

- Nature's transcendental power on the human Soul → 'Ode to Psyche'

They murmur proud pleasure
Soft and low;
While around, the lashed Ocean,
Like mountains in motion,
Is withdrawn and uplifted,
Sunk, shattered and shifted
To and fro.

IV.

In the court of the fortress
Beside the pale portress,
Like a bloodhound well beaten
The bridegroom stands, eaten
By shame.
On the topmost watch-turret,
As a death-boding spirit,
Stands the grey tyrant Father—
To his voice the mad weather
Seems tame;
And with Curses as wild
As e'er clung to child
He devotes to the blast
The best, loveliest and last
Of his name!

Apollo: God of the Sun,
truth, music and poetry

Theme:

Art and Beauty

Song of Apollo¹

Percy Bysshe Shelley

The sleepless Hours who watch me **as I lie**,
Curtained with **star-enwoven** tapestries,
From the **broad moonlight** of the sky,
Fanning the **busy dreams** from my **dim eyes**, —
Waken me when their **Mother**, the grey **Dawn**,
Tells them that **Dreams** and that the moon is gone.

Triggered by dawn?



Awaken

Morphous

superior to heaven?

Then I arise; and climbing **Heaven's** blue dome,

I walk over the mountains and the waves,

Leaving my **robe** upon the Ocean foam;

My footsteps pave the clouds with fire; the caves

Are filled with my bright presence, and the air

Leaves the green Earth to my embraces bare.

He commands the sun!

The **sunbeams are my shafts**, with which I **kill**

Deceit, that loves the night and fears the day;

All men who do or even imagine ill

Fly² me, and from the **glory of my ray**

Good minds, and open actions take **new might**,

Until **diminished** by the **reign of Night**.

I feed the clouds, the rainbows, and the flowers,

With their **ethereal colours**; the Moon's globe,

And the pure stars in their eternal bowers,³

Are cinctured⁴ with my power as with a **robe**;

Whatever **lamps** on **Earth or Heaven** may shine,

Are **portions** of one power, which is **mine**.

dormant,
asleep

Eos

5

Emphasises Apollo's power
light → positive / good connotation

10

Enlightenment

Overcomes
deceit?!

Personification
→ formidable force?

15

fleeing?!

nature

Nyx

Due to
light

20

Plato's Theory
of Forms

(Ideal vs Manifestation)

POETRY IN FILM Song of Apollo by Percy Shelley

¹ Song of Apollo: the poem is also referred to as 'Hymn of Apollo'. The 'I' of the poem is Apollo, the god of poetry.

² fly: flee from me.

³ bowers: shade

⁴ cinctured: to be secured with a girdle or belt.

I stand at noon upon the peak of Heaven; 25
 Then with unwilling steps I wander down
 Into the clouds of the Atlantic⁵ even; *→ where sun is the highest*
 For grief that I depart they weep and frown: *→ humanity*
 What look is more delightful than the smile *→ Sun sets in the west*
 With which I soothe them from the western isle? 30

I am the eye with which the Universe *→ World can see itself only due to light*
 Beholds itself, and knows it is divine;
All harmony of instrument or verse,
All prophecy, all medicine, is mine,
All light of art or nature; — to my song 35
 Victory and praise in its own right belong.

declarative {

— Poetry as light; beauty can only be seen
 or felt in poetry (role of the poet) *→ 'Ode to Psyche', 'Chapman's Homer'*

⁵ Atlantic: the Atlantic ocean, denoting Apollo's descent onto earth to inspire writers on the 'western isle'.

All Poetry

'Hymn of Apollo' by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a **celebratory ode** to the Greek god of light, music, and poetry. The poem's imagery is celestial and ethereal, with Apollo depicted as a **radiant figure illuminating the world**.

Compared to Shelley's other works, 'Hymn of Apollo' stands out for its optimism and its focus on the transformative power of light. While Shelley's earlier poems often explore themes of despair and alienation, this poem celebrates the **beauty and wonder** of the universe.

The poem also reflects the Romantic period's emphasis on **nature and the individual**. Apollo's role as the "eye with which the Universe / Beholds itself" reflects the Romantic belief in the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of self-awareness.

In terms of structure, the poem follows a loose **terza rima** scheme, with each stanza ending in a rhyming triplet. The language is elevated and lyrical, with a strong emphasis on imagery and metaphor.

An Exhortation

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Chameleons feed on light and air:

Poets' food is love and fame:

If in this wide world of care

Poets could but find the same

With as little toil as they,

5

Would they ever change their hue

As the light chameleons do,

Suiting it to every ray

Twenty times a day?

