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The Legacy of Shelley's Vegetarianism: From Henry Stephens Salt to Gandhi

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This essay sets out to explore P.B. Shelley's adherence to a natural diet, given its ethical foundations, and the influence (both direct and mediated) that his thought exercised on Mohandas Gandhi in his adoption of vegetarianism and his belief in non-violent resistance. Central to this investigation is the role played by Henry Stephens Salt, a Victorian social reformer, a member of the Vegetarian Society, and a Shelley scholar who devoted strenuous efforts to popularising the poet's works and pioneering ideas.

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Introduction: Shelley's Natural Diet

Mohandas Gandhi frequently emphasised the moral basis of vegetarianism[1] in his speeches, pamphlets, and private correspondence, alongside his advocacy for respect and compassion toward all living creatures. He forcefully embraced and practiced *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word that literally means "lacking any desire to kill" (Easwaran 2011, 190), which he regarded as his path to Truth. While Gandhi's philosophy evidently drew on Jainism and Buddhism, he also gained valuable insight from Western thinkers and intellectuals. This essay sets out to explore how Shelley's ethical vegetarianism exercised a decisive influence on Gandhi's views on a natural diet while also inspiring his conception of active non-violence and resistance. In the present analysis, the significant role played by Henry Stephens Salt (1851-1939)—the founder and a leading figure in the Humanitarian League (established in 1891), a Shelleyan scholar, a social reform campaigner, a vegetarian, an anti-vivisectionist, and a committed socialist—will also be investigated.

Apart from being a biological necessity, eating is a social act, defining one's cultural identity through the selection, the seasoning, and the cooking of food (Stroup 2000, 94; Morton 2009, 13). As Timothy Morton has observed, Shelley the vegetarian—or, better, the Pythagorean,[2] since the word *vegetarian* was coined only 20 years after Shelley's death—was "keenly interested in what we take into and what we leave out of our stomachs" (Morton 2006a, 174). He himself had begun to adopt a vegetarian diet possibly around 1811, at Oxford, after reading Plutarch.[3] According to his friend and biographer, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley's food "was plain and simple as that of a hermit,[4] with a certain anticipation, even at this time, of a vegetable diet"[5] (Hogg 1858, 128). Hogg himself was reluctantly persuaded by Shelley and his first wife, Harriet Westbrook, to join them in a vegetarian community at Bracknell, near Windsor, in 1812-1813. Among the other intellectuals and reformers who shared the experience were Dr William Lawrence,[6] Dr William Lambe,[7] John Frank Newton and his sister-

[1] Gandhi's views on vegetarianism are collected in a volume entitled *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism* (1959). In one of his most cited sentences, he stated: "I do feel that spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures for the satisfaction of our bodily wants" (Gandhi 1959, 16).

[2] Morton clarifies that "Pythagoreanism was an ancient view of metabolic interconnectedness, in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls" (Morton 2006a, 174). Nineteenth-century Pythagoreans were also known as Brahmins, i.e., people who chose to eat vegetables for sheer moral as well as medical reasons (Morton 2009, 16). As Vincent Edward Burgess maintains, the vegetarian imagery of the time was infused with Orientalist elements (Burgess 2011, 32).

[3] Shelley even translated Plutarch's essays; as he elucidated in a letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, dated November 26, 1813, "I have translated the two essays of Plutarch, *περὶ ςαρκοΦαγίας* which we read together" (Ingpen 1914, 415). Shelley's first reference to his Pythagorean eating habits may be detected in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener (Dublin, March 14, 1812): "we [the poet and Harriet] have forsworn meat, and adopted the Pythagorean system" (281).

[4] In his *Autobiography*, referring to the time when Shelley lived in Marlow, Leigh Hunt also described him as a "hermit [… who] dined on vegetables (for he took neither meat nor wine)" (Hunt 1861, 239).

