

CHAPTER III

Prometheus Unbound

PART - I

Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* in what were perhaps the happiest months of his life, when he had escaped from the trials and frustrations of England to the freer air of Italy. At last he was able to give himself up almost without hindrance to the special kind of imaginative thought which was the centre of his being and to forget immediate cares in the contemplation of noble causes and great ideas. Vida D. Scudder says about the drama:

The idealism which pervades all the writings of these poets from *The Ancient Mariner* to *Hyperion* finds its fullest and most glorious manifestation in the *Prometheus Unbound*, which is the supreme achievement of Shelley.¹

While discussing the opinions of critics in regard to *Prometheus Unbound* we cannot disregard the opinion of Mary Shelley, his wife, because she happened to be a sympathetic listener to her husband's reading of the play just after its composition. In her notes on the play she refers to 'the mystic meaning scattered throughout the poem'.² A similar appreciation comes from a modern critic like C.L. Lewis who rightly and rather interestingly remarks that *Prometheus Unbound* can 'be diversely interpreted according as the reader is a Christian, a politician, a psychoanalyst, or what not.... Myth is thus like manna; it is to each man a different dish and to each the dish he needs.'³ No wonder, there are critics who have interpreted the 'lyrical drama' in perplexing ways. Carl Grabo refers to it as a scientific allegory,⁴ while K.N. Cameron analyses it as a political allegory.⁵ On the other hand, for Newman I. White '*Prometheus Unbound* is not an allegory in the sense in which W.M. Rossetti, John, Todhunter, Miss Scudder and others have treated it.... We must conclude that

Prometheus Unbound was not meant as an allegory.’⁶ It will not perhaps be out of place to refer here to an unknown contemporary reviewer’s comments:

The objectives we have directed against (the poetry) may be caused by our incapacity to comprehend the sublime or profound; or for our readiness to mistake the one for obscurity, and the other for utter darkness.... The pervading intelligence of Mr. Shelley’s poetry may completely hide from our eyes, as the pervading essence of God....⁷

G. Wilson Knight, however, does not treat the play as an allegory. He thinks that it is ‘truly dramatic rather than narrative.’⁸ The poet himself referred to it as a drama ‘with characters of mechanism of a kind yet unattempted.’ He said to Trelawny:

If that is not durable poetry tried by the severest tests I do not know what is. It is a lofty subject not inadequately treated and should not perish with me... my friends say my *Prometheus* is too wild, ideal and perplexed with imagery. It may be so; it is original and cost me severe labour. Authors, like mothers, prefer the children who have given them the most trouble.¹⁰

William Trent, who objected to the ‘extravagant’ praise accorded to the drama, argued:

There are more false notes stuck in the *Prometheus* than in Shelley’s poems together... (the play is) little more than a series of wonderful phantasmagoria flashed forth upon the curtain of the reader’s mind by a very unsteady hand.¹¹

Some twenty years later George R. Eliott still maintained that regarding the drama ‘(Shelley) was deficient in the artistic instinct of following an emotion through into its full specific nature: this means that he lacked poetic spontaneity. He was animated by quick, vague affections.’¹² Frank R. Leavis continued in this vein, when he brought the charge of

monotony against the poet: 'The elusive imagery, the high-pitched emotions, the tone and movement, the ardour, ecstasies and despairs are too much the same all through.'¹³ Louis MacNeice added to this charge, as he says, Shelley was an inferior poet because he did not qualify his dogmas with observation.... Enthusiasm such as Shelley's is a great asset to a poet, but is the better if tempered with reason and observation of fact.'¹⁴ Shelley's contemporary poet and critic Hazlitt also wrote: 'The author of *Prometheus Unbound*... has a fire in his eye, a fever in his blood, a maggot in his brain, a hectic flutter in his speech, which mark out the philosophic fanatic.'¹⁵

After two decades, Emerson commented, rather bitterly: 'Shelley is never a poet. His mind is uniformly imitative. All his poems are composite. A fine English scholar he is, with taste, ear, and memory; but imagination, the original authentic fire of the bard, he has not'.¹⁶ Golfillan, admitting beauties of 'rare order', felt the poem was written too fast, in a state of over-excitement, and twenty years too soon, and that 'its lyrics have more flow of sound than beauty of image or depth of sentiment.'¹⁷

As regards the work's modernity we may cite the opinion of Vida D. Scudder here:

The modernness [*sic*] of Shelley's drama is, however, evident in the more subtle and free interfusion of lyric with recitative, and the far grater elaboration of the personages function of the chorus.¹⁸

Todhunter has perhaps found out that the quality of the play calls forth both praise and abuse:

... here we have abstract philosophical conceptions vitalized into myths of the highest poetical beauty.... Shelley's (myths) are the modern equivalent of the intellectual myths of the Greek mythology; and he more nearly approaches the Greek method of using natural phenomena as symbols of vital forces

underlying nature and analogous to the powers of the human mind, and, conversely, in personifying the vital forces of nature, than Goethe does in the second part of the *Faust*.¹⁹

Hughes, on the other hand, discovers the quality of the play in its being the true representative of the age:

It is the shining monument in English poetry of the age in which it was written for then, under the Holly Alliance, young men who were strong in love resumed the spirit of the great days when human nature seemed to be born again and 'the whole earth the beauty wore of promise.'²⁰

Prometheus Unbound is, however a poetic play and in discussing it as a poetic play, we should remember a comment made by T.S. Eliot: 'The poetry of a great verse drama is not merely a decoration of a dialogue which could, as drama, put in prose; it makes the drama itself different – and more dramatic.'²¹ It needs no emphasis that *Prometheus Unbound* is one of the few great subtle philosophical poetic dramas in English, which is valued for its sustained theme of man's first revolt against tyranny and also for the poet's conviction that love alone can regenerate man and deliver humanity from the bondage of heartless institutions. In this connection Zillman says: 'Interpretations of *Prometheus Unbound* based primarily on moral consideration have been most widespread and, probably rightly so most meaningful.'²²

True, Shelley took the material for his theme from the Greek dramatist Aeschylus, but he refashioned the *Prometheus Bound*, the first play in a trilogy produced in Athens by the year 475 B.C. From fragments and other indications we know that in the second play of the trilogy Prometheus is reconciled with Zeus. But A.M.D. Hughes says something else. In his interpretation Prometheus comes to terms, not when Zeus becomes a tyrant but when a change comes over him through ages of conflict and then he becomes the friend and guide of

man. At the same time Hughes maintains the belief held by many that Shelley knew nothing of such explanation. He took the story at its first impression and could not put up with the idea of the champion of humanity reconciling with the oppressor of mankind. He was well aware of the necessity and reward of strife and so saw the evil and good in opposition. Shelley's play centres on the expulsion of Jupiter by his son Demogorgon and concludes in the joy of man and nature.

