CHAPTER IX

Translations of Dramatic Works of Euripides, Goethe and Calde'ron by Shelley

— Fragments only.

PART–1

SHELLEY'S TRANSLATIONS

When Shelley was asked about the importance of learning a foreign language, he remarked:

> What is a translation of Homer into English? A person who is ignorant of Greek need only look at 'Paradise Lost', or the tragedy of 'Lear' translated into French, to obtain an analytical conception of its worthless and miserable inadequacy. [1]

In spite of this attitude towards foreign language learning, Shelley himself tried his hand in translations. Among his dramatic translations there are part of Goethe's *Faust*, Caldéron's *Magico Prodigioso* and *The Cyclops* of Euripides. In these works Shelley not only put down verbal equivalents for the original but also shaped the dramas according to his own understanding. Thus these translations may be considered as a part of the development of Shelley's dramatic potential. Moreover, it may be worthwhile to analyse these attempts for pointing out the fact that Shelley in these translations also treads on his favourite areas centring round moral beauties and the mystery of evil.

One factor of importance in regard to these translations in Shelley's general theory of poetry, becomes distinct when we analyse the explanation provided in *A Defence of Poetry*:

> Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious reverence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violate into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel. [2]

According to Medwin, Shelley regarded Dante as both a subject for translation and an inspiration for composition — and discomfiting in both aspects.[3] Goethe generated the same response within Shelley. In a note to his own translation of *Faust*, Shelley supplies an alternative rendition of the opening lines of the prologue in Heaven, and then comments:

> Such is a literal translation of this astonishing chorus: it is impossible to represent in another language the melody of the versification: even the volatile strength and delicacy of the ideas escape in the crucible of translation, and the reader is surprised to find a *caput mortuum*. [4]

Shelly insisted thus on thinking like the original poet, but in his own language:

> *Faust* may furnish the germ of other poems... I have, (Imagine my presentation) even with all the license I assume to figure to myself how Goethe would have written in English, my works convey, no one but Coleridge is capable of this work.[5]

PART II

Faust

Bayard Taylor, who translated Goethe's *Faust* into English comments on the Walpurgis Night scene of Shelley's *Faust* fragment and it is worth quoting here:

> His version of the Walpurgis Night, although not very faithful, and containing frequent lines of his own interpolation, nevertheless admirably depict the hurrying movement and the weird atmosphere of the original. This is more remarkable, since he disregards, for the most part, the German metres.[6]

As we have already pointed out Shelley's translation also becomes a part of his genius. He perhaps has chosen *Faust*, because the theme suited his temperament and favourite views. Here is a conflict between good and evil. Mephistopheles, the symbol of evil tempts Faust. This episode represents a moral crisis.

At the beginning Raphael glorifies God's creation:

> The world's unwithered countenance
> Is bright as at Creations day. (*Faust*. Sc. I. ll. 27-28)

But Mephistopheles, who is an Arch-rebel, behaves otherwise, for he is never repentant and loves to find fault everywhere:

I observe only how men plague themselves;-

The little god o'the world keeps the same stamp,

As wonderful as on creation's day;—

A little better would he live, hadst Thou

Not given him a glimpse of Heaven's light

Which he calls reason, and employs it only

To live more beastlily than any beast. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 41-47)

God is confident of the qualities of his 'Servant Faust' and refers to him proudly:

Though he now serves Me in a cloud of error,

I will soon lead him forth to the clear day.

When trees look green, full well the gardener knows

That fruits and blooms will deck the coming year. (*Ibid.* Sc. I. ll.69-72)

As Mephistopheles is eager to win a bet, God even gives him permission to tempt Faust to evil so that he:

…even in his darkest longings,

Is well aware of the right way:

As long as he shall live upon the earth, so long

Is nothing unto thee forbidden — Man

Must err till he has ceased to struggle. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 75-78)

God also apprehends that Mephistopheles will fail in his endeavour. He explains why he has created the Devil and why he puts up with his insolence:

The active spirit of man soon sleeps, and soon

He seeks unbroken quiet; therefore I

Have given him the Devil for a companion,

Who may provoke him into some sort of work,

And must create forever. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 100-104)

In the second scene of the fragment Faust in enthusiastic and energetic, a person who loves to enjoy sensuous beauty:

Already Spring kindles the birchen spray,

And the hoar pine already feel her breath,

Shall she not work also with our limbs? (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 11-13)

Faust tries to guess the nature of Mephistopheles:

Spirit of Contradiction! Well, lead on —

There a wise feat indeed to wander out

Into the Bracken upon May-day night,

And then to isolate oneself in scorn,

Disgusted with the humours of the time. (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 226-230)

Mephistopheles then leads Faust towards the bonfires of the witches. They meet among them a General, a Minister, a Parvenu, an Author and a pedlar-witch. Mephistopheles tells them:

What has been, has been, what is done, is past,

They shape themselves into the innovations

They breed, and innovation drags us with it.

The torrent of the crowd sweeps over us:

You think to impel, and are yourself impelled. (*Ibid.* ll. 311-515)

Here, it seems that Shelley speaks out in the garb of Mephistopheles: then Faust and Mephistopheles begin to dance with a girl and an old woman respectively. A Procto-Phantasmist intervenes because he is surprised to see the ghost 'dancing just like men and women'. Faust, the girl and the Procto-Phantasmist go on disputing for the latter want to 'reason of enjoyment' midst of this din and bustle, Faust let the girl pass from him, for a red mouse came out of her mouth. Then Faust saw another girl, sad and forlorn and it seemed to him that she was like poor Margaret, his first love. But Mephistopheles pointed it out that it was nothing but an enchanted phantom like Medusa. Then he himself was surprised to find a theatre. An attendant informed him that it was really a theatre 'written by a Debutante and the actors who perform are Dilettante' and he himself was also a 'Dilettante curtain-lifter'.

Here ends the fragmentary translation. It becomes clear that Shelley chose this play to establish his moral concern for the everlasting conflict between good and evil and perhaps wanted to depict Faust, as a good soul who sold himself to evil and ultimately was ruined.

PART III

The Cyclops

Shelley translated *The Cyclops* of Euripides, during his stay at Florence in the Winter of 1819.

There are many mythological allusions in the first speech of Silenus, the chief of the Satyrs. From one of his speech it becomes clear that the evil spirit in this play is Cyclops who is referred to as the 'law lass giant', the man-destroying Cyclops; 'The fell Cyclops' etc. In this fragment the conflict is to take place between free human soul and the evil giant.

Though Silenus promises to help Ulysses ('We will help you all we can,' *The Cyclops*, (1,125), later he turns out as a person who cannot be trusted. At first, he demands gold in lieu of help ('But how much gold will you engage to give' *Ibid.* l. 131). Then he is ready to give away almost everything that is owned by the Cyclops, in lieu of wine but as soon as the Cyclops arrives, being afraid, he acts as a turncoat and a liar:

> Ah me;
>
> I have been beaten till I burn with fever. (*Ibid.* ll. 204-206)

He says further.

> ... but they bore off your things,
>
> And ate the cheese in spite of all I said,
>
> And carried out the lambs- (*Ibid.* ll. 211-213)

He is ready to tell a lie in order to save himself:

> Cyclops, I swear by Neptune who begot thee,
>
> By mighty Triton and by Nereus old
>
> ...that I never
>
> Gave any of your stores to these false strangers
>
> If I speak false may those who most I love,
>
> My children, perish wretchedly! (*Ibid.* ll. 240-241)

Thus Silenus has been depicted as a person with some human weaknesses, fear and lack of mental strength — being old, he has lost the strength to withstand oppression and also to rebel. But his sons are young persons and, therefore, not afraid to die.

Chorus : There stop!

I saw him giving these things to the strangers.

If I speak false, then may my father perish,

But do not thou wrong hospitality.