[5] Hogg would also highlight the fluctuation in the poet's dietary habits, especially during his residence in Italy, where he did not strictly adhere to vegetarianism (Hogg 1858, 128). In "Letter to Maria Gisborne", one of his posthumous poems, Shelley wrote "Though we eat little flesh and drink no wine, / Yet let's be merry" (Shepherd 1888, 15).

[6] Lawrence, whom Shelley had met in 1811, rigorously abstained from meat consumption. However, unlike Shelley, he believed that "the use of animal food [was] quite consistent with the greatest strength of body and mind" (Lawrence 1819, 321). Lawrence went so far as to justify the dominion of meat-eating Europeans (much fewer in number) over the "vegetable-eating millions of the East" (321).

[7] Lambe, one of Shelley's physicians, believed that a "regimen of vegetables and pure water" (Lambe 1815, 334) could have a positive effect on consumptive patients (Gigante 2011, 339). He also attached great importance to compassion toward all living beings (Luciano 2024, 49-50). Colin Carman observes that "it is no small hypocrisy on

in-law, Harriet de Boinville (Morton 2006a, 176-177). Newton's *The Return to Nature, or A Defence of the Vegetable Regimen* (1811) is credited by Rod Preece with being one of the main influences on Shelley's dietary habits (Preece 2008, 252). Conversely, David Lee Clark attributes greater importance to *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food, as a Moral Duty* (1802) by Joseph Ritson, apparently one of the poet's favourite volumes on the subject, due to the emphasis placed on the ethical considerations of vegetarianism (Clark 1939, 72). Sharon Ruston includes *Physiological Reflections on the Destructive Operation of Spiritous and Fermented Liquors on the Animal System* (1813) by Thomas Ignatius Maria Forster among other possible scientific sources supporting Shelley's nutritional choices (Ruston 2005, 113-122).[8] According to Franco Lonati, two additional texts should be added to the list: *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses* (1796) by John Lawrence (a dissertation on the inhumane treatment of horses destined for the slaughterhouse), and *Humanity, or the Rights of Nature* (1788), a long poem by Samuel Jackson Pratt that condemns hunting and other forms of cruel entertainment involving animals. Both volumes also frame the asymmetric and exploitative relationship between humans and the natural world within the broader context of social inequalities and slavery—two contentious issues to which Shelley was particularly sensitive (Lonati 2016, 127). For example, he also boycotted sugar in food preparation, as it was imported from slave plantations[9] (Sunstein 1989, 104).

"Ecotopian" (Morton 2006a, 174) aspirations, the firm intention to undermine any hierarchy between humankind and other sentient creatures may be detected in Shelley's entire oeuvre. To quote one of the most insightful passages, at the close of the eighth canto of *Queen Mab* (1813), the poet envisions a time when man no longer "slays the lamb that looks him in the face / and horribly devours his mangled flesh" (Shelley 1888, 39). *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude* (1816) opens with an invocation— "Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!" (Shelley 1880a, 21)—that highlights the kinship between all living beings, "in a way reminiscent of religions like Hinduism and Jainism which see the same spirit as animating human and nonhuman beings that may be reborn in either form" (Vanita 2013, 104), as Ruth Vanita has noted. In *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), Shelley calls for compassion and universal peace when he writes "never again may blood of bird or beast / stain with its venomous stream a human feast, / to the pure skies in accusation streaming" (Shelley 1880b, 193). His wish echoes in Prometheus's famous words of hope—"I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (Shelley 1820, 34)—expressed in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

Shelley also wrote several essays on a natural diet: note 17 to *Queen Mab*,[10] *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813)—a text whose title is modelled on Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, thus emblematically connecting two different, but equally subaltern categories, namely women and animals—, and *On the Vegetable System*

the poet's part that the one intoxicant far more addictive than alcohol" (Carman 2019, 85)—laudanum—was never foresworn by Shelley, who employed it as a sedative.