Jupiter and Demogorgon are under control of a superior divinity who permits a perpetual conflict between the two to accomplish his perfect will. This supreme divinity is Love, and Asia is his special emissary. In this respect, Hughes comments rightly:

We can read in the Aeschylean fragments of the martyr and the oppressor eventually reconciled and the fair estate of man secured. We read in Shelley not only of the oppressor overthrown, but of man, by his own endeavour and more by metaphysical aid, purged entirely of the evil in his nature in which the oppression had taken root. But at the same time the poem is a prophecy of faultless world, the desert blossoming like the rose, the lion lying down with the kid.²³

Shelley thus remodelled the play of Aeschylus to fit in some of his idealist visions. Scudder also has pointed out this process of reconstruction: 'Indeed, the structure of the modern drama is at every point both more complex and more organic than that of the Greek drama. There are more leading characters and their relation to each other is less purely incidental.'²⁴ The background of the composition of the play is noteworthy. The first three Acts were composed near 'the Baths of Caracalla' on some rocks, 'among the flower glades and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees.'²⁵

Several months after the famous Fourth Act was written in Florence, Shelley's aim became to 'familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetic

readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence,'²⁶ and to 'idealise the real.'²⁷ Moreover, it was 'never intended for more than five or six persons,'²⁸ and 'cannot sell beyond twenty copies.'²⁹ It was also 'written in the merest spirit of ideal poetry,' and not, as the name would indicate, a mere imitation of Greek drama.³⁰ We find thus that there are both diffidence and confidence in the passages quoted — diffidence for lacking in dramatic talents and confidence for 'there is nothing which human mind can conceive which it may not execute, Shakespeare was only a human being.'³¹ However, in sameness of theme — in spite of Shelley's changing the concluding part of the theme to suit his own taste and ideas and in certain structural resemblances, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is no doubt indebted to *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus.³² But we may note here that Shelley later wanted to go beyond Godwin's rational philosophy and thought millennium must be moulded on some idea of what should be an imitation of an archetypal spiritual world. For this he had to go to Platonic faith and Christ's philosophy of love.³³

Prometheus is transformed as he withdraws the curse on Jupiter; he now feels pity and not hatred for the Tyrant, thus foreshadowing the ultimate triumph of love. Asia also undergoes transfiguration, making her spiritual essence — love — burst to illuminate the world. After the release of Prometheus, the release of all mankind, the beginning of an era of sweetness and light is heralded. Here Prometheus becomes a victorious rebel.

To find out why and how Shelley became a romantic rebel we have to go back to the later phase of the 'Age of Prose and Reason.' The French Revolution set the romantic imagination of Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley on fire. The surging spirit of Liberty and the urge for asserting the individual selves were expressed through literature. But, at the same time, they were deeply shocked and disillusioned by the notorious September Massacres and all those horrors let loose by the revolutionary leaders who themselves became tyrants.

We may remember here that Shelley, like Wordsworth, did no longer believe in Godwin's theory that evil would ultimately be subdued by the inherent good in man, which inspired by reason, would produce 'Necessity', young Shelley thus mixed up Plato's idea of a world-soul and an archetypal world transcending the materialistic ideas. He finished *Prometheus Unbound* in the late summer in 1819. He was then twenty seven years old. In the mean time he had experienced his full share of disappointments and defeats. But still at heart Shelley was the same enthusiastic and confident youth whose academic career at Oxford had ended so abruptly eight years before. He had, no doubt, matured and modified his youthful ideas. At the same time he was concerned with the same problems which haunted him throughout his life. He was a rebel, a reformer, and not only an idealist but also a didactic preacher of moral ideas, in spite of his denial of formal religion. Initially, the poet, aghast at the world's iniquity, looked upon wrong as a scourge imposed from without. But soon he outgrew the belief that 'a few have clamped misery and oppression upon the innocent and helpless multitudes'. His later writings reveal his firm conviction that evil has a profound inward source, deeper than villainy. Shelley suggested in *Prometheus Unbound* that in the 'smithy of his soul' man beats out his own calamities. The mind of a man, without thinking of the tragic consequences, has appointed the castigating force for the laceration of humanity. Even the consciousness of time is to be altered fundamentally before it can be made free. Zillman's comment may be pertinent to mention in this connection:

In certain respects, Shelley developed modern poetry further in (*Prometheus Unbound*) than it was gone since. For one aim of modern poetry is surely to make the enormously extended knowledge of the universe gained by science, conscious and significant in our minds. In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley links up scientific discovery with the struggle for human liberty.³⁴

PART - II

'Into no poem did Shelley put so much of himself or of what he thought most important.'³⁵; C.M. Bowra thus comments on the plot of *Prometheus Unbound* and his comment is justified because this play is a play of conflict, conflict between Prometheus, the champion of humanity, who is the mouthpiece of Shelley and Jupiter, the oppressor of humanity, and this conflict symbolises Shelley's personal concept about the conflicts between good and evil. *

*We may point out here that in line 12, Act I, where Prometheus says that he has been on the rock for three thousand years, it is indicated that the action takes place in 'modern times', and that this was Shelley's real intention, is confirmed by the vision of the French Revolution and its aftermath pictured before Prometheus by the Furies. The Jacobines ('Slaves and Tyrants', l. 577) take control of the 'World' as a result of the collapse of the revolution. These 'slaves and tyrants' obviously also include 'despot' Napoleon and the Bourbons in France and the 'Holy Alliance' in Europe. We remember here what Shelley observed in *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 'that the mighty advantages of the French Revolution have been almost compensated by a succession of tyrants... from Robespierre to Lewis XVIII',³⁶ Cameron points out in this connection that the world on which Prometheus gazes is then Shelley's own age about 1789 to 1819. That Shelley had at least some idea about the ebb and flow of the French Revolution is evident from the picture that is presented to Prometheus by the Furies, and this is obviously done to demoralise the champion of mankind .