(*Ibid.* ll. 249-252)

Ulysses, on the other hand, symbolizes, the courageous and free human spirit:

– if I needs must die,

Yet will I die with glory; – if I live,

The praise, which I have gained will yet remain. (*Ibid.* ll. 180-182)

He is not afraid of the Cyclops and answers him back:

Hear, Cyclops, a plain tale on the other side. (*Ibid.* I 232)

At first he puts forward to the Giant a moral appeal:

Turn then to converse under human laws,

Receive us shipwrecked suppliants, and provide

Foods, clothes, and fire, and hospitable gifts;

Not fixing upon oxen-piercing spits

Our limbs, so fill your belly and your jaws. (*Ibid.* ll. 283-287)

He tries to redeem the Giant morally:

Forgo the lust of your jaw-bone, prefer

Pious humanity to wicked will:

Many have bought too dear their evil joys. (*Ibid.* ll. 294-287)

But the Cyclops is out an out evil — he is not to be guided by the good principle of life and so bawls out his motto:

I well know

The wise man's only Jupiter is this,

To eat and drink during his little day,

And give himself no care. And as for those

Who complicate with laws the life of man,

I freely give them tears for their reward. (*Ibid.* ll. 320-325)

He is also ironical enough;

These are my hospitable gifts; fierce fire

And yon ancestral caldron, which o'er-bubbling

Shall finely cook your miserable flesh. (*Ibid.* ll. 329-331)

The chorus of the satyrs sums up the subsequent action;

Farewell, foul pavilion:

Farewell, rites of dread!

The Cyclops vermilion,

With slaughter uncloying,

Now feasts on the dead,

In the flesh of strangers joying! (*Ibid.* ll. 361-366)

Ulysses, however, strikes out a brilliant plan to save themselves from the grip of the Giant who after gobbling two sailors and drinking the wine brought to him by Ulysses, is then fast asleep. He requests the young sailors to help him. He tells them what he intends to do to defeat, punish and thus destroy the Cyclops:

When, vanquished by the Bacchic power he sleeps,

There is a trunk of live wood within,

Whose point having made sharp with this good sword

I will conceal in fire, and when I see

It is alight, will fix it, burning yet,

Within the socket of the Cyclop's eye

And melt it out with fire — (*Ibid.* ll. 454-460)

The satyrs jump to this plan immediately:

Chorus: May, I, as in libations to a God

Share in the blinding him with the red brand?

I would have some communion in his death. (*Ibid.* ll. 469-471)

That Ulysses is a true leader who is never willing to forsake his followers in danger is indicated in his following speech:

I will not save myself and leave behind

My comrades in the cave: I might escape,

Having got clear from that obscure recess,

But too unjust to leave in jeopardy

The dear companions who sailed here with me. (*Ibid.* ll. 478-482)

Silenus, this time, joining with Ulysses asks the Tyrant to stay in the cave:

Stay– for what need have you of pot companions?

And in the sun-warm noon

'tis sweet to drink. Lie down beside me now

Placing your mighty sides upon the ground. (*Ibid.* ll. 547-551)

As the Cyclops again falls asleep, Ulysses reminds the satyrs to be courageous:–

'— but bear yourselves like man'. (*Ibid.* l. 529).

However, in spite of their promise ('We will have courage like the adamant rock') at the hour of action their moral courage fails:

With pitying my own back and my back-bone,

And with not wishing all my teeth knocked out.

The cowardice comes of itself — (*Ibid.* ll. 647-649)

Ulysses, being broad minded, forgives them:

....Yet though weak of hand

Speak cheerfully, that so ye may awaken

The courage of my friends with your blithe words. (*Ibid.* ll. 655-657)

When Cyclops cries out in agony ('I perish!' l, 675), the Chorus explains the reason ('for you are wicked', l. 676). Ulysses now has defeated the evildoer and is proud of his deed:

My father named me so; and I have taken

A full revenge for your unnatural feast;

I should have done ill to have burned down Troy

And not revenged the murder of my comrades. (*Ibid.* ll. 701-704)

Ulysses is not Prometheus. He is like Beatrice. He cannot forgive the Cyclops. He is also Hercules. He cannot put with the torture of others who are weak. Being strong he takes the law in his own hand and punishes the evildoer. He is a typical Greek hero, bent on taking rightful revenge. He is an agent of Nemesis and not Necessity.

Therefore he himself is also punished with a curse:

Cyclops: Ai! ai! The ancient oracle is accomplished;

It said that I should have my eyesight blinded

By your coming from Troy, yet it foretold

That you should pay the penalty for this

By wandering long over the homeless sea. (*Ibid.* ll. 708-709)

This fragment is a portion of Greek tragedy of Destiny and that is provided by this curse. If completed, it would have been an objective approach towards drama. The fragment ends here rather abruptly. We however, find even in this fragment the conflict between the moral evil and moral good that is typical of almost all the dramatic works of Shelley.

