Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Utopian Publicity: The Case of Poetic Writings

Byoung Chun Min
Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea

Many critics of Percy Bysshe Shelley have construed Shelley’s “poetry” as a sort of transcendental, mental mechanism through which a more fundamental improvement of human life than immediate political reforms can be made possible. In this view of Shelley’s poetry, the values that poetry would bring about are condescendingly set up against the general public’s down-to-earth wish to improve their immediate life conditions, and therefore, the utopian vision implicit in Shelley’s poetic practice is founded on an exclusion of intellectually and economically unqualified readers. Given these critical assessments, this essay attempts to argue that Shelley’s poetic writings include significant elements that contradict the assumption implied in the view that intellectual elites take an absolute, exclusive position in giving rise to Shelley’s utopian publicity. In more detail, this essay will argue that Shelley’s utopian publicity proposed and embodied in his poetic writings is predicated on his ideal (and practical in many cases) aim toward a realization of a public sphere that espouses free circulations of various positions and embraces voices of people from all the classes.

Keywords: Percy Bysshe Shelley, poetry, intellectual elite, utopian publicity, free circulation

For Whom Were Shelley’s Poetic Writings Written?

Despite a series of studies that pay their attention to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s radicalism (Cameron, 1975; Foot, 1980; Dawson, 1980; Scrivener, 1982; Hoagwood, 1988; Behrendt, 1989; O’Neil, 1989; Wheatley, 1999),1 the prevalent and popular view about Shelley has been that his political and poetical ideas were products of high-mindedly conceived but practically irrelevant idealism detached from contemporary realities. This view is manifested most typically in Matthew Arnold’s (1921) famous description of Shelley as a “beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” (pp. 203-204). In the perspective of this critical view, Shelley’s political ideas were inclined to face a failure in actual practices of them, not only because his chance to address the public was forestalled by the contemporaneous conditions of politics and print culture, but more significantly because the political tenets implied in his writings were posited

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1 Many critics have attempted to identify and explain the origin and development of Shelley’s political ideas. For studies that deal with Shelley’s politics from extensive perspectives, see Cameron (1975), Foot (1980), Dawson (1980), Scrivener (1982), Hoagwood (1988), Behrendt (1989), O’Neil (1989), and Wheatley (1999).
towards a few intellectual elite and thus simply impracticable (Barcus, 1975). In fact, there are several cases of writing in which Shelley seems to selectively search for a limited class of readers who are capable of appreciating his ideas, rather than inclusively accept as possible readers for his writing a variety of publics which are fragmentarily and conflictingly diverse. One telling example that displays this tendency is *Laon and Cythna*, written and published in the period between the publications of the two “Hermit of Marlow” pamphlets that are said to reveal his radical politics in a most typical way. In the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley states the purpose of his composition of this poem, and more importantly, manifests what sort of readers he wants to address and how.

It [*Laon and Cythna*] is an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live. I have sought to enlist…all those elements which essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality, and in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind. For this purpose I have chosen a story of human passion…appealing, in contempt of all artificial opinions and institutions, to the common sympathies of every human breast. … I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue, and be incited to those inquiries which have led to my moral and political creed, and that of some of the sublimest intellects in the world. (Shelley, 2000, pp. 32-33)

As in his political pamphlets, Shelley here manifests that the purpose of writing *Laon and Cythna* is socio-politically motivated, that is, to substantiate the validity of “a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society” in the public mind. Thus, what Shelley would promote through the poem is “a liberal and comprehensive morality”, “a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice”, and “that faith and hope in something good”; they are all social values by which the public good could be implemented in politics and culture. Moreover, the way in which Shelley attempts to disseminate those values is similar to that used in the political pamphlets. Just as Shelley in the pamphlets attempts to validate political reform on the basis of a majority of people’s understanding and consent, he here justifies a critique of “all artificial opinions and institutions” by appealing to “the common sympathies of every human breast”. This preface displays the points that reflect Shelley’s intense concern for politics in 1817, occasioned both by a series of widely impactful political disturbances and his intellectual intercourses with the Hunt circle members, as do the two pamphlets.