[8] Forster linked the intake of animal food with a craving for alcohol (Ruston 2005, 122), a connection that Shelley would later explore in his writings, most notably in *A Vindication of Natural Diet*.

[9] Lonati also mentions John Oswald's *The Cry of Nature* (1791) as a source, possibly the first treatise to consider purely ethical reasons for adopting a natural diet (Lonati 2016, 126). In his works, Pope had already censured the brutal slaughter of wildlife and cattle, while in William Hogarth's *The Four Stages of Human Cruelty* (1751), the barbarous treatment of animals was severely condemned (Canani 2017, 58). At the turn of the nineteenth century, George Nicholson also advocated for oppressed species in his *On the Conduct of Men to Inferior Animals* (1797). The rhetoric of vegetarianism was often interwoven with anti-slavery and proto-feminist discourses (Morton 2006a, 177).

[10] In David Lee Clark's view, the notes to *Queen Mab* were written after *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, not vice versa (Clark 1939, 71), as is commonly believed (see, for example, Canani 2017, 65). The content of the two texts is very similar.

of Diet,[11] which remained unpublished during his lifetime and was first released in 1929.[12] Using the arguments of comparative anatomy, in *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, he observes the resemblance between humans and other frugivorous animals,[13] especially orangutans,[14] given their shared absence of claws "wherewith to seize his prey" (Shelley 1884, 13) and sharp teeth "to tear the living fibre" (13). Drawing on mythology and on Newton's *The Return to Nature, or A Defence of the Vegetable Regimen* (which is quoted verbatim), Shelley blames Prometheus for teaching humankind the consumption of animal food, made more digestible and palatable through the use of fire. Hence, originally healthy and endowed with perpetual youth, men and women had been perverted into sickly creatures. Indeed, the act of cooking had helped "disguis[e] the dead flesh" (Shelley 1884, 13) and conceal "the sight of its bloody juices" which would otherwise "excite intolerable loathing and disgust" (13). The artificiality of such a taste is also demonstrated by the fact that it is only "by the gradual depravation of their digestive organs" (14) that children turn from their natural preferences—"pastry, oranges, apples, and other fruit" (14)—to the "flesh of animals" (14). Like Forster, Shelley believes that both "animal flesh and fermented liquors [are…] slow but certain poison" (20), serving as "unnatural stimuli" (16) capable of altering one's behaviour and influencing the course of history. Had "the populace of Paris" (16) abstained from drinking anything but the water from the Seine, and had the French observed a pure vegetable diet, Robespierre would never have been elected, and the French Revolution would not have been so repugnant and gruesome.[15] In his view, the "craving for dead flesh" (20) is not only unnatural and unwholesome, but also immoral in its egoistic hedonism. Conversely, "there is no disease, bodily or mental, which adoption of vegetable diet and pure water has not infallibly mitigated" (18). Towards the end of the essay, Shelley voices anxieties over "individual rivalship, such calamitous and sanguinary national disputes" (21) to acquire "multitudinous articles of luxury" (21), such as the spices from India necessary to turn raw flesh into culinary delicacies, or the wines from Spain, Portugal, France, or Madeira. In his treatise, therefore, the history of meat and alcohol consumption is inextricably intertwined with imperialistic drives and colonial exploitation.

Henry Stephens Salt and Shelley's Ethical Vegetarianism

Quite surprisingly, as William James Stroup has elucidated, Shelley's commitment to vegetarianism and its social and political implications have often been downplayed by critics[16] "as an adolescent affectation and a peripheral interest at best" (Stroup 2001, 24). Timothy Morton has also noticed that, despite its lasting legacy, Shelley's vegetarianism still remains "one of the most often overlooked aspects" (Morton 2006b,

[11] *On the Vegetable System of Diet* revolves around two main concepts: that a natural diet is healthier—since "disease is the consequence of unnatural habits" (Shelley 1993, 150)—and that human anatomy bears no resemblance to that of carnivorous animals.

