

AN UNPUBLISHED SHELLEY LETTER

BY CHRISTOPHER GOULDING

An unpublished letter by Percy Bysshe Shelley has been found in a privately owned Victorian autograph collection held at a public record office in Newcastle. The letter, dated 27 August 1820, is from Pisa and is addressed to Charles Ollier, Shelley's London bookseller and publisher. It confirms several known aspects of Shelley's literary career, including Southey's denial of authorship of an anonymous attack on *The Revolt of Islam*. There are insights into Shelley's relationship with his publisher, especially concerning Ollier's reluctance to publish a second edition of *The Cenci*, and new light is shed upon the dating of Shelley's essay *A Philosophical View of Reform*.

An unpublished letter written by Percy Bysshe Shelley to his London bookseller has been identified in a private collection held in a public records office in Newcastle upon Tyne. The letter is part of a large late Victorian autograph collection of manuscripts, letters, and other ephemera relating to eminent persons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Brooks Collection was presented to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle in 1894 by Newcastle shipowner John C. Brooks (1812–97), who was one of the society's vice-presidents. The society's collection is kept under restricted access at the Northumberland County Record Office in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Written in Shelley's own hand, the letter is cross-written on a single sheet of paper measuring approximately 8½" by 9¾", and is gummed into one of ten leather-bound albums, accompanied by various newspaper cuttings and pictures relating to the poet's life and works. It is dated 27 August 1820 and was written in Pisa. Two postmarks on it read FPO SE 14 1820 and PISA, both in Roman capitals. The addressees are:

Messrs Ollier, Booksellers.
Vere Street
Bond Street
London
Angleterre

A transcription of the letter (omitting Shelley's spelling mistakes, corrections, and crossings-out) reads as follows:

Pisa August 27, 1820,

Dear Sir

Be so obliging as to forward the enclosed letters to their address, each with the addition of a copy of the *Cenci* & Prometheus Unbound,—

Southey has written to assure me that he is not the author of that article in the *Quarterly* against me—Pray do not omit in those to whom you present copies of the *Prometheus*, any of those named in my last list—among whom, Moore & H. Smith, & Keats I hope were mentioned—

I learn that noth withs tanding [*sic*] the early & prompt sale of all but about a dozen copies of the *Cenci*, of the edition I sent from Italy, no other one has been printed agreeably to my request. I think this very prejudicial to it, & entreat you to be good enough not to allow any delay to take place in printing a second edition. This play unless the Bookseller timidly yields to the cry of the bigots, is calculated to be popular. a second edition is the best answer to that cry.

This summer I have not been idle; I have written a fanciful thing in ottava rima called the 'Witch of Atlas'. I have translated also in ottava rima the Homeric Hymn to Mercury, in about 100 stanzas: the effect is very droll. I have rendered also into choice English, with a subtle preface, the Symposium of Plato, &, as Beppo says 'other things which may be had for asking': but I am meditating more serious literary enterprises—. M^r. Gisborne is not yet arrived here; but I suppose he will bring me a *Prometheus*.—This poem is intended only for the esoteric readers of poetry,—but indeed the *Cenci* ought to sell. Pray, would you like to publish an octavo volume of mine entitled 'A Philosophical View of the Question of Reform in the Government of Great Britain'? You can easily conceive the tone of it.—I think it due to you to ask you before I should offer it, if ever completed, to any other bookseller.

I wonder if you will have the politeness to answer my last letter—
My compliments to your brother, Dear Sir, I remain, y^r. obliged Servant,

P.B.S.

P.S. I wish you c^d. get Hookham's account—& Baldwin's for me.—Reynell the Printer writes for payment; if you see him tell him to be so good as to wait till [illegible]. I meant to have been in London this summer & should have settled my affairs then, but my lawyer was so dilatory that papers & c. are not even yet prepared.

The letter raises several interesting points, some of which confirm existing knowledge of Shelley's life and literary career, others which shed new light on his thoughts and writings during the summer of 1820.