Despite these similarities, however, the preface diverges from the political pamphlets on one significant point. In contrast to Shelley’s willing inclusion of diverse voices into a space of political discussion (in the form of both readers and political agents) in the pamphlets, “an experiment on the temper of the public mind” proposed in the preface to *Laon and Cythna* is directed toward “the enlightened and refined” (i.e., a selected

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2 For example, in a notice signed “J. W.” included in *The Champion* of December 23, 1821, an anonymous reviewer comments on Shelley’s public unpopularity as follows: “It is our opinion, that the poetical merits of Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley have never been duly appreciated by the public. This neglect (for, in reality, it amounts to that) is chiefly to be attributed to himself. He writes in a spirit which the million do not comprehend: There is something too mystical in what he says—something too high or too deep for common comprehensions. He lives in a very remote poetical world, and his feelings will scarcely bear to be shadowed out in earthly light” (Barcus, 1975, p. 287).

3 From March 1817 to February 1818, the Shelley was settled in Albion House, Great Marlow, and Buckinghamshire. Here, Shelley enjoyed an intellectual and creative life with his friends (including Hunt and his acquaintances, thus almost identical with the Hunt circle), and *Laon and Cythna* is a product of these intellectual interactions. It is estimated that Shelley wrote *Laon and Cythna* through the spring and summer of this year, and the printed copy started to be sold at the beginning of December. Hence, it can be safely said that *Laon and Cythna* and the two pamphlets were conceived and written almost simultaneously and in the same political and cultural situation.
class of readers who can intellectually follow Shelley’s moral, political ideals). Thus, despite Shelley’s appeal to people’s common sympathies, “the reader” for this poem is qualified by his or her ability to see “the beauty of true virtue” and apprehend Shelley’s “moral and political creed” and “that of some of the sublimest intellects in the world”. This qualification suggested as a prerequisite of a proper reader of this poem does not quite fit into the inclusive posture that Shelley takes in his political pamphlets, and thus there seems to be an explicit discrepancy between this poem and the pamphlets. Besides, in juxtaposing his moral, political creed with the world’s sublimest intellects, Shelley seems to conduct a process of enlightening people’s consciousness by his superior intellectual capacity rather than by participants’ communication on an equal basis. Here, Shelley’s way of approaching readers for this poem entails his own criterion of intellectual hierarchy and in this sense contradicts the principle of publicity based on the notion of diversity and inclusivity implied in his radical politics.

Another problematic point revealed in this preface is the way in which Shelley makes a value judgment on which his moral and political ideas are founded. As shown in the above quotation, Shelley depends on people’s common sympathies and feelings for communicating his ideas. But how do we know that these sympathies and feelings can guarantee the righteousness of the ideas engendered from them? In the latter part of the preface, Shelley gives an answer to this question. He says,

> It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. I have appealed therefore to the most universal of all feelings, and have endeavoured to strengthen the moral sense, by forbidding it to waste its energies in seeking to avoid actions which are only crimes of convention. (Shelley, 2000, p. 47)

Shelley, in other words, endows the “feelings” by which his communication with readers is made possible, with a normative legitimacy by extracting “the most universal” elements out of them. Still, this universality is too abstract a term to be stipulated as a working criterion for moral and political legitimacy, since this criterion can be infinitely variable according to those who conduct moral and political acts in specific circumstances. Thus, it is necessary to identify who decides this criterion of universality. If we follow Shelley’s logic in this preface, the moral, political agents who decide the criterion of universality should be “the enlightened and refined”, since Shelley already confines the meaningful communications generated by this poem to those among this selected class of readers; that is, Shelley communicates his “universal” ideas to the enlightened and refined readers because only this sort of readers understand them, and at the same time, Shelley’s ideas assume a “universal” value because these readers admit them so. This is definitely a circular logic. And by this circular logic, the criterion of universality that validates Shelley’s ideas becomes confined to a local communication between a few intellectual readers of his own selecting, and this locality of his “universal” ideas reduces his concept of universality to parochial idealism detached from various other groups of people existing in the actual world.

This problematic universal idealism, which aims at a fundamental change of the world with universal values but in reality functions as a limited political actions for certain specific classes, is also revealed in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, another politically oriented work that foregrounds Shelley’s will to achieve the public good. Specifically, in a part where Shelley suggests his “passion for reforming the world”, he at the same time qualifies this political passion by offering a more elaborate account of what he attempts to do in this poem. Shelley says,
it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence…. My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness. (Shelley, 1977, p. 135)