[12] It was likely composed between 1814 and1815 (Morton 2009, 141; Canani 2017, 62).

[13] In a brief passage from *A Refutation of Deism* (1814), Shelley once again resorts to comparative anatomy stating that humans are classed "with those animals who feed on fruits and vegetables" (Shelley 1890, 25). In his opinion, their "gluttonous and unnatural appetite for the flesh of animals" (25) leads to disease and lack of vigour.

[14] "The orang-outang is the most anthropomorphous of the ape tribe" (Shelley 1884, 13).

[15] Later in the pamphlet, Shelley clarifies that if Bonaparte had "descended from a race of vegetable feeders" (Shelley 1884, 17), he would never have yearned for power.

[16] Recently, this tendency seems to have reversed: apart from Carmen Luciano's thought-provoking 2024 volume on Shelley as an anti-speciesist thinker, Maggie Rose's play *Shelley. A Diet for Peace* (2022) deserves to be mentioned.

25) of his life and output, echoing Onno Oerlemans's view that scholars have paid "little serious attention" (Oerlemans 1995, 531) to the poet's adherence to a Pythagorean eating routine. If he did not inaugurate this disparaging tradition, T.S. Eliot unquestionably strengthened it when, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, he condescendingly dismissed the poet's notes to *Queen Mab* as expressing "the views of an intelligent and enthusiastic schoolboy, but a schoolboy who knows how to write" (Eliot 1933, 88).[17]

Conversely, in the final decades of the Victorian era, activists and intellectuals, such as Henry Stephens Salt[18] "one of Shelley's most perceptive readers and a forerunner [...] of contemporary Ecocriticism" (Stroup 2001, 23), to quote Stroup's words, succeeded in grasping the full significance of Shelley's natural diet. The poet enjoyed renewed popularity after the foundation of the Shelley Society, on March 10, 1886, and the publication of Edward Dowden's *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, released in the same year, which divulged documents and information long concealed by Shelley's family (Crisafulli 2008, 62). Salt's first literary endeavour—*A Plea for Vegetarianism* (1886)—was aimed at dismantling anthropocentric perceptions of the natural world, while shaking inveterate power structures. The volume liberally drew on Shelley's *Vindication*, [19] which had just been republished by the Shelley Society with an introduction by Salt himself and William Edward Armytage Axon.[20] In the "Prefatory Notice", the two editors affirmed that "if [Shelley] had lived in the present time he would have taken a leading part in the movement toward Food Reform" (Shelley 1884, 5). In his long and prolific writing career (he authored nearly 40 volumes), Salt devoted equal effort to promoting an ethical diet among his fellow countrymen and countrywomen, and to popularising the works and thought of P.B. Shelley, publishing several biographical studies and editing many of his works.[21] His debt to the poet is unreservedly admitted in the final chapter of *The Creed of Kinship*: "to me [Shelley] has been pre-eminently a guide and a companion, whose life and character have meant more than those of any other mortal of whom I have read" (Salt 1935, 111). In his autobiography, *Seventy Years among Savages* (1921), Salt's profound understanding of Shelley's respect for the dignity of all living beings can be easily ascertained by focusing on the following passage, in which he explains why he had resolved to leave Eton and

[17] Eliot voiced his utmost aversion to Shelley (and his vegetarianism) in many other passages of the text. For instance, he wrote: "from a poet who tells us, in a note on vegetarianism, that 'the orang-outang perfectly resembles man both in the order and the number of his teeth', we shall not know what not to expect" (Eliot 1933, 88). He further added: "an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence" (89), before concluding that he found "his ideas repellent" (89).

[18] The son of a British Army colonel, Salt was born in India, where he spent the first year of his life before relocating to Britain in 1852. Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster lament that Salt "remains largely unknown today" (Clark and Foster 2000, 468), despite his central role in the Humanitarian League. Through the columns of two journals—*Humanity* (1895-1919) and *The Humane Review* (1900-1910)—, this radical advocacy group exposed "the inhumane practices in society while offering potential alternatives and solutions to those social ills" (469). For further information, see https://www.henrysalt.co.uk/.

