



Percy Bysshe Shelley

John Addington Symonds

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Such reflections are forced upon us by the lives of three great English poets of this century. Byron died when he was thirty-six, Keats when he was twenty-five, and Shelley when he was on the point of completing his thirtieth year. Of the three, Keats enjoyed the briefest space for the development of his extraordinary powers. His achievement, perfect as it is in some poetic qualities, remains so immature and incomplete that no conjecture can be hazarded about his future. Byron lived longer, and produced more than his brother poets. Yet he was extinguished when his genius was still ascendant, when his "swift and fair creations" were issuing like worlds from an archangel's hands. In his case we have perhaps only to deplore the loss of masterpieces that might have equalled, but could scarcely have surpassed, what we possess. Shelley's early death is more to be regretted. Unlike Keats and Byron, he died by a mere accident. His faculties were far more complex, and his aims were more ambitious than theirs. He therefore needed length of years for their co-ordination; and if a fuller life had been allotted him, we have the certainty that from the discords of his youth he would have wrought a clear and lucid harmony. These sentences form a somewhat gloomy prelude to a biography. Yet the student of Shelley's life, the sincere admirer of his genius, is almost forced to strike a solemn key-note at the outset. We are not concerned with one whose "little world of man" for good or ill was perfected, but with one whose growth was interrupted just before the synthesis of which his powers were capable had been accomplished.

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