Poets are on this cold earth,

10

As chameleons might be,

Hidden from their early birth

In a cave beneath the sea;

Where light is, chameleons change:

Where love is not, poets do:⁶

15

Fame is love disguised: if few

Find either, never think it strange

That poets range.

Yet dare not stain with wealth or power

A poet's free and heavenly mind:

20

If bright chameleons should devour

Any food but beams and wind,

They would grow as earthly soon

As their brother lizards are.

Children of a sunnier star,⁷

25

Spirits from beyond the moon,

O, refuse the boon!⁸

⁶ Where love is not, poets do: poets change in their pursuit of love and fame.

⁷ Children of a sunnier star: Shelley refers to poets as the 'heavenly' sons of **Apollo**, the god of music and poetry.

⁸ O, refuse the boon!: a call for poets to refuse the 'boon' of fortune and power to remain 'beyond the moon'.

Carol Rumens

Shelley's "exhortation" to poets is playful but complex. It presents the Romantic ideal of the poet as an **anti-materialistic free spirit**, a subject discussed recently by contributors to the Poem of the week comments. Is Shelley completely in earnest, though? Is he himself playing the chameleon?

The jaunty tetrameters dance in a trio of nine-lined stanzas, finished each time by a graceful trimeter. Their rhythm suggests some evanescent, semi-visible creature, nodding on a breeze-fluttered branch, perhaps, reflecting an ever-changing sky. Shelley would have known perfectly well that actual **chameleons** need more than light and air as nourishment. The chameleon he conjures is already a **creature of imagination**.

How beautifully and deftly the noun "light" in line one shape-changes into an adjective, "the light chameleon", in line seven. Later, in the last stanza, that light chameleon colours up as "the bright chameleon". These delicate revisions exploit the ability of language itself to behave like a chameleon.

The poem never directly claims that the poet's changing colour in pursuit of love and fame is admirable. However, there seems to be something about such that appeals to the speaker's imagination, even as he advises against it. Doesn't the poet need versatility, and maybe reversibility, to be a poet at all? Keats certainly thought so.

'An Exhortation' was first published among the individual lyrics Shelley published with his verse-drama *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820. The poet-critic John Hollander describes it as "a witty piece, developed from Sidney's phrase, 'The Chameleon poet', in his Apology; but it also has a kind of exhilarated poignancy, typical of Shelley". Steven E Jones points out its source in the *Satiric Fragments* drafted in the Huntington Notebook.

He considers that Shelley's mind is chiefly on the **Protean** (ever-changing) poet William Wordsworth, whose conduct was widely discussed and criticised in English literary circles at the time. Jones cites Thomas Love Peacock's ballad 'Sir Proteus', a poem chiefly targeting Southey, but implicating Wordsworth and others considered to have defected from the Radical cause. This is where the **marine imagery** of stanza two fits in. **Proteus was a sea-god; like the chameleon he was a shape-shifter – changeable, slippery, but also a seer.** Shakespeare specifically connects the chameleon with Proteus in *Henry IV*, part III, when Richard III announces:

I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?
Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.

Villainous duplicity hovers around sea-gods and chameleons, then, but Shelley continues his exhortation in a spirit of empathy. Ahead of his time, as so often, he senses the psychological imperative behind the phenomenon. **The desire for love/fame is not itself castigated**, and the generalised reference to "poets" suggests that the need may tempt any poet on occasion to revise his shapes and colours. Shelley seems not simply to be satirising the wickedly worldly seeker of fame, but glancing with kindly mockery at his Romantic opposite. The tone contrasts strongly with that of the harsh mock-obituary of the earlier sonnet, 'To Wordsworth'.

In another of those chameleon-like shifts mentioned earlier, "light and air" rather delightfully metamorphose into "beams and wind" in the third stanza. And now the message gets another, more serious reiteration, as beams take us inevitably to the real god of poets – not Proteus, but **Apollo**. Chameleons can't be mere earth-dwellers, like lizards, the poet declares, and **warns his peers to "refuse the boon" of earthly power**. Serve Apollo instead, that "sunnier star" that provides your unreliable inspiration, and your ever-changing colours. I think he might be teasing a little, even here.

Graham Henderson

In "An Exhortation," Shelley addresses a question that preoccupied his age: what is a poet? In attempting to answer this question, Shelley uses as his primary metaphor the **chameleon**, the shape-shifting, colour-adjusting reptile. Readers of the Romantics might know that, funny enough, the chameleon was also central to Keats' understanding of the poet. According to Keats, the poet's distinguishing trait was their ability to write convincingly of any life situation, event, or mindset, an **adaptability that stemmed from their deep knowledge of human nature**.

