitica*; see PATTERSON [1930] 1933, 733.

meeting, he apologized for not having been more professional by illuminating rather than denouncing a canonical poet just because he could not sympathize with Shelley as he understood him. Then Royal quoted T. S. Eliot's most famous comment on Shelley—"in his last, and to my mind greatest though unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*, there is evidence not only of better writing than in any previous long poem, but of greater wisdom" ([1930]1933, 90)—adding that whoever might attempt to rehabilitate Shelley's reputation would have to begin with *The Triumph of Life*. A few weeks later, after I had passed the four written preliminary exams, I was surprised to see that the major work on which I would be quizzed in the oral exam that followed was none other than that final major fragment on which Shelley had been working just before his death. By the time that I had prepared for that exam, I was so wrapped up in the complexities of *The Triumph* that I decided to write my dissertation on this, the culmination of Shelley's poetic career, under Royal's direction. When another favorite teacher—G. Blakemore Evans, then completing his edition of the Riverside Shakespeare—asked me about the status of Shelley's text, I promised him that I would look into it and soon ordered a microfilm of the poem's holograph draft at the Bodleian Library. Though I could not have predicted any such outcome, in the spring of 1958 my career course had been decided, for thereafter I centered my study on a poet for whom neither my mentor nor I had, a few weeks earlier, shown much sympathy or even interest.

In order to understand *The Triumph of Life* I had to read all of Shelley's poetry, prose, and letters, everything written about *The Triumph*, and earlier literary works identified as having had an impact on its composition. While trying to transcribe the text of the draft from a bad microfilm copy of the Bodleian manuscript, I discovered a few discrepancies between the manuscript and the received text that enabled me to solve interpretive cruxes, thereby convincing me that further study of the manuscript itself would go far toward elucidating Shelley's meaning. In the spring of 1960, I completed my dissertation, and after my first year of teaching at Duke University, my wife and I spent some ten weeks at Oxford working on the text of *The Triumph*, as well as surveying the other manuscripts and books in the Bodleian's preeminent Shelley collection. In 1964, when my book on *The Triumph* was in the press, I was teaching at Wisconsin-Milwaukee and writing the *Percy Bysshe Shelley* volume for the Twayne's English Authors series. I had learned enough about the poet's life, thought, and art to know that he was worthy of careful attention and that the Bodleian by itself contained ample useful work for a lifetime of research. Then, to my surprise, during the MLA meeting in New York, Kenneth Neill Cameron invited me to lunch and, after telling me that he planned to return to teaching, asked whether I

would like to succeed him as Editor of *Shelley and his Circle* at the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library—the largest repository of Shelleyan manuscripts outside the Bodleian. I accepted, although in so doing I cut myself off from teaching regularly and thereby restricted the range of my future publications of the kind generated by ideas that arise during teaching preparations.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s my reviews, lectures, and periodical papers on editing, together with the publication of *The Romantics Reviewed* (1972), volumes Five and Six of *Shelley and his Circle* (1973), the 128 volume compilation of *The Romantic Context: Poetry*, and Norton Critical edition Shelley of 1977 tagged me as primarily an editor, rather than a scholar-critic. But spending many hours working with primary documents—especially draft manuscripts, in which the craftsmanship of poets is most clearly visible—revealed to me that immersion in such textual studies provides, perhaps, the best *means* to understand the craft of poetry. By following the development of a poem from its inception, as revealed in a poet's letters, through its various stages of composition, to its published form, and finally the reactions to it by the authors and their contemporaries, we can learn at least some of the magicians' secrets. Painstaking study of *The Triumph of Life* and, later, of the composition of *Laon and Cythna* taught me that the best path to the authorial meaning of a poem was to follow the twists and turns of Shelley's drafts and fair copies—not just word by word, but often letter by letter—trying to imagine why he changed one word into another. Sometimes Shelley's changes improved the rhymes or the patterns of assonance in his *terza rima* or Spenserian stanzas. Sometimes he turned back to an earlier word choice to avoid repetition, while at other times he added repetitions to reinforce his tone and meaning. For me, Shelley had become not just a competent, facile poet, but a master wordsmith who strove for perfection in his art. Then, while vetting the first three volumes of the *Cornell Wordsworth* edition for the MLA's Committee on Scholarly Editions (CSE),<sup>4</sup> I detected in Wordsworth's revisions the same spirit that transformed the deeply felt initial utterances of his early versions into clearer and more coherent works of art. Similar to these personal discoveries was the (possibly apocryphal) story told by Henry Stephens (Keats's medical roommate) of Keats reading to him the draft of the first line of *Endymion* as "A thing of beauty is a

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3. During the first five years following my Ph.D., I had written essays on Shakespeare, Chaucer, Lamb, and Henry James, as well as notes and reviews on subjects and authors ranging from *Beowulf* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, through Matthew Arnold and G. M. Hopkins, to *The Catcher in the Rye* and Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

4. See GILL 1975; PARRISH 1977; AND DARLINGTON 1977. See also REIMAN 1987, 130–47.

constant joy”—and then revising the line to “A thing of beauty is a joy forever”, an act of judgment thereby changing a neat enough verse into a line that “will live forever” (STILLINGER 1978, 576). And so it has been with every great poet whose work I have had occasion to analyze in detail. I can sum up this process simply by rephrasing the title and subtitle of this talk: *Textual scholarship provides a fruitful means to literary understanding, which is the ultimate goal of the study of literature*. Literary understanding embodies at least two primary components: cognitive enlightenment and aesthetic appreciation—teaching and delighting, or sweetness and light. Whatever writing lacks one of these two elements may be, as Coleridge noted, part of a *poem*, but it is not *poetry*.

