

CHAPTER II

Shelley's Gravitation Towards Drama

It will be interesting to note that drama as a form of literature received perhaps the greatest compliment from a poet when Shelley remarked:

The connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in a whatever other form. And it is ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence: and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in an action where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners.¹

It is no wonder, therefore, that a mind as that of Shelley, so richly gifted with imagination and sensitivity, would be fascinated by the world of drama from an early age. But, as T.S. Eliot regrets: 'Shelley did not live to put his poetic gifts, which were certainly of the first order, at the service of more tenable belief.'²

Mary Shelley points out in her Preface to the first collected edition of Shelley's *Poems* (1839) that her husband's poetry was mostly and ardently concerned with '...the cause of human happiness and improvement. This sympathy and concern took their roots in his mind from the very beginning and expressed through various moods and habits.'³

One of the moods, one may safely guess, must have inspired him to write play. Again, among Shelley's boyhood habits which can be taken as anticipations of his dramatic potentiality, were reciting dialogues, telling stories and even acting dramatic monologues. He used to read aloud Shakespearean lines, a habit which perhaps never left him.⁴ He also took part in Shakespearean plays.⁵ As he grew older, he became fond of reading Greek dramas – a

love which also never left him. ⁶ He calls *King Lear* 'the deepest and the sublimest tragic composition' and he pays high tributes to the plays on Oedipus. When his dead body was found ashore, among other things, an edition of Sophocles' play was found in one of his jacket pockets.

He often visited theatre houses with Medwin. He went to Richmond to see Dora Jordan, a leading comic actress taking part in *The Country Girl* – he was then but a school boy. This interest did not decrease as he grew up. He went to see Edmund Kean in *Hamlet* at Drury Lane on October 13, 1814. In 1817, on January 29, he saw Eliza O' Neill in *The Jealous Wife* and on February 11, he enjoyed her performance in *The Merchant of Venice*. Next year, on February 16, Shelley went to Covent Garden to see Eliza O' Neill again in *Fazio* which was being repeatedly performed in the Covent Garden theatre.

On February 21 at Drury Lane, he saw the stage version of Byron's *The Bride of Abydos* – he returned to Covent Garden on March 2 to enjoy the comedy *The Castle of Glyndower*. Thus, during the last phases of his stay in England, Shelley visited the theatres frequently and it certainly proves his deep interest in theatrical performances. From the journals of Mary and Clair we come to know that during this period he also attended the operas frequently. Even when he was residing in Italy, he continued to attend the operas. ⁷

Indeed an intense and helpless awareness of conflict inherent in the very nature of things made him even as an adolescent boy form a mental image of a universe where an invisible drama is being enacted eternally. Through his poetry he strove to give expression to this dramatic conflict with missionary zeal. These early habits and awareness may raise a question: was he thus disciplining his imagination for dramatic writing? ⁸

As a matter of fact, Shelley regarded drama as a prismatic and many-sided mirror which collects the bright rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms. ⁹

On the other hand, poetry is to him 'a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight.'¹⁰ To him, 'It is indisputable that the height perfection of human society had ever corresponded with the height dramatic excellence,'¹¹ and drama is 'teaching the human heart its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself.'¹² Shelley further believes that 'the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it once flourished is a mark of a corruption of manners...'¹³ It is not that Shelley is unaware of the necessity of objective view on the part of the dramatist or of the dual characteristics of dramatic language, but wants in this connection that 'imagery and passion should interpenetrate one another.'¹⁴ *

In respect of dramatic language Shelley admitted that it should be brought close to the common man's understanding,¹⁵ and 'mere poetry' should be avoided.¹⁶

* We may note here that Shelley's imagery is always dramatic, expressive of struggle and aspiration towards heights which he knew were unattainable and which he felt to be enchanting for the very difficulty of scaling these. His imagery is expressed often through concrete, creative language which seeks to intensely portray an unseen and unattainable truth:

The loftiest star of unascended heaven

Pinnacled in the intense inane,

(*Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, sc. iv, pp. 203)

He calls it an 'affection' to declare that a play is written for any other purpose than stage performance.¹⁷ So he is not a champion of a mere reading play, though a devout reader of world's best plays.