We cannot do better than quote what K.N. Cameron has said in this context:

In the great days of the National Assembly, the fall of the Bastille, and the proclamation of the right of man, people were like 'a legioned band of liked brothers' dedicated to 'Truth, Liberty and Love'; with the successive assumption of power by Robespierre, Napoleon and the Bourbons, 'Tyrants rushed in and did divide the spoil', and 'Despair' smothered the hearts of man.³⁷

In Shelley's view, love is the instrument that, combined with reason, should be the only harmonising principle of life. N.I. White holds the view that the play expresses Shelley's 'own disillusion and disappointment in life' yet the poet 'reasserted more strongly than ever an optimism based upon a new philosophy of reality that could recognise fully the strength of evil while perceiving that it was not forever invincible; because it rested upon a distortion of truth'.³⁸

* Contd. We can recall here the conversation between semi-chorus I and semi-chorus II (ii 564-577) and we may also recall Prometheus' report of the picture to Panthea in response to her query after the departure of the Furies (ii 648-655)

The main theme of the play may be poetically described as the progress of the soul soaked in love. When love and reason are united, evil is conquered. Demogorgon dethrones Jupiter; thus the spirit of life defeats a destructive force. In Act I, goodness touched by love sounds the death knell of evil and for the destruction of evil through the united force of love and reason; it also causes the law of Necessity to help the process.

Since Shelley 'was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the champion with the oppressor of mankind',³⁹ he felt the need for adding a Fourth Act, a hymn of rejoicing at the defeat of evil. What Scudder says about the addition of the Fourth Act is worth quoting:

The fourth act was an after thought, composed at Florence, a few months after the rest of drama. The action proper was of course concluded with the end of the third act; yet we have had a consciousness throughout that not only the immediate personages but the entire universe of living forces were involved in the issue; and the union of Prometheus and Asia, as well as the general statements of the third act, leave us unsatisfied. We demand some expression of rapture from these chorus-voices which have lent so much charm to each stage of the poem. The fourth act, that great symphony of rejoicing, where all voices of nature and of the mind sing their triumph, is thus no arbitrary addition, but an essential spiritual unity of the drama.⁴⁰

The action of the play is rather complicated, but Shelley manages to knit together the various threads of his ideas into one whole. During this process, undoubtedly, drama suffers but philosophy and poetry win. True, the action does not proceed as in a well-made play, but is of a kind which fits in a poetic drama. Scudder comments rather regretfully in this respect:

'Despite the wondrous nature poetry of the drama, the whole action takes place, not on this solid earth of hill and forest, but in an unknown region

which has no existence outside the soul of man. The personages are vast abstractions, dim though luminous, like wraiths of mist in morning sunlight they drift around us, appearing, vanishing, in mystic sequence. Over the whole drama plays, though with broken and wavering lustre, the 'light that never was on sea or land' and which change to the sober and not once does the 'poet's dream' change to be sober world of waking fact. ⁴¹

We may now briefly analyse what happens from Act One to Act Four. The First Act deals with the martyrdom of Prometheus. After the curtain opens the hero of the drama, who has hung three thousand years on the icy rocks in the Indian Caucasus, is found along with the two sisters of his would-be-bride Asia. They — Panthea and Ione — accompany him to cheer him up. As no mortal tongue may utter the curse he once pronounced upon Jupiter, Prometheus calls upon the phantom of the tyrant himself to repeat it. He is now repentant of his curse and thus he forgives Jupiter and attains peace and serenity. As dawn begins to break up, Mercury, the messenger of the gods comes down from heaven with the Furies following him. He laments his task and advises Prometheus to reveal the secret regarding the destiny of Jupiter. As Prometheus rejects him he has no other way than to call up the Furies who will torture the Titan. Shelley makes these Furies, hurt the feelings of Prometheus with visions of heart-rending misery and crying. After their departure some benevolent spirits watching over the noble endeavours of man come down to the exhausted victor and try to cheer him up with the visions they have seen. But still Prometheus feels that all hope is vain without love, for Asia is still far away from him.

Act II opens with a spring morning in a valley of the Indian Caucasus. There Asia is united with Panthea, who comes from Prometheus. Panthea informs Asia that she had dreamt of Prometheus being transfigured with radiance of love and also of the transcription 'follow, follow' on all the forms of nature. These words are repeated by Echoes which bid Asia to

follow for waking up an unspoken voice which sleeps in the world unknown. The description of the forest into which Asia and Panthea go, comes in the form of a pastoral interlude and thus relieves the action. They reach the peak of a mountain where the portal of the cave of Demogorgon is. When they meet Demogorgon on his throne, the action is held up for nearly 200 lines in which the poet puts a metaphysical discourse and narrative of Prometheus dealing with mankind. The Government of the world, which causes Prometheus to suffer, Asia to intervene and consequently Jupiter to be overthrown, is explained through the conversation of Asia and Demogorgon. Asia enquires of Demogorgon the nature of the mystery of the conflict between good and evil, but without replying her directly Demogorgon ascends the chariot of Hour to reach heaven and Asia and Panthea ride another chariot to reach a cloud sailing above the earth. The cloud becomes full of the light that is reflected from the appearance of Asia.

In Act III the poet deals with the fall of Jupiter and the liberation of Prometheus. Jupiter is dethroned in the first scene. In the second scene the conversation between Apollo and Oceanus hints at the fact that the gods in Shelley, as in Aeschylus, were averse to the tyranny of Jupiter at heart and they forecast the glorious future. Scene iii shows the unbinding of Prometheus by Hercules. The spirit of the Earth then guides Asia and Prometheus to a beautiful cave where they will live. Scene iv contains the narration of the accomplishment of the renovation of all things after the destruction of the evil.