The first point of interest is Shelley's note of Robert Southey's assurance to him that he had not been the author of a savage anonymous attack on his poem *The Revolt of Islam* in the April 1819 edition of the *Quarterly* magazine. Southey had written to Shelley in July 1820 expressing his denial, which Shelley gratefully acknowledged to Southey personally in a letter dated 17 August, and also in letters to other correspondents.¹

Shelley then expresses his frustration with Ollier at his unwillingness to publish a second edition of his play *The Cenci*. This point had been raised in

1 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F. L. Jones (Oxford, 1964), ii. 583.

earlier letters to his bookseller on 30 April and 14 May, and relations between the two were becoming rather uneasy at this time, as can be deduced from Shelley's exasperated request for a reply at the end of the letter. The disparaging references here to the bookseller's timidity in the face of potential critics—described as 'bigots'—underlines the poet's strength of feeling on this issue in terms very much on the strong side by the standards of Shelley's correspondence.

We then have a summary of the poet's other work in progress for which he has hopes of publication. Most notably in this paragraph, he refers to his translation and preface 'in choice English' of Plato's *Symposium*, a work which he had vainly been trying to interest publishers in since 1818. Almost exactly a year after this letter was written, Shelley was to lose this manuscript, finding it again some eleven months later, only days before his untimely death.

Then, the most interesting and perhaps valuable piece of information revealed is the mention in the fourth paragraph of his work referred to here as *A Philosophical View of the Question of Reform in the Government of Great Britain*. This would appear to be a reference to the essay hitherto known only by the shorter title, *A Philosophical View of Reform*. Due to its politically radical nature, it was kept unpublished by Shelley's family until 1920. It has since been compared by Paul Foot to the work of Paine, Marx, and Engels.²

Some uncertainty exists over the dating of the manuscript for this essay. Donald Reiman states that in the absence of known references to it anywhere else, 'Only three indisputable contemporary references to *A Philosophical View of Reform* occur in Shelley's letters.'³ Three of Shelley's letters to other correspondents dated between December 1819 and May 1820 are then cited. Reiman regards these as being 'our only external information about when Shelley drafted the fragmentary essay and what he hoped for it'.

Other commentary upholds Reiman's view. Michael Henry Scrivener adds: 'I believe Shelley worked on *A Philosophical View of Reform* from November [1819] to possibly January [1820], but the essay was "finished" by then—as finished as it would ever be.'⁴ The new letter suggests that Shelley was still revising the essay after his references to it in May 1820, possibly right up to August that year. At the very least, Shelley had revised its title to a much longer version than that quoted in all other known correspondence.

Finally, Shelley notes his intention to have made a return visit to London to settle his increasingly problematic financial affairs during the summer of 1820. His plans for such a visit had been referred to in an earlier letter to Leigh Hunt dated 13 November 1819. The visit never took place, of course, and Shelley

2 In his book *Red Shelley* (London, 1980).

3 D. H. Reiman (ed.), *Shelley and his Circle* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973), vi. 953.

4 M. H. Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), 210–12.

I have in London this summer ^{& should} have settled my affairs then, but my lawyer
was so satisfactory that paper &c. are not soon got together.

Pisa August 27. 1820.

Dear Sir Be so obliging as to forward the inclosed letters to their address,
each with the address of a copy of the *Enci & Parmesan Letters*. —
Boswell has written to advise me that he is not the author of that article
in the Quarterly against me. — Pray do not omit in them to inform me present
copies of the Promotions, any of these names in my list & list — among others, Moore
& H. Smith, *Shelley* & *Shelley* I hope was mentioned —