[19] Just like Shelley, Salt referred to the arguments of comparative anatomy in support of a natural diet, while also valuing temperance "both in food and drink" (Salt 1886, 26). He believed that "grossness of diet [was] indeed a fertile cause of dulness [sic] and dejection of mind" (46).

[20] Axon also wrote a pamphlet entitled *Shelley's Vegetarianism* (1891).

[21] In *A Shelley Primer* (1887), Salt argued that Shelley's vegetarianism "was no mere fastidious crotchet, but directly connected with his belief in universal Love" (Salt 1887, 33). In *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Monograph* (1888), he described the poet as "a vegetarian at heart and by conviction" (Salt 1888, 245). In *Shelley's Principles; Has Time Refuted or Confirmed Them?* (1892), Salt underlined that "in his condemnation of flesh-eating, Shelley was a precursor of a vital and growing reform" (Salt 1892, 57). The poet's dietary habits are also mentioned in *Percy Bysshe Shelley, Poet and Pioneer. A Biographical Study* (1896). In 1915, Salt edited *Selected Prose Works of Shelley*.

his career.[22] Shelley's revulsion against all forms of cannibalistic exploitation (including animals, women, or colonised subjects) resonates in Salt's remark, where cattle and low-class workers are equally mangled and devoured by their masters:

> Thus, gradually the conviction had been forced on me that we Eton masters, however irreproachable our surroundings, were but cannibals in cap and gown—almost literally cannibals, as devouring the flesh and blood of the higher non-human animals so closely akin to us, and indirectly cannibals, as living by the sweat and toil of the classes who do the hard work of the world (Salt 1921, 64).

The appalling imagery in this excerpt closely mirrors that of P.B. Shelley's *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), a satiric drama in which a dehumanised and abused mob is degraded to the rank of animals, their flesh actually consumed as sustenance by the upper classes.

Henry Stephens Salt: A Cultural Mediator between Shelley and Gandhi

Henry Stephens Salt also served as a link between P.B. Shelley and Mohandas Gandhi. Before delving into the details of their indirect acquaintance, a few preliminary observations will prove useful. As Carol Adams has emphasised, in the nineteenth century, proponents of male white supremacy considered meat "as superior food" (Adams 1990, 8), fit for the requirements of the ruling class and essential to their intellectual activities. Influenced by evolutionary theories, George M. Beard, a renowned physician, believed that, in order to maintain good health and avoid exhaustion, men were supposed to "diminish the quantity of cereals and fruits, which [were] far below him on the scale of evolution, and increase the quantity of animal food" (Beard 1884, 250), given the closer evolutionary proximity of animals to men.[23] In Adams's words, in line with these prejudiced assumptions, cereals and fruit were "thus appropriate foods for the other races and white women, who appeared to be lower on the scale of evolution as well" (Adams 1990, 8). Within this biased conceptual framework, the world was supposedly divided into two categories: the intellectually and physically superior meat-eaters and the savage, vulnerable, and soon-to-be conquered plant-eaters. Beard also argued that a nation's character and its standing in the international arena strictly depended on its diet:

> The rice-eating Hindoo and Chinese and the potato-eating Irish peasant are kept in subjection by the well-fed English. Of the various causes that contributed to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, one of the chief was that for the first time he was brought face to face with the nation of beef-eaters, who stood still until they were killed. And in Egypt the late campaign was a short one partly because good food was arrayed against poor food: bread and beef against rice and lentils. The peasantry of France, Italy, and Spain, who take their half-bottle of wine with rice and soup, must always give way, in battle or labor, to the properly fed Englishman or American. (Beard 1884, 256)

As clearly expressed in his *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1963),[24] Gandhi himself initially shared these partial and inaccurate views. Even though

[22] Himself an Etonian like Shelley, Salt was distressed by the neglect "the poet-pioneer" (Salt 1921, 90) endured at the college: "At Eton there was little knowledge of Shelley, and still less understanding" (91).