The last act, Act IV is the consummation of all the preceding events. Shelley composed this act to give an expression to the natural world participating in the spiritual conflict. There are four divisions of the Act. The first division (lines 1 to 184) is a choral prelude which describes the passing of the evil era, the creation of the new and perfect world and the participation of the hours and the spirits in the overwhelming joy. The second division (185 – 315) presents visionary representations of the moon and the earth as seen by

Panthea and Ione. In the third division (319 – 510) the mutual felicity of the Moon and the Earth is described. The fourth division (511 – 578), however, gives a note of warning that evil may again break loose. Demogorgon, as the leader of the Daemons and the repository of the truth, calls forth his crew from the natural and the spiritual regions. He then declares the only way for Man is to recover his power and glory. He warns them that if men do not overcome hatred and revenge, if they degenerate in mind, tyranny will revive and evil will reign again. The regeneration of mind is the basis of the new Promethean age. If man purges himself of all his stupid illusions he can free himself from ‘Sceptres, tiaras, swords, and chains and tomes / Of reasoned wrong, glazed on by ignorance.’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, Sc. iv, ll. 166-167)

This Act has rightly been called a symphony. The light and timeless beauty of Greek choric songs has been combined in the drama with the abandon of the best Elizabethans. The capacity for sustained lyricism shown by Shelley in this Act has perhaps never been equalled. Songs like ‘To the deep, to the deep,’ ‘Life of life; thy lips enkindle’ are noteworthy. For the sake of variety, Shelley used different kinds of stanzas and handled them with the greatest care.

PART - III

The element of lyricism that abounds in the fourth Act of *Prometheus Unbound*, however, naturally puts some hindrance in the presentation of dramatic action. In order to consider the much-debated question that arise from this fact, the question whether there is more of lyric or of drama in this play, we are likely to compare it with Aeschylus’ dramatized version of the Greek mythology. This will be doing injustice to Shelley. The play by Aeschylus dealt with concrete facts according to the beliefs of the Greeks. Shelley, on the other hand, dealt with highly idealised visions. The myth is the same as in *Prometheus Bound*

but Shelley gave it a metaphysical twist with a particular moral concern of his own. In Shelley, Prometheus suffers, but ultimately wins, whereas in Aeschylus, the great and good character not only suffers, but as generally happens in life, is perished. However, Shelley's world of action has to be inward; 'action' nevertheless is there, even some physical action. The three stages of the development of the plot – the exposition, the climax and the denouement depend on the suffering of Prometheus, his revocation of the curse, the conflict between Jupiter and Demogorgon and the unbinding of Prometheus. But the actions are two-fold – one is physical, the other is mainly spiritual. The climax of both physical and spiritual actions is inherent in Asia's penetration into the den of Demogorgon (Act II, Sc. II). The denouement is made to flow from the hero's revocation of his curse in the opening scene. At many places of the play, dramatic devices of suspense and tension are well applied. Two examples may be cited: hearing the sound of Demogorgon, Jupiter moves close to the throne (Act III, Sc. I, l. 249). Then after Jupiter's fall, the fate of Prometheus is held in suspense when the significance of the climatic event is discussed by Ocean and Apollo (Act III, Sc. II, ll. 18-19 and 35-39). Dramatic relief is also provided in the songs of the spirits after the torture of Prometheus by the Furies (Act I, Sc. I, ll. 795-800). The above mentioned conversation (between Ocean and Apollo) itself is also a dramatic relief. The conversation of the fauns represents the passing of time in course of which Asia and Panthea journey to the cave of Demogorgon (Act II, Sc. II) and Asia's transfiguration provides the impression of time taken by Demogorgon to the abode of Jupiter (Act II, Sc. V). There is another frequently used device – the contrast of the opposites – the noble is contrasted with the tyrant. In the play human touches are sprinkled at right places. The third and fourth scenes of the third Act bring a soft touch of domestic felicity with Earth, Asia, Panthea, Ione and Prometheus joining together. Human elements are also found in abundance in the behaviour of many characters.

Mother Earth's sympathetic treatment towards Prometheus has a benign effect (Act I, Sc. II, ll. 656-657).

Mercury has to obey Jupiter's commands and arrange to torture Prometheus by the Furies, but he himself is unable to witness the painful sight (Act I, Sc. II, ll. 135-438) Ione with her typical forebodings is a typical female (Act I, ll. 756-759). The two Fauns are full of common superstitions (Act II, Sc. II, ll. 89-97).

To Shelley, his dramatic personnel are some visible symbols, representing human souls in their varied aspects. But his concern is not merely with human destiny; he is concerned with the representation of certain moral ideas that have universal appeal and application. That is why the drama is enacted far above the temporal world of concrete situation.

Prometheus wants to take back the curse (Act I, Sc. I, ll. 69-73). He has outlived his hate and ill will. Here we find contrast with Aeschylus' Prometheus and echoes of Milton's Satan, to some extent:

If then my words had power,
Though I am changed so that aught evil wish
Is dead within; although no memory be
Of what is hate, let them not lose it now:
What was that curse! for ye all heard me speak, (Act I, ll. 69-73)

But the spiritual transformation of Prometheus and his sufferings have already made him wiser and more mature, unlike his Greek counterpart:

I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more,
As then ere misery made me wise.
(Act I, ll. 56-88)

The poet himself says in his Preface to the *Prometheus Unbound*:

The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan,; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which, in the hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceeds all measures. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest end.⁴²

Thus Shelley himself has pointed out the difference between Milton's Satan and his Prometheus. Milton's Satan is forever proud and bent on taking revenge. He does not forgive his enemy and wants to wage 'eternal war' against him by taking recourse even to fraud or guile. Shelley's Prometheus, on the other hand, though he himself has not mentioned it, accepts a Christ-like approach. When we consider lines 53-59, we may become doubtful as to why Shelley insisted on repetition of the curse. We should say that he wanted to realise the extent of his evil thought, to foreswear them for ever. From the dramatist's point of view, it may be a clever plan of revocation. Shelley's Christian idea of sin is reflected in the lines 284-287:

To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow

In fear and worship: all prevailing for:

I curse thee: let a sufferer's curse

Clasp thee, his torture, like remorse: (Act. I, ll. 284-287)

We have to be attentive to the fact that a sufferer's curse will torture the tyrant 'like remorse'. 'Remorse' is the key-word here. To Shelley both Good and Evil are infinite as the universe is. That Shelley regarded Evil as a negation of Good without resistance is reflected in the lines 297-301.