Apart from all pervading influence of the Greek dramatists, as Denis Donohue says: 'For Shelley... the limits of drama were set by his apprehension of Shakespeare.'¹⁸ * Influence of Caldéron's plays is also noteworthy as he was full of praise 'both for his poetry and dramatic genius.'¹⁹ His admiration for Goethe's *Faust* was for its 'passages of surpassing excellence.'²⁰ William's play *The Promise* is regarded by him as 'worth fifty such thing as Cornwall's *Mirandola*'²¹, though Berry Cornwall's *Mirandola* is praised for its poetry only.²²

Byron's *Marino Faliero* though not 'transcendentally fine', is 'very well'.²³ He was rather generous about his great contemporary, when he expressed his belief that Byron 'will produce something very great', and whose 'familiarity with the dramatic powers of human nature' will soon enable him to soften down the severe and harmonize traits of his *Marino Faliero*.²⁴ *Jungfran Von Orleans* by Schiller is 'a fine play, if the fifth act did not fall off',²⁵ so goes Shelley's comment.

* The following scholars, among other, have traced Shakespeare's influence on Shelley: F.O. Jones, '*Shelley and Shakespeare: A Supplement*', *PMLA*, Vol. LIX of Shakespeare in *Huntington Literary Quarterly*, Vol. XII, 1948-49, pp. 163-190; Sara Ruth Watson, '*Shelley and Shakespeare: An Addendum*', *PMLA*, Vol. LV, 1940, pp. 611-614.

Shelley, it seems, equated drama with tragedy. Peacock says that he tried in vain to reconcile him to comedy.²⁶ And then the only contemporary tragedy that pleased him was Milman's *Fazio*. It is true that he did not like the contemporary theatrical performances. Shelley's visits to the theatre houses have been noted earlier, but it appears that he could never overcome his deep-rooted prejudice against the contemporary theatre. J.L. Peacock informs: 'He (Shelley) had a prejudice against theatre which took some pains to overcome. I induced him one evening to accompany me to a representation of the *School for Scandal*.... I do not think he forever went to another'²⁷

Yet Shelley wanted Miss O' Neill to play Beatrice in his *The Cenci*.²⁸ He liked the artist and actor Sgricci who often gave him company and recited lines from Shakespeare's tragedies for his pleasure.²⁹ Mary Shelley thought that her husband was of such fastidious taste that 'he was easily disgusted by the bad filling up of the inferior parts.'³⁰ Significantly Shelley disliked comedy also for its 'withering and perverting spirit'.³¹ To him until 'laughter is put down, no reawakening is possible for mankind.'³²

Mary Shelley informs that Shelley fancied that he was destitute of dramatic talents. This erroneous view is, Mary Shelley writes, due to his thinking that he could not form and follow up a story or plot.³³ Yet while asking his wife to write a play he said 'There is nothing which the human mind can conceive which it may not execute. Shakespeare was only a human being.'³⁴ This is clearly an indirect reference to his own dramatic talents. Shelley scholars are not of course unanimous on this point, F.R. Leavis for example believes, 'Shelley lacked dramatic genius.'³⁵