[23] Since proximity on the evolutionary scale allegedly made food more wholesome and digestible, Beard also paradoxically maintained that "man *[was]* good food for man; and cannibals *[were]* the strongest and healthiest of savages" (Beard 1884, 253).

[24] The text was originally written in Gujarati and published in two volumes, in 1927 and in 1929.

he came from a strictly vegetarian Vaishnava family, in his teens, he experimented with eating meat, urged by one of his friends who believed the secret of British power lay in the consumption of large quantities of beef.[25] As Gandhi recalled, "It began to grow on me that meat eating was good, that it would make me strong and daring, and that, if the whole county took to meat eating, the English could be overcome" (Gandhi 1963, 12). In support of this thesis, Gandhi also cited a popular doggerel of the Gujarati poet Narmada:

> Behold the mighty Englishman
> He rules the Indian small,
> Because being a meat eater
> He is five cubits tall. (Gandhi 1963,12)

As well as being haunted by the remorseful nightmare of a living goat bleating inside him, young Gandhi despised himself for betraying his principles, despite the seemingly valid reasons that had led him to do so: "I wished to be strong and daring and wanted my countrymen also to be such, so that we might defeat the English and make India free" (Gandhi 1963, 13).

Before departing for Britain in 1888, to further his education and become a barrister, he eventually vowed to his mother "not to touch wine, woman, or meat" (Gandhi 1963, 24), and he honoured his commitment. During the first weeks of his stay, Gandhi experienced hunger and isolation. He strove awkwardly to mimic the Englishmen he met by taking up the violin, taking elocution lessons, and adopting a European style in clothing. Finding a vegetarian restaurant in Farrington Street and having his "first hearty meal since [his] arrival in England" (30) was an epiphany for him. He realised that not everybody in that distant country was a beef-eater (and thus an *oppressor*): some actually shared his values. This common ground made cooperation possible, paving the way for a fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue. Before entering that restaurant, he noticed some books for sale displayed in a glass window near the door: among them was Henry Stephens Salt's *A Plea for Vegetarianism*. Gandhi purchased the volume and eagerly read it "from cover to cover" (30). At that precise moment, he "became a vegetarian by choice" (30), attributing this definitive decision to Salt's pivotal influence:

> I blessed the day on which I had taken the vow before my mother. I had all along abstained from meat in the interests of truth and of the vow I had taken, but had wished at the same time that every Indian should be a meat-eater, and had looked forward to being one myself freely and openly some day, and to enlisting others in the cause. The choice was now made in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission. (Gandhi 1963, 30)

Gandhi understood that humanity's alleged supremacy over other creatures meant that "the higher should protect the lower" (34) rather than preying upon them. He also acknowledged the mutual interdependence between humans and non-human animals. Hence, he turned into an active member of the London Vegetarian Society (founded in 1888)[26] and, in September 1890, was invited to join its Executive Committee and

[25] Gandhi's friend thus explained why he regularly ate meat: "we are a weak people because we do not eat meat. The English are able to rule over us because we do not eat meat" (Gandhi 1963, 12).

[26] As Colin Spencer has observed, "the Pythagorean diet officially changed its title to vegetarianism in 1847" (Spencer 1995, 25), with the establishment of the Vegetarian Society, during a meeting in Ramsgate (Kent). Manchester soon became the centre of many of the Society's activities and hosted its first annual meeting, in 1848

