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Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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1811

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In Europe too wild ruin rushes fast:
 See! like a meteor on the midnight blast,
 Or evil spirit brooding over gore,
 Napoleon calm can war, can misery pour.
 May curses blast thee; and in thee the breed
 Which forces, which compels, a world to bleed;
 May that destruction, which 'tis thine to spread,
 Descend with ten-fold fury on thy head.
 Oh! may the death, which marks thy fell career,
 In thine own heart's blood bathe the empoisoned spear;
 May long remorse protract thy latest groan,
 Then shall Oppression tremble on its throne.
 Yet this alone were vain; Freedom requires
 A torch more bright to light its fading fires;
 Man must assert his native rights, must say
 We take from Monarchs' hand the granted sway;
 Oppressive law no more shall power retain,
 Peace, love, and concord, once shall rule again,
 And heal the anguish of a suffering world;
 Then, then shall things, which now confusedly hurled,
 Seem Chaos, be resolved to order's sway,
 And errors might be turned to virtue's day.—

AND FAMINE AT HER BIDDING WASTED WIDE
 THE WRETCHED LAND, TILL, IN THE PUBLIC
 WAY

PROMISCUOUS WHERE THE DEAD AND
 DYING LAY,

DOGS FED ON HUMAN BONES IN THE OPEN
 LIGHT OF DAY

-Curse of Kehama

Preface

—NUNQUAM NE REPONAM

VEXATUS TOTIES?— Juvenal.

THE following Poem is such, as some might conceive to demand an apology; it might appear to those, who do not consider with sufficiently accurate investigation, that its ultimate view is subversive of the existing interests of Government. A moment's attention to the sentiments on which it is founded must demonstrate the erroneousness of this supposition. Before the system which it reprobates can be ameliorated; before that peace, which, perhaps, with greater sanguineness than certainty, every good man anticipates, a total reform in the licentiousness, luxury, depravity, prejudice, which involve society, must be effected. This reform must not be the work of immature assertions of that liberty, which, as affairs now stand, no one can claim without attaining over others an undue, invidious superiority, benefiting in consequence *self* instead of society; it must not be the partial warfare of physical strength, which would induce the very evils which the tendency of the following Essay is calculated to eradicate; but gradual, yet decided intellectual exertions must diffuse light, as human eyes are rendered capable of bearing it. Does not every feeling mind

shrink back in disgust when it beholds myriads of its fellow-beings, whom indigence, whom persecution, have deprived of the power to exert those mental capabilities which alone can distinguish them from the brutes, subjected by nature to their dominion? Is it not an insult to the All-wise, the Omnipresent intelligence of the universe, that one man should, by the abuse of that capacity which was formed to be exerted for the happiness of his fellow-creatures, deprive them of the power to use the noblest gift which his wisdom had imparted? As there is great reason to suppose that degrees of happiness will be adjudged to each, in a future state, in proportion to the degrees of virtue which have marked the life of the individual in this; as it is self-evident that the state of probation in which we now reside, is merely a preparatory stage in which to display our energies, to fit us for a more exalted state of existence, is not the deprivation of liberty the deepest, the severest of injuries?¹ Yet this is despotism.

Poetical Essay

DESTRUCTION marks thee! o'er the blood-stain'd heath
Is faintly borne the stifled wail of death;
Millions to fight compell'd, to fight or die

¹ These ideas of a future state of rewards and punishments, it must be confessed, do not exactly coincide with those of St. Athanasius, regarding that, by which he so liberally condemns all who differ from his own opinions to eternal torture. Independent of the evident spirit of intolerating priestcraft, which this anathema displays, I have another reason for not crediting the Reverend Father. St. Chrysostom, a saint in no less repute than the above-mentioned creed-maker, has, in his admonitions to the Bishops, whilst discussing the best method of expounding the scriptures, the following passage: "Should you meet with any part of the Bible, which either does not accord with your own sentiments, or those which you think necessary to adopt, explain it as an allegory; if then it will not bend, say that it is typical of some future event; if you find it impossible to escape thus, expound it *καθ' ἐξοχήαν*, directly contrary."