... let the hour

Come, when thou must appear to be –

That which thou art internally;

And after many a false and fruitless crime

Scorn track thy lagging fall through boundless space and time.

(Act I, Sc. II, ll. 297-301)

The destined Hour will expose Jupiter's hollowness. He will survive only word of universal scorn for all time to come.

Prometheus himself admits that 'it does repent me; words are quick and vain' (Act I, l. 303). Thus he is contrasted with Milton's Satan, who remains vain and does not repent. It shows that pride is intellectually abjured, not emotionally. It is a fact that Prometheus realises that he in the blindness of his suffering gave way to bitter hatred; 'Grief for a while is blind, and so was mine', (Act I, l. 304) and thus Prometheus's moral reformation is complete. Shelley does not forget to emphasize his hero's conversion from fright to pity. We may also, by the way, may take note of the fact that Prometheus's mother Earth bursts into a passion of grief as she mistakes his mode of capitulation as a surrender, the confession of defeat; Rossetti's remark may be remembered here that the tyrant god is created by the mind of man.

In response to third Fury's attempt to torture Prometheus mentally and psychologically the reaction of Prometheus shows the inviolable part of the soul that can

never be degraded and we may take it as a kind of mysticism found in Plato's *Republic* and Shelley's essay on Love. The Furies cannot put out the light of his soul, although they can undermine his repose. As 'Yet am I king over myself' (Act I, l. 492), he is the master of all conflicting thought within, hence their threats are futile. Ultimately, in the encounter between Good and Evil, Good wins and the victim's old internal agony will torment the shadowy thing. As Prometheus is the 'King' over himself, Milton's Satan also is, but therein ends the resemblance. Satan's 'Mind' and Prometheus's 'Mind' are two different mental states – Satan still hates whereas Prometheus hates no more. Therefore Satan merges with the figure of Evil and reacts against anything good, whereas Prometheus suffers like Christ in order to destroy Evil and establish the reign of Good. Between lines 503 and 502 we find a narration which shows the sight of nations suffering from misery and bloodshed and a city is reduced to ashes, but as the fire behind ashes will flare up later, similarly evil is bound to decay:

Leave the hatred, as in ashes
Fire is left for future burning:
It will burst in bloodier flashes
When we stir it, soon returning:
Leave the self-contempt implanted
In young spirits, sense enchanted,
Misery's yet unkindled fuel:

(Act I, ll. 506-512)

Self-contempt here is the meanest fault in human character leading to gratification of senses. The invocation at its place to certain spirit is to read misery in human heart by inducing self-contempt. Further the maniac fears those who fear him:

Cruel

More than you can be with hate

Is he with fear...

(Act I, ll. 514-516)

Therefore, leave for the present all cruelty. The chorus of Furies says that such evils as 'hatred' and 'hell's secrets' are bound to recur again in history.

Then there are the series of pictures parallel to the different events in history – to the Napoleonic Wars as in the *Revolt of Islam*, crucifixion of Christ, sufferings of Christ and breaking out of the French Revolution and its aftermath. In all these narrations of historical events, especially the visions of two central tragedies of the world's history (which are meant to intensify Prometheus's agony), we find Shelley's moral concerns are writ large. There are references to Christ – a type of those who suffer because they love (this Christ is not the malignant soul that Shelley refers to earlier). But Shelley does not forget to remark that Christ's religion ultimately brought wars, killing and discord among religious sects (there is a subtle reference to the persecution of the blacks in Spain, ll. 546-559). (We may remember here the vision which Michael unrolls before Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*). The Furies also conjure up visions of tainted past and dark futures. The sight of this misery of man tortures Prometheus and he suffers crucifixion himself. And the images of Christ and Prometheus merge together.

Then we have the picture of the social and political disaster that took place after the French Revolution. When the concept of liberty, equality and fraternity was thrown to the wind, Prometheus's (Shelley's) faith in the goodness of man was temporarily forgotten and the tortuous reaction of Prometheus made Shelley suffer from psychological torment. When all healthy idealism, dedication to truth and freedom were supplanted by the reign of terror, it is a matter of regret to Shelley that French people become still the victims of the old spirit of

hatred. The Reign of Terror ultimately produced another batch of tyrants and despots like Napoleon:

Drops of bloody agony flow
From his white and quivering brow
Grant a little respite now:
See a disenchanting nation
Springs like day from desolation:
To truth its state is dedicate,
And freedom it leads forth her mate
A legioned band of linked brothers
Whom Love calls children.

(Act I, ll. 564-575)

In this poetic drama, Shelley has taken the role of a poet in the way as Shelley himself says in *A Defence of Poetry*: 'A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one.'⁴³

If we probe deep into the urges that prompted Shelley to write a beautiful rhapsodic harmonious fourth Act, we shall not fail to find in ultimate analysis that Shelley never forgets to give vent to his moral anxieties regarding the mystery and potency of the evil and the helplessness of the good in combating the forces of the evil. That he paints an advanced picture of the golden age in which he dreams of a better, happier and brighter world ruled by love and justice and free from inequalities, injustice, tyranny and hatred, is justified by his same moral concern which inspired him to write the play itself. At the same time his moral concern is also over the fact that the golden age may not last long and the serpent is trampled only for the present and not crushed.

As we try to justify lack of physical action in the *Prometheus Unbound*, we have to face another issue – the leading characters are symbolic universals. However, we must bear in mind that they do possess some element of individuality also. The four chief characters – Prometheus, Jupiter, Asia and Demogorgon may be judged by their internal conflict. The more a character suffers from conflict, the more he or she may be considered an individual being made of flesh and blood.