selected to represent the London Vegetarian Society at the Conference of the Vegetarian Federal Union in Portsmouth, in May 1890 (Gandhi 1963, 35-44). Gandhi even started his own vegetarian club in Bayswater the following year, while enthusiastically contributing articles to the Vegetarian Society's two weekly magazines: *The Vegetarian* and *The Vegetarian Messenger*. While the majority of his journalistic pieces sought to establish channels of communication between East and West on the common ground of a natural diet—for example, he wrote about Indian vegetarianism and religious festivals in his own country—Gandhi also linked his commitment to vegetarianism with broader issues of justice, as P.B. Shelley had done before him. In his article "English Misrule in India", published in *The Vegetarian* on July 29, 1893, he strategically praised the British government as "one of the most civilised [...] in the world" (Gandhi 1893, n.p.); yet, he openly denounced the unfair treatment of attorneys in Gujarat, whose licenses had been revoked. They could regain their right to practice only by paying an annual fee of 30 rupees. As Gandhi remarked:

> In no civilised government the independence of lawyers is not respected. They are mouthpieces of the ignorant masses, and when they are deprived of their freedom everything is done up. When the freedom of press and freedom of debate are the true birthrights and privileges of the English people, why should not a small portion of them be liberally extended to Indians who are really in need of it and who have every right to claim a fair share of them from the British Government? (Gandhi 1893, n.p.)[27]

Henry Stephens Salt was also a prominent member of the Vegetarian Society; he wrote several articles on Shelley's poetry, as well as on his reflections on food and social reform, for various magazines.[28] As Madhu Benoit has clarified, therefore, "it is practically impossible that Gandhi did not imbibe Shelley's ideas in some form or other during his contacts with all those people" (Benoit 1997, 313), referring not only to Salt but also to other members of the Society and Shelley enthusiasts. Benoit's assertion is reinforced by Thomas Weber, who maintains that "in the vegetarian circles in which [Gandhi] moved, and in the vegetarian books and journals he read, Shelley and his ideas on nonviolence were often topics of discussion" (Weber 2004, 28). At the beginning of chapter XV of his autobiography, Gandhi also credits Howard Williams's *The Ethics of Diet* (1883)—a comprehensive history of vegetarianism, whose meaningful subtitle is *A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-eating*—with serving as the basis for his further reflections on an ethical diet. In the 18-page chapter of the volume devoted to Shelley's vegetarianism, the famous note 17 to *Queen Mab* is quoted extensively, alongside a long excerpt from *Laon and Cythna*.

In Gandhi's vast literary output, however, P.B. Shelley is rarely mentioned.[29] One possible reason may lie in Gandhi's views on sexuality, which significantly diverged from those of the English poet. While the latter was an advocate of sexual liberation and

(263). In 1888, following a split from the original Society, the more radical London Vegetarian Society was founded (276).

[27] As David Bulla has pointed out, "this would become the template for Gandhi's future persuasive writing: Praise the British political system while detailing contradictions that unfairly impacted some of her subjects" (Bulla 2019, 60).

[28] Among others, "Shelley's Gospel of Nature", *The Hygienic Review*, July 1, 1892; "Shelley's View on Social Reform", *Justice*, October 31, 1885; "Shelley and the Superior Person", *International Review*, September 1889.

[29] According to Stroup, Gandhi had never studied Shelley's poems at school (Stroup 2000, 92). However, Benoit has argued that, during his still-underexplored early years in London, "in all probability [Gandhi] read Shelley's *A Vindication of Natural Diet*" (Benoit 1997, 313).