This differentiation applies to literary prose as much as to poetry, so called. Decades ago, when I taught *Pride and Prejudice*, I pointed out to an undergraduate class that virtually no word on a page of Jane Austen’s novel could be replaced—or even repositioned—without altering and, to some extent, spoiling either the meaning or the aesthetic beauty of the prose that Austen transmuted into poetry, precise and perfectly tuned. Devotees of her novels may now find this remark to be a truism, but in 1963, I had never known anyone to make such a claim. (Now that the writings of some of Austen’s sister novelists have been pushed up to her level in the canon, someone might wish to analyze their prose to see whether it exhibits the kind of artistry that keeps on giving satisfaction, reading after reading and century after century.) Though I am not advocating a return to Matthew Arnold’s theory of touchstones, I do believe that classic, time-tested literature can provide standards against which newer works may be evaluated, even though I cannot follow Arnold in judging the value of a writer’s career by comparing it with snippets of Homer, Dante, and Milton. (see TRILLING 1949, 173–75). Such comparisons can be useful only if the critics applying them begin by understanding each work that is being compared with the thoroughness that a specialist scholar-critic might devote, for example, to the 548 lines of *The Triumph of Life*.

This brings me, finally, to our theme of the “psychic connections” between editors and the authors whose works they edit. Did I choose PBS? Did he choose me? I can’t speak for Shelley, because I don’t know how he’s been spending his time on the higher reaches of Parnassus during the nearly two-hundred years that earthlings haven’t heard from him directly. As noted earlier, Royal Gettmann just threw Shelley and me into the arena together and let us fight it out, presumably till I should grow “weary of the ghastly dance / And [fall] [. . .] by the way side” (*Triumph*, lines 540–41 [REIMAN and FRAISTAT 2002, 500]). I’m old and weary enough, but I’m still in the ring, giving the struggle my all, because I know how fortunate I was to be guided first to the Bodleian and then to the Pforzheimer just when Shelley’s fortunes

were beginning to rise. When I availed myself of those opportunities, not only was the work itself rewarding, but I valued especially the wonderful people who have shared the work with me—foremost among them my wife Héléne, who has spent over thirty years researching beside me.

In my younger days, I used to say that, if I had a press-pass to Parnassus to interview some of the glitterati there, I would stay clear of Shelley's wraith because I feared that, with his British upper-class perspective, he'd be terribly condescending to me—and, besides, he might tell me that all my ideas about him and his poetry were rubbish. Keats, on the other hand, would be sociable enough, and I believe that even Byron would be polite, so long as one didn't put on intellectual airs. Lately, however, I've come to think that Shelley, who felt so unappreciated during his lifetime, might respond with real kindness to an admirer of his writings, especially if I were the first to tell him how greatly his poetry was now admired all over the world—in Japan, China, and parts of Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Shelley's writings have often been praised not only for their artistic excellence but for inspiring political reformers, idealistic poets, and even hard-headed, scientifically trained skeptics. But I must admit that Shelley as a person made a lot of mistakes, even when he tried to treat those around him well. Although he did manage to gain more wisdom in human relations as time passed, his influence on my life has probably done me more harm than good. True, his vision of total human freedom and individual self-expression was a powerful antidote for the rigid and hypocritical religious and moral system promulgated in the hierarchical English culture of his time. But in our own hyper-egalitarian society, where presidents and senators are addressed by their nicknames and where teeny-bopper celebrities and their acolytes try to live totally without communal restraints, we admirers of Shelley's should have given more attention to some of his less emphasized ideals, as in his sonnet warning us that "Man who man would be / Must rule the empire of himself; [ . . . ] establishing his throne on vanquished will" (REIMAN and FRAISTAT 2002, 327).

The need for such self-control is also a central theme of Rousseau's speeches in *The Triumph of Life*, and perhaps that is why T. S. Eliot and Royal Gettmann admired that poetic fragment more than they did much of Shelley's earlier poetry. In my later years, I've avoided tying myself to the mast of Shelley's spirit's bark, in which he, like Dante, wished to launch into the storm, "far from the trembling throng / Whose sails were never to the tempest given", to sail "darkly, fearfully, afar" (REIMAN and FRAISTAT 2002, 427). As most of us who live long enough discover, "That is no country for old men" (FINNERAN 1989, 193).

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