We had already noted that Shelley in his Preface to the play refers to his hero as ‘the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature’⁴⁴ and we may also note that he selected the noblest elements alone in the Prometheus of Aeschylus and developed these elements into a grand and harmonious conception.⁴⁵ Shelley’s Prometheus stands for love, justice and liberty, as opposed to Jupiter, the tyrant. He represents the desire in the human soul to create harmony through reason and love by dint of unequalled courage and endurance. Todhunter thinks he is: ‘the incarnation of the genius of humanity.’⁴⁵ Later, he describes Prometheus as the ‘divine imagination, the father force which creates and re-creates the universe by its marriage with the divine idea, or mother force, Asia’.⁴⁷

But we must recall that Prometheus is not presented as an ideal character at the very beginning. His imperfection becomes evident from the fact that he curses Jupiter after being punished:

I curse thee: let a sufferer’s curse

Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse: (Act I)

He then shows that he has the mortal weaknesses of hate, envy, revenge, scorn, anger and defiance: ‘Fiend, I defy thee!’ (Act I, l. 262) At the time he was removed to a great extent from wisdom, love, forgiveness, pity, sympathy, and benevolence. To achieve purity and perfection, he has to struggle hard within his soul, has to pass through the

purgatory of suffering, pain, and despair which ultimately brought remorse. Suffering makes him wise, destroys his pride and the slavery of self so that he may shine and pronounce:

Yet am I king over myself, and rule
The torturing and conflicting throngs within,
As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous.

(Act I, ll. 492-494)

Prometheus Unbound is the play of the spiritual reformation of Prometheus. The Aeschylean hero in the beginning — proud, self-willed, over-free in the use of his tongue, mad with hate against his enemy — gradually changes and feels that love and forgiveness are needed to remove evil and then revokes the curse pronounced upon the enemy.*

* Let us remember his declaration: 'I speak in grief, not in exultation, for I hate no more.'

(Act I, ll. 56-57)

We recall here Shelley's description of Christ on cross — bleeding, yet forgiving. ('Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.') The Prometheus figure naturally merges into the image of the suffering and forgiving Christ.

But in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley is also, distinguishing Christ from the concept of Christianity. His Prometheus resembles Christ, as he too is suffering not so much for himself as for his beloved mankind whose dark, bloodstained future he has been shown, and he too was nailed on the rocks for his championship of the human cause. This spiritual reformation causes Carlos Baker to say:

The Titan, having cast out pride and hatred while remaining firm and calm in his opposition to the evil principle, is now ready for the arrival of the great hour of man's redemption.⁴⁸

And this image of Prometheus remains resplendent up to the last — a figure who triumphs through suffering and shines in a projected character steeped in love, wisdom, and lack of enviousness. Thus his reformation is complete and his moral glory enlightens the world. Jupiter, on the other hand, does not suffer from any conflict directly. In the play, he is the lord of everything except ‘the soul of man’ which ‘like inextinguished fire’ burns ‘towards heaven with fierce reproach...[and]... reluctant prayer’. This is the only threat to his otherwise secure ‘Empire’ built on the oldest faith and hell’s coeval. (Act III, Sc. I, ll. 5-10)

But there is a passive reference to the fact that he was not such an evil force in the past, for otherwise Prometheus would not have made him a temporal and spiritual guide and governor of man. He was certainly good and just to be appointed so:

Then Prometheus

Gave wisdom, which is strength to Jupiter,

And with this law alone, ‘Let man be free.’

Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven.

(Act II, Sc. IV, ll. 43-46)

But as Jupiter became drunk with power, he deteriorated into a worse state of existence. As he began to misuse his power, the rulers of church and state, who acted under his influence, made men their slaves by political coercions or by superstitious fears. Thus he became the agent of the mysterious power of evil striving forever with the power of good for dominion over space and time.

In Aeschylus, Prometheus reconciles with Jupiter by delivering a secret to the latter that his (Jupiter’s) child by Thetis will overthrow him. But Shelley, not agreeing with this kind of surrender, brings Demogorgon, the progeny of Jupiter. The doom of Jupiter at the hands of this character suggests that evil must be defeated by itself:

I am thy child, as thou wert Saturn's child;

Mightier than thee:

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 54-55)

However, here we meet him for a very brief period. In Act III (Sc. I), he is cheerful with the expectation that Demogorgon will 'redescend and trample out the spark' burning forever in the soul of man. And ironically enough, in that very scene Demogorgon descends only to bring about Jupiter's dire ruin.

In order to eradicate evil, human mind must embrace love and intellectual beauty, which in the play have been symbolised by the character of Asia. Todhunter explains the case beautifully:

The long sufferings of Prometheus, which result from the usurpation of evil — the retarding power which withers and destroys his work by regarding it as fixed and final when Asia becomes so transfigured that evil can no longer endure the light of her beauty.⁴⁹

It is true that in the mind of Asia there is no direct moral conflict, but there is a gradual change from confusion to necessitarianism. Her descent into the cave of Demogorgon signifies the purification of her mind. She was not sure of the nature of truth and the supreme power of the world. After a conversation with Demogorgon, Asia's mind is purified of all inhibiting doubts and she is ready to rejuvenate the world, seeking its fruition with wisdom, patience, endurance, courage, and self-sacrifice. The original radiance, which she possessed at her birth among the Aegean isles, returns and the voices in the air sing her glory, praising her as 'life of life' (Act II, Sc. V, l. 48), 'child of light' (*Ibid*, l. 54), and 'lamp of Earth' (*Ibid*, l.66). She may be regarded as both the lover and the guardian angel of Prometheus.

Demogorgon is, in some sense, the spirit of life, the spiritual energy displayed in truth, virtue, love, genius, or joy. Various critics have interpreted him in various ways — he

has been considered the principle of Necessity or Destiny, which is again to some a moral principle and also the representative of 'a mystical state of mind'. He is also explained as a spirit of rebellion stirred up by the spirit of tyranny and also as a law of liberty. In any case, there is a contradiction in the delineation of the character of Demogorgon. He is at once a denizen of the Jupiter-Prometheus cosmos and an intruder into it. There is close affinity between him and Earth's 'prostrate sons' (Act I, l. 216), who had revolted against Jupiter. He inhabits the bottom of a volcano and erupts in order to overthrow Jupiter. So we find an outward conflict — the awful spirit brings the ruin of his own creator after a physical encounter with him.

Thus, all the chief characters in *Prometheus Unbound* participate in the eternal moral conflict between the principle of Goodness and the principle of Evil in which the former ultimately wins, being helped and encouraged by the principle of Love and the law of Necessity.