The chameleon poet of Shelley's strange little poem is a bit different from Keats's, however. Playing with one of his favourite ancient texts, Plato's *Symposium*, **Shelley claims that the poet shape-shifts their way through life in pursuit of their unattainable goals: love and fame**. (Elsewhere in Tuesday Verse, we've explored how, in Shelley's writing, "love" is often depicted as a fraternal power, a bond with humankind at large). **The poet will never achieve the love they pursue**. However, this can be a good thing for Shelley, since the acquisition of this kind of love can bring "wealth and power" – the things that degrade all of us, but especially the poet. **If the poet is destined to wander their way through life in pursuit of ideals that cannot be attained**, this process also gives to poetry its most important qualities: **creative freedom, integrity** preserved from the world's corrupting influences, and **truth**.

Sonnet to Byron

Percy Bysshe Shelley

[I am afraid these verses will not please you, but]

If I esteemed you less, **Envy would kill**
Pleasure, and leave to Wonder and Despair
The ministration of the thoughts that fill
The mind which, like a worm whose life may share
A portion of the unapproachable, 5
Marks **your creations rise as fast and fair**
As perfect worlds at the Creator's will.

But such is my regard that nor your power
To soar above the heights where others [climb],
Nor fame, that shadow of the unborn hour 10
Cast from the envious future on the time,
Move one regret for his unhonoured name
Who dares these words:—the worm beneath the sod
May lift itself in homage of the God.

- Nature's duality → On the Sea
- Nature's might and mankind's insignificance → To Alisa Rock
- Nature's transitional / cyclical processes → To Autumn

XII

Thou heaven of earth! what spells could pall thee then,
In ominous eclipse? a thousand years
Bred from the slime of deep oppression's den,
Dyed all thy liquid light with blood and tears,
Till thy sweet stars could weep the stain away; 170
How like Bacchanals of blood
Round France, the ghastly vintage, stood
Destruction's sceptred slaves, and Folly's mitred brood!
When one, like them, but mightier far than they,
The Anarch of thine own bewildered powers, 175
Rose: armies mingled in obscure array,
Like clouds with clouds, darkening the sacred bowers
Of serene Heaven. He, by the past pursued,
Rests with those dead, but unforgotten hours,
Whose ghosts scare victor kings in their ancestral towers. 180

XIII

England yet sleeps: was she not called of old?
Spain calls her now, as with its thrilling thunder
Vesuvius wakens Aetna, and the cold
Snow-crag by its reply are cloven in sunder:
O'er the lit waves every Aeolian isle 185
From Pithecusa to Pelorus
Howls, and leaps, and glares in chorus:
They cry, Be dim; ye lamps of heaven suspended o'er us!
Her chains are threads of gold, she need but smile
And they dissolve; but Spain's were links of steel, 190
Till bit to dust by virtue's keenest file.
Twins of a single destiny! appeal
To the eternal years enthroned before us
In the dim West; impress us from a seal
All ye have thought and done! Time cannot dare conceal. 195

XIV

Tomb of Arminius! render up thy dead,
Till, like a standard from a watch-tower's staff,
His soul may stream over the tyrant's head;
Thy victory shall be his epitaph,

Graham Henderson

Shelley apparently wrote "Political Greatness" with Benevento in mind, an Italian city that briefly established itself as a republic between July 1820 and the spring of 1821. Whether Shelley wrote his poem before or after the fall of the republican city is an interesting conundrum, given the poem's questioning attitude about the possibilities of political revolution. Do the people of Benevento embody Shelley's portrait of successful revolutionaries, who must exercise self-awareness and mastery of their own will before they are able to create political change? Or does Benevento illustrate the failure that awaits spontaneous and disorganized mass uprisings?

Whatever the answer to this question, this sonnet certainly captures Shelley at a moment of political uncertainty. While 1820 was a fairly good year for progressives, witnessing successful reform movements in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Brazil, Shelley dedicates his poem to asking hard questions about the possibilities for achieving political change. Shelley doesn't renounce the hope of revolution or reform; rather, he suggests that an inner revolution—a self-disciplining, whereby we are able to master our desires and better know ourselves—must take place before we are able to achieve widespread social change. Shelley seems to have understood a crucial lesson imparted by reformers from Socrates to William Godwin to Martin Luther King Jr.: that in a world in which power is deeply ingrained not only in social institutions but in the collective psyche, the effort to change minds is perhaps more important than the effort to change laws.