Should not its power extend to each, to all?
If he who murders to death is due,
Should not the great destroyer perish too?
The wretch beneath whose influence millions bleed?
And yet encomium is the villain's meed.
His crime the smooth-tongued flatterers conquest name,
Loud in his praises swell the notes of Fame.
Oblivion marks the murdering poor man's tomb,³
Brood o'er his memory contempt and gloom;
His crimes are blazoned in deformed array,
His virtues sink, they fade for aye away.
Snatch then the sword from nerveless virtue's hand,
Boldly grasp native jurisdiction's brand;
For justice, poisoned at its source, must yield
The power to each its shivered sword to wield,
To dash oppression from the throne of vice,
To nip the buds of slavery as they rise.
Does jurisprudence slighter crimes restrain,
And seek their vices to controul in vain?
Kings are but men,⁴ if thirst of meanest sway
Has not that title even snatched away.—

The fainting Indian, on his native plains,
Writhes to superior power's unnumbered pains;
The Asian, in the blushing face of day,
His wife, his child, sees sternly torn away;
Yet dares not to revenge, while war's dread roar
Floats, in long echoing, on the blood-stain'd shore.

⁴ —By *Kings* here the Author must be understood to mean, not merely those men who are invested with the *regal* authority, but also all who are entrusted with the executive part of legislation, to whom more advantages result from the station which they fill, than the consciousness of having discharged their duty for the welfare of their fellow creatures. We cannot say with Horace "Rex ille est."

Oppressors' venal minions! hence, avaunt!
 Think not the soul of Patriotism to daunt;
 Though hot with gore from India's wasted plains,
 Some Chief, in triumph, guides the tightened reins;
 Though disembodied from this mortal coil,
 Pitt lends to each smooth rogue a courtier's smile;
 Yet does not that severer frown withhold,
 Which, though impervious to the power of gold,
 Could daunt the injured wretch, could turn the poor
 Unheard, unnoticed, from the statesman's door
 This is the spirit which can reckless tell
 The fatal trump of useless war to swell;
 Can bid Fame's loudest voice awake his praise,
 Can boldly snatch the honorary bays.
 Gifts to reward a ruthless, murderous deed,
 A crime for which some poorer rogue must bleed.
 Is this then justice?—stretch thy powerful arm,
 Patriot, dissolve the frightful [erratum: frigorific] charm,
 Awake thy loudest thunder, dash the brand
 Of stern Oppression from the Tyrant's hand;
 Let reason mount the Despot's mouldering throne,
 And bid an injured nation cease to moan.
 Why then, since justice petty crimes can thrall,

³ —It cannot be supposed that by this the Author means to justify the crimes of the indigent, but thinks that no earthly power for whatever offence, has a right to deprive an individual of that life which a will, superior to human law, entrusted to his preservation, with which intention human law ought to concur. Confinement, restriction, punishment even is necessary for the support of civilized society; but to shut the door of repentance even upon a murderer, to put an eternal termination to his usefulness in this life, to force him upon an unknown, inconceivable existence, is beyond what we can conceive to be the authority of custom. The morality, if not the necessity of war, must in course be impeached by this argument. If war then is proved to be deleterious, which I think few will deny, then those, in the identification of whom none can hesitate, ought to be deprived of the power of mischief, whose interest, whose desire it is to promote so forcible an outrage on its happiness.