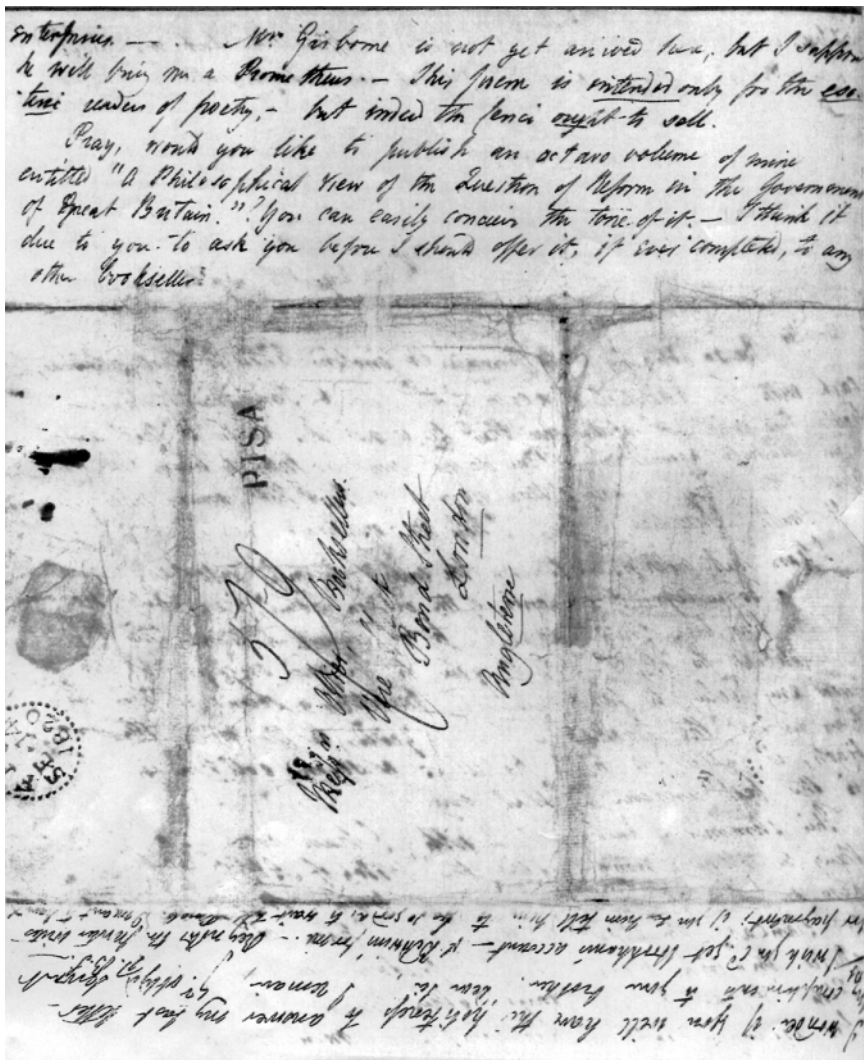
I hear that with rather tedious the work of prompt sale of all but
about a dozen copies of the *Enci*, of the edition I sent from Italy, no
other one has been printed, agreeably to my request. I think this very
propitious to it, & in great you to be good enough not to
allow any delay to take place in printing a second edition. The
only unless the Bookseller kindly sends to the end of the next
night, is calculated to be profitable a second edition in the
is the best answer to that copy.

This summer I have not been idle; I have written a principal
thing in *strange* name called the "Pitch of Atlas". I have translated
also in other names the Homeric hymn to *Mercury*, the other
100 stanzas: the effect is very good. I have written also into
choric English, with a suitable preface, the *Symposium* of
Plato, & as Bishop says "other things which may be had
for asking": but I am notwithstanding more serious literary

was to die in a boating accident while still in self-imposed exile nearly two years later.

The single sheet of paper on which the letter is written would appear to be half of a bifolium sheet, of which the other half is Shelley's letter of the same date to Hayward, his solicitor.⁵ The similar dimensions of that letter, supplied by the Massachusetts Historical Society as being $8\frac{1}{4}'' \times 9\frac{3}{4}''$ tend to support this. Two differences between the letters have been explained by Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield of the Bodleian Library. The Pisa postmark on the Hayward letter is in a florid, slanting font, rather than the roman capitals of the Ollier letter; these two styles are both found on various Shelleyan letters in the

⁵ *Letters*, ii. 584–5.



Bodleian collection from around this time. (Jones distinguishes between them in the respective notes to his *Letters* as ‘PISA’ and ‘Pisa.’) Different postal fees of 1s. 11d. in respect of the Hayward letter, and 5s. 9d. for the Ollier letter, are accounted for by the enclosures mentioned at the start of the Ollier letter.

Research continues to ascertain the provenance of the letters. Cuttings pasted into the album alongside the letter in the Brooks Collection appear to be extracts from auction catalogues, and suggest that it may have been purchased at one of the auctions of Ollier’s Shelley correspondence that took place at Puttick & Simpson in 1877 and at Sotheby’s in 1878.

Newcastle upon Tyne