

MANDORLA

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POETRY AND COMMITMENT

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What I'd like to do here is touch on some aspects of poetry as it's created and received in an even more violently politicized and brutally divided world than the one MacDiarmuid knew. This won't be a shapely lecture; rather I'll be scanning the terrain of poetry and commitment with many jump-cuts, hoping some of this may rub off in other sessions and conversations.

To begin: what do I mean by commitment?

I'll flash back to 1821: Shelley's claim, in "The Defence of Poetry," that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Piously over-quoted, mostly out of context, it's taken to suggest that simply by virtue of composing verse, poets exert some exemplary moral power—in a vague unthreatening way. In fact, in his earlier political essay, "A Philosophic View of Reform," Shelley had written that "Poets *and philosophers* [italics mine] are the unacknowledged," etc. The philosophers he was talking about were revolutionary-minded: Thomas Paine, William Godwin, Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft.

And Shelley was, no mistake, out to change the legislation of his time. For him there was no contradiction between poetry, political philosophy, and active

confrontation with illegitimate authority. This was perfectly apparent to the reviewer in the *High Tory Quarterly* who mocked him as follows:

*Mr. Shelley would abrogate our laws...He would abolish the rights of property
...He would pull down our churches, level our Establishment, and burn our
bibles...*

His poem, "Queen Mab," denounced and suppressed when first printed, was later pirated in a kind of free-speech movement and sold in cheap editions on street-stalls in the industrial neighborhoods of Manchester, Birmingham and London. There it found plenty of enthusiastic readers among a literate working and middle-class of trade-unionists and Chartists. In it Queen Mab surveys the world's disorders and declares:

*...This is no unconnected misery,
Nor stands uncaused and irretrievable.
Man's evil nature, that apology
Which kings who rule and cowards who crouch, set up
For their unnumbered crimes, sheds not the blood
Which desolates the discord-wasted land.*

...

NATURE! —No!

Kings, priests and statesmen blast the human flower...

Shelley, in fact, saw powerful institutions, not original sin or "human nature" as the source of human misery. For him, art bore an integral relationship to the "struggle between Revolution and Oppression." His *West Wind* was the "trumpet of a prophecy," driving "dead thoughts...like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth."

He did *not* say, "Poets are the unacknowledged interior decorators of the world."