Shelley's first attempt at writing a play was rather boyish; for he, a mere boy, along with one Hellen made up a play and 'solemnly' sent it up to London to be considered by Charles Mathews.³⁶ After a short interval, 'a drama of a very wild, metaphysical and

inexplicable kind with a hero resembling Prometheus,³⁷ was attempted. His dramatic plans by the year 1818 include a tragedy on the madness of Tasso, a play on the *Book of Job*, a tragedy — *Timon of Athens*, another on Charles I and a drama on Prometheus. He also planned dramas on Napoleon and *Genesis*, and translation of some Greek plays and plays of Caldéron but the following fragments and translations are known to have been actually attempted by Shelley: *The Cyclops: A Satiric Drama* (translated from the Greek of Euripides), scenes from the *Magico Prodigioso* (from the Spanish of Caldéron), scenes from *The Faust* of Goethe, scene from Tasso, Orpheus and *A Dialogue*.³⁸ However only six full-fledged dramatic compositions and the fragmentary translations are to be considered here, namely *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*, *Hellas*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Fragments of an unfinished Drama* and *Charles the First*.

In all these dramas and dramatic compositions, Shelley deals with his conception of Evil and his moral concern related to it. Moreover, he is anxious to uphold the principle of love which may help mankind to eliminate Evil from the universe. At the same time, he was doubtful about the means, for he was afraid that Man may commit an error and generate the force of Evil within his own mind.

Shelley's Idea of Evil: His Moral Sense.

The term 'moral sense' is equivalent to 'conscience' and shows the field of ethics with such principle as rectitude, remorse, duty, fellow-feelings, not hurting the feelings of others and, in wider sense, not exploiting men and not doing injustice — social, political and religious. Appreciation of inner moral sense, distinct from external commandment, is indicated by Antigone in Sophocles' play and she repudiates the establishment law. J. Butler defines morality as 'principles in man by which he approves or disapproves his heart, temper and action.'³⁹ This inward sense of approval and disapproval may also be regarded as 'moral sense'.

Among the ethical moralists of the eighteenth century, Richard Prince and Kant opposed the notion of 'moral sense' as such, and sought in reason the ultimate moral authority. In its treatment of the moral sense, the eighteenth century Enlightenment insisted upon something more rationalistic than conscience. The tendency of the nineteenth century and twentieth century has been to reduce the principle in question to social.⁴⁰

Further, we may consider the vices to be guarded against. Radical vice of human nature consists in egoism which manifests in lust, desire, and intention. They manifest in greed, hatred, unfeeling attitude, pride, perjury, vengeance, murder, and even paternal authority. On the other hand, there are the principles of pity, moderation, sympathy etc. The Christian moral that appeals to Shelley was the relation of the Holy Spirit to human freedom. (We know Shelley respected Christ, but not the conventional Christian dogmas. To him the moral ideal was realised by Jesus. We must remember that Shelley used the term 'moral' not in the sense of conventional sin or moral evil but in the sense of conscience as associated with everything good.)

Needless to say, any theory of evil has an obvious association with moral sense. The immanence of evil, the villainous nature of man, the problem of his redemption of his remorse, are too all-encompassing in the dramatic writings of the Romantics as in their poetry. An element of illusion assuredly is present in the plays, along with sentimentality and a predominance of imagination, but in their concern with universal and human problems the plays of the Romanticists are real, more so are the plays of Shelley.

Coming back to Shelley's idea of evil, which is inextricably associated with moral concerns, we may say that generally speaking Shelley scholars believe that the poet regarded evil as something unreal and inessential.⁴² Quite possibly Shelley had no knowledge either of the nature of evil or of the means by which evil can be eradicated.⁴³ W.E. Peck thinks that

Shelley's concept of evil was rather shallow as the poet thought that all evil is the consequence of Government, Church and Law.⁴⁴

There is no doubt that Shelley's early poems show that he looked upon evil as externalistic, and as a passing phase. In his early youth, Shelley conceived wrong and injustice to be an evil that has been imposed from outside. In *Queen Mab*, kings, priests, statesmen, and Black Marketeers are responsible for the slavery of the mob. In *Laon and Cythna*, the tyrant Othman and the wicked priest crushed the good instincts of incorruptible general mass of people. But Shelley soon outgrew the belief that evil was something external and he began also to believe that evil was deep and pervasive, and that it has a profound inward source which is deeper than villainy.⁴⁵ All his later writings will bear this out. In *The Cenci*, for instance, the sharp antitheses between good and evil had been done away with. Beatrice is basically virtuous, but revengeful. In his preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley states: 'Revenge, retaliation, atonement are pernicious mistakes.'⁴⁶