Shelley here makes a significant distinction between a didactic writing and a poetic writing, and he places the latter above the former. According to Shelley, a didactic writing is purported to give rise to practical political actions (e.g., “the direct enforcement of reform”) based on “a reasoned system on the theory of human life”. This definition is indeed about general features of a political writing with practical purposes, and his political pamphlets can be categorized as this type of writing. On the other hand, the type of writing that Shelley attempts to practice in a work like *Prometheus Unbound* (say, “poetry” in Shelley’s sense) has quite a distinctive purpose. This type of writing, instead of directly delivering a workable political agenda, implicitly suggests “beautiful idealisms of moral excellence”; more importantly, the reader should belong to “the more select classes of poetical readers” with “highly refined imagination”. Hence, in this type of writing, the true meaning of a work can be brought to light only through a mediation of enlightened and refined individuals’ mental capacities, for example, by love, admiration, trust, hope, and endurance. In this sense, poetry, despite its explicit aim toward achieving the public good, is distinguished from what Shelley calls a didactic writing, and the form of communication that will be practiced in poetry requires selected classes of readers endowed with intellectually refined mentality. The publicity immanent in this type of poetic writing, therefore, comes to be differentiated from the one generated by political pamphlets, and this publicity ineluctably includes an elitist principle founded on the notion of exclusivity and selectivity rather than of inclusivity and diversity.

**Critical Reviews**

Given this distinction between didactic writing and poetic writing, does Shelley presuppose two different types of publicity in practicing the public good through an act of writing? Many critics offer an affirmative answer to this question. For example, Dawson, despite his objection to distinguishing between didactic and non-didactic writing, sees the public ideals suggested in Shelley’s revolutionary epics (especially, *Laon and Cythna*) anti-revolutionary, since Shelley’s heroes of these epics embody the lesson that political revolutions would be doomed to fail if it were not for individuals’ reformed consciousness (Dawson, 1980). From this reading of Shelley’s poetic works, he argues that, to understand the precise nature of the public ideals implied in Shelley’s poetry, “we must turn from the democratic activist, Paine, to the philosophical theorist of anarchism, William Godwin” (p. 75). In other words, Shelley’s poetry, for Dawson, seeks to achieve political ideals by referring to refined philosophical theories, and this way of engaging with politics is obviously distinguished from the way of Paine, a down-to-earth activist for procedural democracy.

Scrivener (1982) offered a more explicit point on this issue. For Scrivener, Shelley’s political (thus didactic) writings are motivated differently from his poetic writings, in that “the former tries to embody the

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4 For Dawson, Shelley’s poetic practice cannot but fall under a category of didactic writing, despite his claim that he abhors didactic poetry. Dawson (1980) contended, “[Shelley] announces his intention to ‘enlist’ poetry in the service of a previously settled system of morality and to persuade his readers to adopt the ‘doctrines’ which constitute his own ‘moral and political creed.’ This is to make poetry a means to some exterior end, which is what we now understand by didacticism” (p. 213).
actual state of social consciousness in institutions”, but “the latter tries to alter that consciousness” (p. 124). Thus, in Scrivener’s view, while in political writings Shelley acts as “a libertarian activist” who is concerned with “the actual level of public opinion”, in poetry he becomes “a philosophical anarchist” who “is not satisfied with moderate reforms and desires a radically new society” (p. 124). Moreover, Scrivener (1982) touched on the issue of the intended reading public for Shelley’s poetry. He contends,

Shelley was not writing Laon and Cythna [and Prometheus Unbound] for the followers of Cobbett or Wooler, but for the readers of the Edinburgh Review, the Examiner, the Morning Chronicle, and the Independent Whig. If the leisure-class liberals would undergo a cultural revolution, adopting Shellyan principles and carrying them into practice, then they could lead a new movement that would go beyond merely parliamentary reform. (pp. 124-125)

Hence, for Scrivener, Shelley’s poetic practice not only goes beyond realistic political agendas that concern the general public’s practical interest (e.g., parliamentary reform), but exclusively aims at a specific class of people who are intellectually and economically competent enough to share Shelley’s “enlightened and refined” ideals and thus participate in the literary elite’s public sphere—i.e., what Behrendt (1989) termed “a potential universal army of visionaries” (p. 24). And for Scrivener, the existence of this special class of readers for poetry signifies Shelley’s dichotomous approach both to his writing practice and its public reception.