PART IV

Magico Prodifioso

Shelley translated the *Magico Prodifioso* of Caldéron directly from Spanish. The translation was praised by a well known Spanish critic, Salvaldor de Madariaga:

> Shelley's translation is indeed a, striking proof of his insight into Caldéron's and style. Expression is not always crystal like in Calderon. He sometimes strains his sentences in order to cage them within the narrow walls of his versifications. But Shelley's ingenuity in disentangling the sense overcomes all obstacles. At times the younger poet improves the body of the original, perhaps at the expense of the image. [8]

There are three scenes. In the beginning, Cyprian, the central figure, is a good honest noble scholar:

…The books you brought out of the house

To me are ever best society. (*Magico Prodifioso*. Sc. I, ll. 4-5)

Here also we find the poet's favourite theme — the encounter of the good and the evil. There is a conflict between the Daemon, the evil sprit and Cyprian, the good human being. The Daemon at first tries to win over Cyprian through argument:

Search even as thou will.

But thou shall never find what I can hide. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 57-58)

He comes then in the guise of a foreign gentleman who is also a scholar well-versed in many subjects:

For in the country whence I come the sciences

Require no learning, — they are known. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 95-96)

He gives an indirect reference to his fall from heaven:

Had so much arrogance as to oppose

The chair of the most high Professorship,

And obtained many votes, and, though I lost,

The attempt was still more glorious, than the failure

Could be dishonourable.

(*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 99-106)

The moral question which Cyprian asks him is quite characteristic of Shelley:

...even Jupiter

Is not supremely good; because we see

His deeds are evil, and his attributes

Tainted with mortal weakness; in what manner

Can supreme goodness be consistent with

The passions of humanity? (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 119-124)

He comments further as a deist:

Evil in God is inconceivable;

But supreme goodness fails among the Gods

Without their union. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 146-147)

As the Daemon is unable to shift Cyprian from his belief in the existence of supreme God, he applies trick:

Since thus it profits him

To study, I will wrap his senses up

In sweet oblivion of all thought of but

A piece of excellent beauty; (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 208-211)

From the speech of Lelio, it becomes evident that Cyprian is a man much honoured by the citizens of Antioch.

Although my high respect towards your person

Holds now my sword suspended, thou canst

Restore it to the slumber of the scabbard:

Thou knowest more of science than the duel;

For when two men of honour take the field,

No counsel nor respect can make them friends

But one must die in the dispute. (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 237-243)

Cyprian, on the other hand, is not merely a bookish gentle scholar:

By my birth I am

Held no less then yourselves to know, the limits

Of honour and of infamy, nor has study

Quenched the free spirit which first ordered them; (*Ibid.* Sc. I, ll. 249-252)

He is intelligent and, controls the situation well:

And if you both

Would marry her, is it not weak and vain

Culpable and unworthy, thus beforehand

To slur her honour? What would the world say

If one should slay the other and if she

Should espouse the murderer? (*Ibid.* Sc. I. ll. 276-281)

In the second scene of the play the conflict is further complicated. The beginning of this scene reminds us of Faust, for Cyprian sells his soul to Devil in exchange of Justina's love:

So bitter is the life I live.

That, hear me, Hell! I now would give

To thy detested spirit

My soul, forever to inherit,

To suffer punishment and pine,

So this woman may be mine. (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 15-21)

Then he beholds unnatural happenings:

Philosophy, thou canst not even

Compel their causes underneath their yoke:

From yonder clouds even to the waves below

The fragments of a single ruin choke

Imagination's flight; (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 33-37)

Daemon again comes, now in the guise of a shipwrecked person. His soliloquy reveals his plan:

It was essential to my purposes

To wake a tumult on the sapphire ocean,

That in this unknown form I might at a length

Wipe out the blot of the discomfiture

Sustained upon the mountain, and assail

With a new war the soul of Cyprian,

Forging the instruments of his destruction

Even from his love and from his wisdom. (*Ibid.* Sc II, ll. 71-78)

The Daemon again gives an oblique reference to his revolt against the supreme God and the consequent fall from Heaven:

But the high praise

Stung me with pride and envy, and I rose

In mighty competition, to ascend

His seal and place my foot triumphantly

Upon his subject thrones. Chastised, I know

The depth to whitch ambition falls; too mad

Was the attempt, and yet more mad were now

Repentance of the irrevocable deed: —

Therefore I chose this ruin, with the glory

Of not to be subdued, before the shame

Of reconciling me with Him who reigns

By coward cession. (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 118-129)

Cyprian ultimately receives the boon from the Daemon:

I am the friendless guest

Of these wild Oaks and Pines — and as from thee

I have received the hospitality

Of this rude place, I offer thee the fruit

Of years of toil in recompense; whate'er

Thy wildest dream presented to thy thought

As object of desire, that shall be thine. (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 171-177)

The third scene of the fragmentary play may be labelled as the temptation scene. The daemon attempts to tempt Justina who is a devout Christian.

Let birds, and flowers, and leaves, and all things move

To love, only to love.

Let nothing meet her eyes

But signs of love's soft victories;

Let nothing meet her ear

But sounds of Love's sweet sorrow,

So that from faith no succour she may borrow, (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 12-18)

Justina, it seems, moves towards the signal of love, she is almost on the verge of falling in love:

O Nightingale,

Cease from thy enamoured tale, —

Leafy Vine, unwreathe thy bower,

Restless Sunflower, cease to move, —

Or tell me all, what poisonous Power

Ye use against me– (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 75-78)

She admits of a soft and tender feeling for Cyprian:

From the moment

That I pronounce to my own listening heart,

'Cyprian is absent!' – O me miserable!

I know not what I feel! (*Ibid.* Sc. III. ll. 87-90)

She resigns herself to be drawn by that 'feeling' which she recognizes as pity:

...it is

Enough I pity him, and that, in vain,

Without this ceremonious subtlety.

And woe to me, I know not where to find him now,

Even should seek him through this wide world. (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 96-100)

At the same time she realizes that she is perhaps being enslaved by some evil power and so decides to free herself, against the passion which was trying to overwhelm her,

Thought is not in my power, but action is: (*Ibid.* Sc. III, l. 119)

She is going to resist the evil power, which will 'force her' to step against her 'free will' (l. 125), because she believes that:

It is invincible;

It were not free if thou hadst power upon it, (*Ibi*d. Sc. III, ll. 126-127)

Justina tells the tempter, the Daemon bravely:

My defence

Consists in God. (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 133-134)

So, when the Daemon threatens her of making her a victim lust of others, she puts a forward plea to God:

I

Appeal to Heaven against thee; (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 143-140)

As Jupiter apprehends danger that may befall, she decides to take resort to worship:

Livia, Quick, bring my cloak,

I must seek refuge from these extremes

Even in the temple of the highest God

Where secretly the faithful worship, (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 172-179)

The scene ends with her ardent plea;

Thine is the cause, great God! turn for my sake,

And for Thine own, mercifully to me! (*Ibid.* Sc. III, ll. 186-187)

Thus Justina stands pitted against the Daemon and symbolized good principle in action here. She tries to defy the Daemon with the weapon of devout prayer.

Here Shelley obviously takes resort to an easy solution. The mystery of evil is apparently resolved and countered by rather a conventional esoteric force. ('More things are wrought by prayer' Tennyson)

It is at least evident in these fragmentary translations that the poet's moral anxieties have not yet left him exhausted even after the completion of his longer and full-fledged plays, where, of course, the shadows fall deeper.

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3. *Conversations of Lord Byron*. Thomas Medwin. New ed. 1825, 1232.

4. Shelley's Note to *Faust*.

5. Shelley's letter to John Gisborne. 10 April, 1822, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. ed. Frederick. L. Jones. 2 Vols. Oxford: 1964, II. P. 407. Shelley is reported to have written to Coleridge urging him to translate *Faust*, but the letter has not survived.

6. *Faust*. Goethe. Translation, Bayard Taylor. New York: 1870, p-306.

7. *Shelley: The Golden Years*. K. N. Cameron. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1974, p. 75.

8. *Shelley and Caldéron and other Essays*. Salvador de Madariaga. London: 1920, pp. 46-47. Also see Rogers. pp. 319-323, James Fitzmaurice, *Shelley*. 'Chapters on Spanish Literature', London: 1908, p. 198.