Beatrice's father is a devil, but he has the merit of being courageous and rebellious. The culprits in *Hellas* are not deliberately malicious. Mahmud gropes madly for light and Hassan wishes to die for 'one God, one King, one Hope, one Law'. (*Hellas*; 1. 333.) We find rather a modern view of life's tragedy in Shelley's last work, *The Triumph of Life* and also in his incomplete play *Charles the First*. Charles is the reverse of the villainous tyrant. His view of righteousness becomes the cause of his destruction. Similarly, we find that Rousseau's idealism is demolished by an inward cause. Thus we find that Shelley reduced to a minimum the idea of sin and concluded that the tragedy of life lay in the inner struggle of man for tearing asunder the destructing walls that have been raised by himself in his erroneous view of life.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley again expresses his mature view of evil. Here he distinguishes between two kinds of evil – evil that has an objective basis and cannot be

eradicated and evil that is subjective and deeply based. The race after casting off the outworn skins like snakes has still to confront 'Chance and death and mutability'. (*Prometheus Unbound*; Act III, Sc. IV, p. 201) True, 'Labour, and pain, and grief' (*Ibid*; Act IV, p. 404) have been brought under control, but they have not been completely effaced. Of course, the poet is not vocal about the origin of such unavoidable evil, and his silence is significant. The note added to *Hellas* contrasts the mutability of matter with the eternity and then adds that 'there is a true solution of the riddle and that in our present state that solution is unattainable by us.'⁴⁷

Shelley being a radical humanist, a humanist prophet of revolution, suggested in so many words a gradual reformation. In *Prometheus Unbound*, we may remember that it takes a 'hundred ages' before the earth is regenerated. In 1817, he advocated man's coming to maturity by getting rid of 'symbols of its childhood'.⁴⁸ Any sudden attempt at universal suffering would produce an immature attempt at a Republic. It is better that an object so inexpressibly great should never have been than it should be attempted and fail.⁴⁹ Melvin M. Rader thinks that these observations of Shelley are in contradiction to the summing up of Shelley's doctrines by S.F. Gingerich: 'Thus it requires but a small amount of self-assertion to get rid of an accident or a mere error and attain to perfectibility.'⁵⁰

The flaw in this premise is further supported by an oft-quoted observation by Mary Shelley in her note to *Prometheus Unbound*, as she observes that 'Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there would be no evil, and there would be None.'⁵¹ We should remember that the main undercurrent of the poet's thought is that evil being partially subjective, a Platonic formulation to the doctrine, decay and sorrow are just passing phases whereas truth, beauty, and love are permanent ideas beyond time and space. In the play *Prometheus Unbound*, the protagonist stands for the human soul whose life is redeemed by an intense faith that there would be no more evil. From his heart all hatred and malice are

removed. Thus the main problem in reforming the world is how to change man's heart. For that, an inward revolution should be consummated with the outward changes. We do not overlook the obvious seeming contradictions in Shelley's theory of human perfection. And this contradiction, let us remember, is due to Shelley's intense reading of Spinoza's ethical system and the philosopher's pronouncement about the intellectual love of god. That both Plato and Spinoza made profound subjective idealistic impression on Shelley, helping formulate his idea of evil, there is no doubt about it.