PART – IV

Regarding Shelley's use of diction and imagery, it may be appropriate to point out that Shelley's aim in composing this play is perfectly balanced with his portrayal of different characters and style:

My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence.⁵⁰

Comparing Shelley's diction with that of other English poets, we can say that despite a few echoes of Shakespeare and Milton, Shelley does not distil the older poets after the manner of Tennyson or care like Browning for free bold coinages. It is natural that he should

have such favourites as 'custom', 'slave', 'hope', and 'just' with their derivatives in one class, and in another as 'agony', 'delight', 'gentleness', and 'mildness'. He is over-fond that in their abuse or excessive use may be called hectic such as 'demon', 'curse', 'mad', 'poison', and 'blood'. This streak of the romantic novel of terror he never lost.

But in the language of *Prometheus Unbound*, what matters most is the music of the verse. The prosodic wave of this majestic drama, ranging from the soft lyrics of the consoling spirits, passing through the rhapsodic 'life of life', merges in a grand manner to the majestic orchestration of the Act IV.

There are no doubt some dramatic elements too. The first speech of Jupiter in the scene of his fall is perhaps the best dramatic speech:

Victory! Victory! Feel'st thou not, O world,
The earthquake of his chariot thundering up
Olympus?

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 49-51)

In fact, the long and high-sounding speeches in the play do not mar the dramatic action. It does something quite different. Especially, the 'curse speech' in the phantasm of Jupiter and Jupiter's first speech meant for the deities, though highly rhetorical, are dramatically effective, too. The conversation of the Furies is full of dramatic suspense:

First Fury: Ha! I scent life!

Second Fury: Let me but look into his eyes!

Third Fury: The hope of torturing him smells like a heap
Of corpses, to a death-bird after battle.

(Act I, ll. 336-340)

It is interesting to note that the poet felt to have recourse to blank verse whenever he had to give vent to a long suppressed feeling (*viz.* Prometheus laments in Act I):

Yet I endure,

I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?

I ask you Heaven, the all-beholding Sun,

Has it not seen? The sea, in storm or calm,

Heaven's ever-changing shadow, spread below,

Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?

Ah me! alas, pain, pain ever, forever!

(Act I, ll. 24-30)

In the words of Scudder:

The basic blank verse, which accounts for over half the drama, is varied in tone to differentiate between characters: thus, of the soliloquies which open Act I, - II, and -III, Prometheus's is craggy and harsh, Asia's mild and delicate, and Jupiter's majestic [*sic*]. Shelley's blank verse has none of the sweet music of Shakespeare or of the organ-harmonies of Milton. But here is a music of aerial eloquence, as if sounded by:

The small, clear, silver lute of the young spirit

That sit in the morning star.⁵¹

In this way, Shelley has in fact tried to build up the atmosphere of the play full of moral concern — the conflict between different characters has thus been shown through the use of his diction.

PART – V

We have already referred to the fact that Shelley does not always echo his predecessors. That also means that we have to remember certain weaknesses of Shelley: he

does not possess the Shakespearean power of dramatic constructions. At the same time we must remember that he also does not expose the intellectual power, as Tennyson does in *A Memoriam*. Yet it cannot be denied that there are certain influences of Shakespeare and of other Elizabethan dramatists, for perhaps there is no literary genius in the world who is not at places influenced by some other genii. Even Shakespeare assimilated much from others. Actually what matters is the matter and manner of assimilation. However, unfortunately, in cases of most of the Romantic dramatists, the influence of Shakespeare and other Jacobean and Elizabethans seems to be the reverse to invigorating effect. They attempted to recreate the Elizabethan spirit, but their attempts resulted in shadows in place of substance.

In the Preface to the play *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley himself remarks on the influence of other poets and dramatists on him:

There is similarity between Homer and Hesiod, between Aeschylus and Euripides, between Virgil and Horace, between Dante and Petrarch, between Shakespeare and Fletcher, between Dryden and Pope: each has a generic resemblance under which their specific distinctions are arranged. If this similarity be the result of imitation, I am willing to confess that I have imitated.⁵²

True, verbal echoes from Shakespearean plays are not many, or rather, they are perceptible between lines, and are reflected in a subtle way: but Shakespeare is very much there in certain passages and incidents. In Act III (Sc. II), after Jupiter's fall, the fate of Prometheus is held in suspense when the significance of the climactic event is discussed. This is Shakespearean.

In Act I, after Prometheus is tortured by the Furies, a dramatic relief is provided through the songs of the spirits. After the fall of Jupiter, Apollo and Ocean rejoice. This is another dramatic relief which is obviously Shakespearean. There are again dramatic pauses in

Shakespearean style. In Act II (Sc. II), the conversation of the Fauns provides the impression of time taken by the journey of Asia and Panthea. This is an echo of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Similarly, the time taken by the journey of Demogorgon to the halls of Jupiter is indicated in the scheme which describes the transfiguration of Asia (Act II, Sc. V). Another dramatic technique is the contrasts of the opposites. The Furies, reminding of the witches in *Macbeth*, are the tyrants, the mighty torturers who are contrasted with the noble, the loving, the sweet, and the naughty spirit of Earth. We know from a letter from W. H. Merle, a school-fellow of Shelley, that he (Shelley) often used to run up and down stairs, indulging in the Witches' songs in *Macbeth*.⁵³

PART – VI

We may, however, do not treat Shakespeare's influence upon Shelley as a demerit; but there are some other accusations raised against this play. These are mainly that the action is too little; the characters are nothing but symbols; and the Fourth Act is a meaningless addition. But we often forget that it is a lyrical and poetic drama. The action is twofold here — while one is physical, the other is mainly spiritual. The effect of this drama comes not necessarily from the action, but from the various conflicting emotions which the characters give vent to; the characters and the plot are only instruments for creating the total effect.

Still, we may go through some of the flaws that may be pointed out if the play is to be considered as a 'drama' only. At the cost of Jupiter's degradation as purely evil, Prometheus is upgraded as purely good. Thus, Prometheus becomes a less convincing character from the dramatic point of view. Ocean, instead of becoming a dramatic character, turns out to be a mysterious, sensuous beauty of the sea. Mercury is painted as an unwilling slave of the tyrannous force of Jupiter. The brief appearance of Hercules loses importance after his

unbinding of the hero whereas he should have been a symbol of a powerful and benign agent between Heaven and mankind. Asia, Panthea, and Ione could have been painted in contrasts as more humane than they are.