This dichotomous view on Shelley’s writing and its reception is elaborated in Kim Wheatley’s (1999) study. Wheatley (1999) supposed that there were two discursive stances in literary dialogues of the romantic period. The first stance, which dominated most of the Romantic period as a result of the intense political struggles of this period, is “paranoid”, “Satanic” stance. Writers in this stance (especially, writers for the political, cultural establishment) “characterize their adversaries as Satanic rebels against orthodoxy” by “[a]dopting the Miltonic and apocalyptic imagery of English political rhetoric” (p. 2). Shelley’s early writings, Wheatley (1999) argued, maintain this stance in their defiant confrontation against an antagonistic readership. The second stance is an alternative to this paranoid discourse, which Shelley developed in his later poetry. According to Wheatley (1999), this “nonparanoid” stance is concerned with Shelley’s turn to idealism and aestheticism, in which the aesthetic replaces the political by “momentarily sidestepping the oppositional structure of Satanic scenario”, and, by this turn “the very act of opening up a nonpartisan aesthetic space can be seen as offering a way out of a rigid and morally bankrupt political discourse” (p. 6). Briefly put, Wheatley (1999) opposed Shelley’s political writing to his aesthetic writing and finds in the latter an advanced form of speaking to the world through literature; in this sense, Wheatley also locates two different types or attitudes in Shelley’s practice of writing.

As discussed thus far, many critics argue for an existence of a certain hiatus in Shelley’s writings, and this hiatus is explained in terms of several binary oppositions, such as working-class laborers vs. leisure-class liberals, democratic activist vs. philosophical theorist, and the political vs. the aesthetic, to name a few. Despite some differences in details of arguments, critics who presuppose this hiatus in Shelley’s writing commonly assume that, unlike political writings for practical purposes or what Shelley calls “exoteric poems”, the form of writing that Shelley practices under the name of “poetry” seeks to achieve some high-minded and noble values by which the best state of human morality and politics can be conceived beyond down-to-earth material conditions of the existing human society. In other words, these critics construe Shelley’s “poetry” as a sort of transcendental, mental mechanism through which a more fundamental improvement of human life than immediate political reforms, which will lead ultimately to “beautiful idealisms of moral excellence”, can be
made possible. To be sure, these idealistic values that Shelley’s poetry conceives and practices should not be regarded as a solipsistic evasion of social realities through transcendental literature or what Jerome McGann (1983) called “romantic ideology”, since the goal of these values is definitely directed toward the general public and the social realities shared by them. Still, it is hard to deny that, in this view of Shelley’s poetry, the values that poetry would bring about are condescendingly set up against the general public’s down-to-earth wish to improve their immediate life conditions, and therefore, the principle of publicity implicit in Shelley’s poetic practice is predicated on an exclusion of intellectually and economically unqualified readers. The publicity that these critics consider Shelley implies by his poetic practice does not lie in a specific historical space where various people’s voices are cacophonously conflicting with each other, so much as in an imaginary ideal world created by Shelley’s and his qualified peers’ poetic deliberation.

Poetry as a Discursive Field of Authors and Readers

With all these critical assessments, does Shelley, in his poetic practice, attempt to generate a distinctive public sphere to which only enlightened and refined readers are admitted? And by validating the values engendered from this public sphere of poetry, does Shelley single out poets as a principal guide who will bring forward the ultimate public good for the world? It is true that several statements in his writings about poetry confirm this view of the poet as a qualified enlightener of the world ridden with ignorance and prejudice, but it is also the case that these writings include a number of elements that contradict the assumption implied in this view that poets take an absolute, exclusive position in giving rise to the public good.

In the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley frequently reveals an anxiety that his poetic practice may not effectuate the public good as he intends. For example, right after an elated announcement of what this poem will do for the public, Shelley tempers this announcement by intimating a possible failure of his intended poetic task. Shelley says,

… if the lofty passions with which it has been my scope to distinguish this story, shall not excite in the reader a generous impulse, an ardent thirst for excellence, an interest profound and strong, such as belongs to no meaner desires—let not the failure be imputed to a natural unfitness for human sympathy in these sublime and animating themes. It is the business of the Poet to communicate to others the pleasure and the enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings, in the vivid presence of which within his mind, consists at once his inspiration and his reward. (Shelley, 2000, p. 34)

Of course, Shelley here sticks to his faith in the way in which poetry generally makes a beneficial influence on the reader by “human sympathy in these sublime and animating themes”; nevertheless, this faith does not guarantee a successful implementation of *his own* poetic practice toward readers. Shelley accepts a possibility of his own poetry’s failure to achieve its public missions in terms of its relation with readers. This acceptance of a possible failure carries a significant connotation. Shelley, by this acceptance, intimates that, although it is indubitable that poets play a seminal role in fulfilling the public good for the world, their way of playing this role is not so much a one-sided act of enlightening or instructing readers as a reciprocal interaction between poets and readers. And Shelley also implies that even a poet’s excellent ideas could be inconsequential without the reader’s corresponding responses, and in this sense readers can be said to influence poets (not only vice versa). From this perspective, it is understandable why Shelley underscores the ability to “communicate to others” as a poet’s important business, and this model of communication on which Shelley’s notion of poetic practice depends contradicts the view that Shelley absolutizes poets’ role as a moral, political guide of the world.
Throughout the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley keeps emphasizing readers’ role in fulfilling his poetic practice. In a part in which Shelley states the experiences and the feelings from which he cultivated his poetic capacity and obtained sources of his poems, he again suggests that the power that his poetry will potentially wield depends on the audience’s engagement in the process of poetic creation. He contends,

