

Shelley, P.

## *England in 1819*

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## “England in 1819”

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Written 1819–1820

An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,—  
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow  
Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring,—  
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,  
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,  
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—  
A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field,—  
An army, which liberticide and prey  
Makes as a two-edg'd sword to all who wield,—  
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;  
Religion Christless, Godless—a book seal'd;  
A Senate,—Time's worst statute, unrepeal'd,—  
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may  
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

ONE OF the great poems of political anger in English, Shelley's sonnet about headline news (as we now say) commands attention for its tone (few poets have sustained such indignation for so long without monotony), for the way it condenses topical information (several radical pamphlets' worth), and for its odd structure: one sentence, mostly a stack of subject clauses, displaying an idiosyncratic rhyme scheme, with twelve lines giving reasons for despair, then two devoted to figures for violent hope. Shelley wrote the sonnet while living in Italy; anyone in England who tried to publish such sentiments would have risked prosecution for treason, and Shelley did not ask anyone to try. Instead, he enclosed it a letter to a friend, the poet and publisher Leigh Hunt, who shared Shelley's radical, antimonarchical politics, and who had been impris-

oned for sedition. It first appeared in print in 1839, when Mary Shelley collected her late husband's poetry (Hunt was still alive and writing, and must have given the letter to her). Mary also gave the sonnet (untitled in the poet's letter) the title that has stuck to it ever since.

"England in 1819" contains just one sentence, its main verb, "Are," delayed till line 13. All the lines before "Are" form a list, a set of things, conditions, people, and legislation to be found in the England whose condition the radical Shelley assailed. That list becomes the compound subject for Shelley's verb, a stack of despised entities piled one on another and then at long last overthrown.

As in George Herbert's "Prayer (I)," we expect lists in poems to imply reasons behind their order. A list of good things should shift from better to best; a list of bad things should descend from bad to worse. Yet Shelley's first example of England's parlous state seems hard to top: it is the head of state, George III, known in the United States today as the king against whom America staged a revolution, known to Britons in 1819-1820 as the eighty-one-year-old monarch whose unbalanced mind required the Regency, a legal arrangement by which the king's son, the prince regent, ruled in his stead. Though without direct political power, the old king retained his title, and gave the radical poet a fine first symbol for the elements he hated in his native country: deference to hereditary order, conservatism (a temperament, not just a political movement), willed ignorance of what seemed to Shelley (and to anyone else who sympathized with the goals of the French Revolution) the inalienable rights of man.

The Hanoverian line of descent flows downward, from mad king to prince regent, growing more polluted as it goes on, like a "muddy spring." Hanoverian rulers and governors (George III, the prince regent, and the ministers under them) are not only blind, but without sympathy, as if they also lacked the sense of touch. (Shelley may have in mind the scene from *King Lear*, another harsh masterpiece about a divided kingdom, in which the mad Lear tells the blinded Gloucester, "You know which way the world goes"; Gloucester responds, "I see it feelingly.") Muddy springs may hold real leeches, which have medical use; the Hanoverian line, so close to the dirt already, disgorges only the useless leeches of ministers and kings who "cling" to England, gorging themselves on its blood, spending the riches they did not work to produce, until they collapse from some toxic combination of satiety, old age, and turpitude.

The first six lines form the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet, rhymed *ababab*—

Shelley appears to put the conclusion first (England, too, is morally upside-down). When the rhyme changes, England looks worse still. A nation whose vilest enemies were the aristocratic “leeches” of lines 4–6 might be saved by time alone, but this England requires (in Shelley’s view) disruptive action—a revolution easy for Shelley to imagine, but hard to carry out. The sonnet reacts to the Peterloo Massacre of August 1819, in which British troops on horseback charged and fired their weapons into a crowd assembled in St. Peter’s Square, in the industrial city of Manchester (“loo” alludes sarcastically to the Battle of Waterloo). Sixty thousand people attended the meeting, where radical orators spoke for universal suffrage (one man, one vote). Hundreds of civilians were wounded, and at least a dozen died. Britons who shared the orators’ goals, and many who did not, were horrified; peaceable social change seemed far away—Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt in December 1819, “I suppose we shall soon have to fight.” “Two-edg’d sword” implies that (as in many countries today) a nation that puts down domestic dissent with its army risks encouraging a military coup. It also alludes to Psalm 149, in which the righteous, with “a two-edged sword in their hand,” will “execute vengeance upon the heathen . . . to bind their kings with chains.”

Shelley was (or, at least, often writes like) what philosophers call an Idealist—someone who believes that abstractions such as Liberty or Justice are at least as real as tables and lemons. It makes sense, then, that his list of bad things in his England should begin with a bad person, continue through bad or badly treated groups of people (the victims at Peterloo, the standing army), and conclude with abused or traduced ideas. English laws do not represent justice: “golden” is sarcastic in one sense (the laws violate ordinary morality), straightforward in another (the laws serve the rich), and allusive in a third (laws protecting private property make it into an idol like the Golden Calf).

“Sanguine” is also double-edged, meaning “bloody, blood-colored,” or else “confident”: the laws shed innocent blood with unearned confidence. Expelled from Oxford University for writing a pamphlet called “The Necessity of Atheism,” Shelley was no friend of the Christian God, but this sonnet does not exactly attack Christianity; rather, the insincere worship of a God set up as Christian, a state church that in practice worshiped the state, seemed to Shelley even worse than sincere belief. Worst of all, in the poem’s first couplet, is one particular bad law. Which one? Most critics identify one or another statute denying political rights to Catholics, though some (among them the formidable scholar James Chandler) propose the very existence of the “senate”—that is, Parliament—itself.

The concluding couplet alters the mood entirely, away from anger, toward a vertiginously qualified hope. "Are graves" stands out not only for what it means, not only for its long-delayed main verb, but also for the early caesura it makes—early enough to feel odd. By contrast, lines 1–7 and 10–12 constitute grammatically complete noun clauses, and line 8–9 break between a subject and its verb. The caesura (internal pause) within line 14 comes even sooner than the pause in line 13. It comes after just one syllable, "burst," suggesting the shock that a revolution might bring: few people will expect it, until it arrives.

Will it ever arrive? The "glorious phantom," the triumphantly revenant spirit of liberty, may (or may not) "burst" up from this succession of graves; if it does, it will resemble a sun reappearing from behind dense clouds. (For centuries, English radical thinkers—John Milton among them—invoked an "ancient liberty" identified with England before the Norman Conquest, so that any future revolution would also be a reappearance, a rebirth: Shelley's language of resurrection and reappearance suggests this tradition, though faintly.) "Tempestuous day" summarizes the violence of the list that precedes it, but makes clear, too, that the darkness over England is like a stormy day, not a night. It will clear up (if it does clear up) suddenly and unpredictably, rather than as part of any gradual, regular order that nature can bring.

The last couplet feels conclusive, emphatic, as final couplets often do in Shakespearean sonnets. Shelley's form, though, is certainly not Shakespearean: inverted and odd at the outset, it concludes with a couplet and then another couplet, as if the poem—like its England—had lost its balance. To these doubled couplets, Shelley adds doubled metaphors (a phantom from graves, the sun from behind storm clouds). England requires sudden change so urgently that no one image will do.