In mangled heaps on War's red altar lie.
 The sternly wise, the mildly good, have sped
 To the unfruitful mansions of the dead.
 Whilst fell Ambition o'er the wasted plain
 Triumphant guides his car—the ensanguin'd rein
 Glory directs; fierce brooding o'er the scene,
 With hatred glance, with dire unbending mien,
 Fell Despotism sits by the red glare
 Of Discord's torch, kindling the flames of war.
 Fortheethen does the Muse her sweetest lay
 Pour 'mid the shrieks of war, 'mid dire dismay;
 For thee does Fame's obstrep'rous clarion rise,
 Does Praise's voice raise meanness to the skies.
 Are we then sunk so deep in darkest gloom,
 That selfish pride can virtue's garb assume?
 Does real greatness in false splendour live?
 When narrow views the futile mind deceive,
 When thirst of wealth, or frantic rage for fame,
 Lights for awhile self-interest's little flame,
 When legal murders swell the lists of pride;
 When glory's views the titled idiot guide,
 Then will oppression's iron influence show
 The great man's comfort as the poor man's woe.
 Is't not enough that splendour's useless glare,
 Real grandeur's bane, must mock the poor man's stare;
 Is't not enough that luxury's varied power
 Must cheat the rich parader's irksome hour,
 While what they want not, what they yet retain,
 Adds tenfold grief, more anguished throbs of pain
 To each unnumbered, unrecorded woe,
 Which bids the bitterest tear of want to flow;
 But that the comfort, which despotic sway
 Has yet allowed, stern War must tear away.

Ye cold advisers of yet colder kings,

To whose fell breast no passion virtue brings,
 Who scheme, regardless of the poor man's pang,
 Who coolly sharpen misery's sharpest fang,
 Yourselves secure. Your's is the power to breathe
 O'er all the world the infectious blast of death,
 To snatch at fame, to reap red murder's spoil,
 Receive the injured with a courtier's smile,
 Make a tired nation bless the oppressor's name,
 And for injustice snatch the meed of fame.
 Were fetters made for anguish, for despair?
 Must starving wretches torment, misery bear?
 Who, mad with grief, have snatched from grandeur's store,
 What grandeur's hand had snatched from them before.
 Yet shall the vices of the great pass on,
 Vices as glaring as the noon-day sun,²
 Shall rank corruption pass unheeded by,
 Shall flattery's voice ascend the wearied sky;
 And shall no patriot tear the veil away
 Which hides these vices from the face of day?
 Is public virtue dead?—is courage gone?
 Bows its fair form at fell oppression's throne?
 Yes! it's torn away—the crimes appear,
 Expiring Freedom asks a parting tear,
 A powerful hand unrolls the guilt-stain'd veil,
 A powerful voice floats on the tainted gale,
 Rising corruption's error from beneath,
 A shape of glory checks the course of death;
 It spreads its shield o'er freedom's prostrate form,
 Its glance disperses envy's gathering storm;
 No trophied bust need tell thy sainted name,
 No herald blazon to the world thy fame,

² .—See the speech of one of his Majesty's ministers in the last Session of Parliament.—The candour of the Right Hon. Gentleman demands our admiration, his impudence has ceased to surprise us.

Nor scrolls essay an endless meed to give;
 In grateful memory still thy deeds must live.
 No sculptured marble shall be raised to thee,
 The hearts of England will thy memoirs be.
 To thee the Muse attunes no venal lyre,
 No thirsts of gold the vocal lays inspire;
 No interests plead, no fiery passions swell,
 Whilst to thy praise she wakes her feeble shell,
 She need not speak it, for the pen of fame
 On every heart has written BURDETT'S name;
 For thou art he, who dared in tumult's hour,
 Dauntless thy tide of eloquence to pour;
 Who, fearless, stemmed stern Despotism's course,
 Who traced Oppression to its foulest course [erratum:
 source];
 Who bade Ambition tremble on its throne—
 How could I virtue name, how yet pass on
 Thy name!—though fruitless thy divine essay,
 Though vain thy war against fell power's array,
 Thou taintless emanation from the sky!
 Thou purest spark of fires which never die!

Yet let me pause, yet turn aside to weep
 Where virtue, genius, wit, with Franklin sleep;
 To bend in mute affliction o'er the grave
 Where lies the great, the virtuous, and the brave;
 Still let us hope in Heaven (for Heaven there is)
 That sainted spirit tastes ethereal bliss,
 That sainted spirit the reward receives,
 Which endless goodness to its votary gives.
 Thine be the meed to purest virtue due—
 Alas! the prospect closes to the view.
 Visions of horror croud upon my sight,
 They shed around their forms substantial night.