free love, the former was firmly convinced that sexual activity was enervating and disruptive to the body. Consequently, Gandhi practiced *Brahmacharya*, which implies independence from physical impulses and passions (Benoit 1997, 316-318). The charges of atheism pressed against Shelley after the publication of *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811) possibly contributed to preventing Gandhi from openly acknowledging his debt to the poet. In his autobiography, in fact, Gandhi declared his "aversion to atheism" (Gandhi 1963, 43) and his "prejudice against atheism" (43). Stroup claims that "Salt's introduction of Shelley as a vegetarian hero allowed Gandhi to see past the label of atheist" (Stroup 2000, 125), but he may have still been reluctant to voice his admiration for the poet. All the same, in his 1893 *Guide to London*, a booklet written for Indian students intending to pursue their education in England, Gandhi proudly announced that, among many other notable Englishmen,[30] "the poet Percy Shelley was a vegetarian" (Gandhi 1958a, 91). Three years later, on February 3, 1896, in a letter on food reform addressed to the editor of *The Natal Mercury*, he listed Shelley as a renowned vegetarian, along with Buddha, Plato, Pythagoras, and other "eminent men" (Gandhi 1958b, 293). When, in November 1931, he was invited to deliver a speech at the London Vegetarian Society, Gandhi publicly praised Henry Stephens Salt—who was, in fact, seated to his right—and his *A Plea for Vegetarianism* for "show[ing him] why it was a moral duty incumbent on vegetarians not to live on fellow-animals" (Gandhi 1971, 326). The following year, Gandhi wrote a letter to him, underlining the profound bond that tied them together, despite the obvious cultural differences:

> May I say in all humility that one rarely finds people outside India recognising non-human beings as fellow beings. Millennium will have come when mankind generally recognizes and acts up to this grand truth. (Gandhi 1972, 309)[31]

Lastly, Shelley's and Salt's vegetarian ethics and principles, the poet's abhorrence of any form of violence and his stern refusal to mirror the aggressive strategies employed by tyrants (as in his *Prometheus Unbound*,[32] where forgiveness functions as an antidote to brutality) might have influenced Gandhi's conception of *ahimsa* and non-violent resistance. While conversing with Christian missionaries during the International Missionary Conference held in India on December 12, 1938, he explained his notion of "active non-violence" (Gandhi 1977, 203) as far removed from passivity: "to be truly non-violent, I must love [my opponent] and pray for him even when he hits me" (202). To support his argument, Gandhi recited several lines from Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), a political poem composed after the Peterloo Massacre which he likely became familiar with thanks to "the direction given to him by vegetarian authors" (Stroup 2000, 127).[33] Gandhi edited and abridged the text, so that its message could appear universal, without any explicit reference to England or the specific situation. What remains are quatrains 79, 84, 85, 86, and the final five lines:

> Stand ye calm and resolute,
> Like a forest close and mute,
> With folded arms and looks which are
> Weapons of unvanquished war.

[30] Gandhi also mentioned Salt and his *A Plea for Vegetarianism*.

[31] Gandhi's letter was written in reply to a message from Salt, in which food reform was equated with socialism as "an essential part […] in the liberation of mankind" (quoted in Gandhi 1972, 309n).

[32] Benoit considers Shelley's lyrical drama "impregnat[ed …] by Indian culture" (Benoit 1997, 311).

[33] Benoit argues that the poem was possibly copied for him by Esther Menon, in 1933 (Benoit 1997, 314).

> And if then the tyrants dare
> Let them ride among you there,
> Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—
> What they like, that let them do.
>
> With folded arms and steady eyes,
> And little fear, and less surprise,
> Look upon them as they slay
> Till their rage has died away.
>
> Then they will return with shame
> To the place from which they came,
> And the blood thus shed will speak
> In hot blushes on their cheek.
>
> Rise like Lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number—
> Shake your chains to earth like dew
> Which in sleep had fallen on you—
> Ye are many—they are few. (Gandhi 1977, 203-204)

The words of Indian scholars Krishna Pachegonkar and K.R. Shriwadkar offer a fitting conclusion to this essay on the legacy of Shelley's vegetarianism and its resonance in Gandhi. In their article on Gandhi and British Romanticism, Pachegonkar and Shriwadkar observe a potential connection between *Bapu* (the Gujarati word for "father") and Shelley's Prometheus. What follows is their conclusion, emphasising how the selfless and compassionate titan had finally found its earthly incarnation: "Shelley would have been more than gratified to know that the 20th Century could finally see the Prometheus of his vision becoming a reality in Asia" (Pachegonkar and Shriwadkar 1999, 185).

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