> How far I shall be found to possess that more essential attribute of Poetry, the power of awakening in others sensations like those which animate my own bosom, is that which, to speak sincerely, I know not; and which with an acquiescent and contented spirit, I expect to be taught by the effect which I shall produce upon those whom I now address. ... There must be a resemblance which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live, though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded. (Shelley, 2000, p. 41)

While still foregrounding a faculty of sympathy awakened by poetry as its “essential attribute”, Shelley no more places this faculty exclusively in poets’ act of creation. Shelley now seriously considers readers’ part in a poetic creation; more specifically, he elevates readers’ role from passive recipients of a poet’s own ideas to equal participants in a process of creating poetry. Thus, Shelley here “expect[s] to be taught” by what he will effectuate on the readers, and from this reciprocation he assumes a discursive field of poetry founded on dynamics between poets and readers. Furthermore, Shelley expands this dynamic discursive field formed between poets and readers into a more comprehensive dimension of time and space (i.e., what Shelley calls “age”). This notion of age indeed qualifies influences that a poet possibly makes on the world and shifts the source of poetry’s power from an individual poet’s autonomous volition to a collective engagement made between members of a society (including both writers and all potential readers). In other words, Shelley conceives the general public’s engagement in producing socially influential discourses rather than an individual poet’s one-sided address to readers when he explains how poetry speaks to people.

Despite Shelley’s emphasis of a collective aspect of poetic creation, however, it should be noted that he never discards a belief in an individual poet’s power to make a meaningful difference to the world. For Shelley, “a common influence” to which a poet is inevitably subject does not mean an external condition that coercively determines his or her poetic creation, but a discursive field to whose formation a poet’s individuality will can meaningfully conduce; therefore, a poet’s act of creation in itself contributes to the formation of this common influence, and the poet him/herself becomes “the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded”. And from this belief in an individual effort to effectuate the public good with poetry, Shelley can validate the public significance of his own poetic practice, while conceding its limited role in giving rise to an age’s leading discourse by which to practice moral, political ideals. For Shelley, in this sense, a poet’s act of creating poetry functions both as an agent and a product of a public discourse.

This double function of poets’ practice is more clearly enunciated in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. Explaining how both internal powers of an individual poet and external influences on him/her contribute to a

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5 As to Shelley’s qualified view on the role of an individual will in poetic creation, James Chandler offers a compelling argument in relation to the notion of age: “In contemporary commentary on Romanticism, the natural supernaturalism of Wordsworth’s Prospectus to *The Recluse* and the faithful skepticism of Byron’s *Manfred*—or again, the progressive-conservatism of *Waverley*—are each of them offered as oxymoronic representations of the age’s consciousness of itself. From this confident fiction of epochal self-consciousness derives what Shelley called the ‘didacticism’ of such programs; it is what Keats, working out of Hazlitt, called the sense of ‘palpable design’ (LJK, 1:224). Shelley persistently fostered a generous suspicion of this claim of an individual will to represent the general will, even (indeed, especially) for those among his contemporaries whom he regards as possessed of greatest genius” (*England in 1819*).
poetic creation, Shelley offers a definition of poet which encompasses these antipodal elements existing within a poetic creation. He says,

A poet, is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others, and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers; he is not one, but both. Every man’s mind is in this respect modified by all the objects of nature and art, by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are in one sense the creators and in another creations of their age. (Shelley, 1977, p. 135)

As Shelley compellingly argues here, a poet’s role in a society, despite his/her special capacity to “modify the nature of others” with “internal powers” given by poetic writing, is not different from that of other producers of culture (e.g., “philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians”), since his/her mind (and “Every man’s mind) is completely open to publicly operated cultural practices (i.e., “all the objects of nature and art”, “every word and every suggestion”), and thus “one form” created by one cultural producer is a cultural product of a mind in which “all forms” belonging to an age are reflected. More simply put, by placing a poet’s act of writing poetry in a public operation of various cultural practices, Shelley suggests that a poet is after all a participant in a cultural public sphere formed in a specific age where an individual cultural action shapes and is shaped by a working of cultural circulations (Roberts, 2009).6 And the fact that Shelley in the two prefaces frequently mentions other poets (both predecessors and contemporaries), reviewers, and prose writers on politics, economics, and metaphysics in order to explain the principle of his poetic writing attests to the extent to which his own writing itself represents and embodies this working of cultural circulations.