Shelley' Idea of Love

The idea of love in Romantic poetry assumes different forms in Shelley's works. Byron's egoistical obsessions are as much part of it as Shelley's Christian concept of love. Some critics offer the thesis that Shelley's philosophy of love is closely associated with his impulse of social reform stemming from his distrust in established institutions like the Church and the State. It emerges from Mary Shelley's observation that Shelley was a kind and compassionate man with a genuine love for suffering people. The poet held Jesus in high esteem, in spite of his hatred for Christianity because Jesus' love and compassion for common people moved him. Shelley's philosophy of love also is basically the same as that of Jesus. We may argue and quote a significant line from *Prometheus Unbound* ('I wish no loving thing to suffer pain', Act 1, l. 305) to show that Shelley's idea of love embraces his idea of social revolution.

In many ways Shelley appears to be a Christian socialist whose concept of love is comprehensive enough to include social reform in contrast to the Christian idea of love concerned mainly with individual happiness. This exalted concept of love finds expression in the character and aspirations of Prometheus, a relentless crusader against tyranny, to whom the overthrowing of the strong is more desirable than mere passion for an individual woman.

Love to Shelley is a struggle against evil by non-violent means, and it is an instrument of social change and revolution. Judged in a broader perspective, love in Shelley becomes a political ideology of social revolution. Prometheus's victory over Jupiter stands for the end of tyranny and hatred ushering in a golden future. *Queen Mab* forms a mental picture of the future state of thing as envisioned by the Romantic poet. Though Shelley pines for a world of equality, his emphasis on love as a means of change in the individual as well as society draws him closer to the spirit of the *New Testament* than to the idea of scientific socialism proclaiming dictatorship of the proletariat. Shelley comes to the conclusion that 'love is goodness and goodness is god: hence love is god.' It lies at the core of Shelley's philosophy of love.

Shelley's revolutionary creed feeds largely on love. It should be noted that Shelley's reformist zeal is not an isolated phenomenon in Romantic literature. In the same period, Ebenezer Elliot, Tom Hood and Mrs. Hemans also called for social justice in various ways and moves but their difference in their approach is obvious. But Shelley's philosophy of love as it emerges from his revolutionary creed is an abstract optimistic political ideology. His concept of love has undergone different phases – from the fleshly attachment of the *Alastor* period to the moral law of the *Prometheus Unbound* phase and it finally merges with the metaphysical concept of the 'One'.

In spite of Shelley's declaration to Jane, 'One word is too often profaned'⁵², there is a role of physical passion in Shelley's system of love. In one of his poems written to Jane Williams, Shelley craves for absorbing physical passion:

Let thy love in kisses rain on lips and eyelids pale

My cheek is cold and white, alas

My heart beats loud and fast :-

Oh, press it to thine own again

Where it will break at last. ⁵³

We cannot forget that he felt in *A Defence of Poetry* that the great secret of moral is love, and, as Carlos Baker reminds us: 'The point of *Prometheus Unbound*, like that of T.S. Eliot's later day *Waste Land* is that when love fails all is lost unless love can be revived.'⁵⁴ Thus Shelley's moral concern is closely related to his belief in the efficacy of the power of love. The argument that Shelley depicts love in the widest connotation which has little to do with Byron's egoistical love concept is not therefore to be accepted.

True, we may trace the growth of the Greek and Christian view of love in the early part of the poetic drama. It is a long journey from Plato to Plotinus, the former advocating that the idealistic longing for beauty is only a desire for union with the divine beauty. The Christian concept of love is expounded by St. Augustine and St. Theresa of Avilla to whom love stands for happiness only. But Shelley evidently was influenced by Jesus' idea of love as a revolutionary force to improve the world by means of forgiveness and tolerance.

To Shelley, 'love is a going out of our nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own'. It is apparent that Shelley was influenced both by Platonic and the Christian view. His view of love embraces the idea of liberty and these two concepts are intertwined in Romantic poetry. Liberty is a dominant theme in his famous odes like '*Ode to the West Wind*' and '*Ode to Liberty*', his longer poems like '*Queen Mab*' and '*The Revolt of Islam*' are also gospels of love and liberty against tyranny. Love has indeed become a political ideology in Shelley's poems.

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