**Utopian Publicity of Shelley’s Poetry**

This public sphere assumed in the two prefaces, however, is not confined to circulations and interactions of cultural practices. An ideal poet suggested by Shelley’s notion of poetry in these prefaces is less a man of culture who contemplatively appreciates and delivers a beauty of nature and art than a man in pursuit of achieving the public good for the world, and this aim of a poet toward an engagement in public affairs is closely aligned with the Hunt circle’s notion of literature which endorses an engagement in politics as an essential part of literary practice. Hence, Shelley’s strong contention of poets’ public mission as political activists, suggested in the part of his assessment of contemporary politics in the first chapter of *A Philosophical View of Reform*, is repeated almost verbatim in his most comprehensive and ambitious writing for vindicating the role of poetry in the world, *A Defence of Poetry*. The part, which elucidates the nature of poets, is obviously linked to the points on the same issue suggested in the aforementioned two prefaces, in that it defines a required quality of poet, “a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit,” as “less their spirit than the spirit of the age” (Shelley, 1977, p. 508); that is, it makes explicit that poets’ practice does not lie in poets’ individual will but in a public sphere in which they are participating, as do the two prefaces.

This part, however, goes beyond this consistently sustained point by presenting another definition of poets—i.e., the famous phrase “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (p. 508). Here, the word “legislators” strongly suggests that poets’ practice bears a political connotation. By this word, what poets do to

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6 On the issue of how Shelley positions his act of writing in terms of a public working of cultural circulations, Hugh Roberts (2009) commented that “Shelley repeatedly urges the reader to see his texts as existing within a noisy pre-existing universe of circulating poems, stories, manuscripts and even newspaper accounts, which inevitably shape his own writing, and the reader’s potential responses to that writing” (p. 196).
the world is solemnly heightened from a liberal address on public affairs to a normative practice of giving laws by which standards for righteousness in the world are assessed and ultimately enforced for the good of the people. This connotation obviously takes on the feature of practical politics. Just as Shelley’s political pamphlets aim to effectuate a legislative action (say, parliamentary reform), this definition of poets as legislators aligns Shelley’s poetic statements with political actions which would provide normative rules for fulfilling political justice. In this sense, the political public sphere embodied in his political writings and the literary public sphere assumed in poetic writings can be unified in this definition of poets as legislators, and with this unified public sphere that encompasses all cultural, political practices Shelley identifies his notion of utopian publicity.

Besides this connotation of the word legislators, the word “unacknowledged” also bears a significant meaning. In fact, the word “unacknowledged” is oxymoronically connected to the word “legislators”, since “unacknowledged” seems to highlight an aspect of poets as solitary recluses in contrast to the obviously public term “legislators”. Considered from Shelley’s repeated point that poets’ internal mind is a mirror of all the public elements of a society that they belong to, however, “unacknowledged” should be interpreted as signifying less poets’ solitary state or their alienated position than a public character of their internal mind unknown to themselves; that is, the publicity inherent in their seemingly individual practices of poetic writing is unacknowledged by themselves, and the acknowledgement of this inevitable publicity can be completed only by the corresponding responses of the people who participate in the public sphere that they belong to. Given this meaning of “unacknowledged”, then the phrase “unacknowledged legislators” perfectly makes sense.

Moreover, through the word “unacknowledged”, poets’ legislative activity, which may imply their superior position as belonging to the enlightened elite class, is properly qualified as a practice open to and even depending on the participation of the general public including working-class people. That is, as William Keach (2006) compellingly contended,

Shelley’s writing may need and appeal to cultural knowledge and skills generally found “among the higher orders,” but his political vision depends upon the eruption of volcanic forces from below that enter human existence in ways that cannot be confined to established practices of refinement and taste. (p. 132)

In brief, the notion of publicity proposed and embodied in both of Shelley’s political and poetic writings is predicated on his ideal (and practical in many cases) aim toward a realization of a public sphere that espouses free circulations of various positions and embraces voices of people from all the classes.

References