Then there is no direct meeting between Prometheus and Demogorgon whereas Demogorgon is presented before Asia as a 'mighty darkness', 'ungazed upon and shapeless', without any 'limb', form, and 'outline', visible on the 'ebone throne'. This is dramatically disappointing. Asia's delivering a long speech on the history of the world takes away the scope of what could have been a much more assuaging climax. Demogorgon's answer to Asia's question should have been a distinct statement in aphorism. The scene which Shelley could have exploited dramatically is the scene of Jupiter's fall. Instead of conflict, there is Metaphysics. However, the metaphysical suggestions are not always appropriate. Demogorgon says that he is the child of Jupiter and Thetis; but as Eternity he is presumably older than he says; then why must he recede in darkness?

Remembering all these flaws, we may establish three allegations against Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* — that the play is not organically connected, that its characters do not help the readers understand emotions and that the majestic characters fall from their serene profundity to a common level. Graham Hough thinks that in this play '...the realisation of his [Shelley's] own conception was too personal and too intense to allow the "negative capability", the ability to become everything and everyone that the dramatist required.'⁵⁴ But Shelley was a romantic poet and so he could never be objective.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that *Prometheus Unbound* has much similarity with the chief characteristics of the plot-structure and character-delineation as we find in Greek and Shakespearean dramatists. Besides, the contemporary Gothic paraphernalia also contribute much to render the play suitable for stage performance. Chorus (Ione and Panthea), messenger (Mercury), songs and dances, peripeteia, anagnorisis, hybris, dramatic

relief, pauses, supernatural beings, keynote, rising action, climax, denouement — all are there as in Greek or Elizabethan plays. Chorus, Furies, speeches, blood and groans, torture and desolation, scorn and despair, and remorse remind us of the Gothic plays. All these characteristics have been incorporated to shape the play into such a coherent organic whole that it will not be wrong to term the play as ‘truly dramatic rather than narrative’.⁵⁵ Shelley’s claim that it is a drama ‘with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted’ is also not unjustified.⁵⁶

Prometheus Unbound may be weak as a drama, but its structure is not inadequate because it was not a tailor-made drama meant for stage-performances. Prometheus’ mind is the source of the moving spring of the play, extending its influences over men and nature. One example may be cited — his mental conflict as shown in the First Act is the most dramatic. In the opening scene, he is discovered chained to a rock in the Caucasus. Panthea and Ione are sitting at his feet. Night slowly dissolves into dawn. This change in nature simultaneously brings change in Prometheus, but the most important dramatic act is that the whole action revolves around suspended dawn.

The remaining action in Act I centres round the torturing by Furies, emphasis being on the mental pain and comforting by the spirits. This act thus dramatises the fate of the idealist. In this very act, Prometheus withdraws his curse on Jupiter, the symbol of evil, and, forgiving an enemy, Christ-like, demonstrates the final triumph of love. Shelley’s idea was to make the myth more dramatic, though at the cost of some confusion in the scheme of the play.

There are also enough changes of mood in the play. In Act I, nature is harmonious with the mood of suffering — bleak, cold, wild, and awful. Yet, significantly enough, the sky does not lose the varied beauty. In Act II also, we find a variety of colourful natural scenes, luxuriant tropical valley, snow-clad cliffs, glaciers, and lakes in tone with the colourful lyrics

when Love and Faith go hand in hand in quest of wisdom. Action in all the four acts takes place, for the most part, on the heights where the air is free from any impurity. The functions of light and colours in this play create an organic unity.

The Fourth Act was introduced as an afterthought to fulfil the artistic and spiritual unanimity of the drama.⁵⁷ Moreover, the title of the play is not the *Unbinding of Prometheus* but *Prometheus Unbound*. This act, therefore, displays the exultant state of the world after the hero was unbound.

It may be said here that abundance of lyrical poetry rather than external drama does not necessarily make this play less dramatic. On the other hand, as T. S. Eliot has observed:

The poetry of a great verse-drama is not merely a decoration of a dialogue which could, as drama, be well put in prose; it makes the drama itself different and more dramatic.⁵⁸

However, as we have already said, conquest of evil is the central theme of this play, based on a moral issue. Shelley has here drawn Virtue as she would be magnificent in persecuted state, but impatient of unauthorised tyranny. This feature of moral excellence has been pointed out as the central theme of the play by the poet himself. We have to see now how intensely the poet suffered from moral anxiety. Keeping aside the demerits, we, therefore, need to shift our focus on the moral atmosphere of the play.

PART – VII

In his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley wrote:

Didactic poetry is my abhorrence: nothing can be equally expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes

of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence: aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure; reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness.⁵⁹

The same moral concern has been expressed in the concluding speech of Demogorgon at the end of Act IV of the play itself:

These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled doom.
To suffer woes which Hope think infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power which seems omnipotent
To love, and bear: to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent.

(Act IV, ll. 568-575)

This moral concern of Shelley has been explained by Mary Shelley in the following way:

The prominent feature of Shelley's theory of the destiny of the human species was that, evil is not inherent in the system of the creation but an accident that might be expelled.... Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil and there would be none.⁶⁰

What she has not pointed out here is that Shelley also believed that love was the transcendental force which would inspire mankind to will so. No one doubts that man is subject to necessity, or, as Demogorgon puts it, to Fate, Time, Occasion, and Change; but

there are moments of choice, when man's destiny is in his own hands, when he is to choose between good or evil. In the beginning of the play, such a moment comes to Prometheus, and he chooses wisely because his heart is filled with love:

I wish no living thing to suffer pain.

(Act I, l. 305)

Pity and forgiveness — these two virtues help Prometheus in resembling Christ:

Remit the anguish of that lighted stare;

Close those wan lips; let that thorn-wounded brow

Stream not with blood; it mingles with thy tears!

(Act I, ll. 597-599)

Prometheus resembles Christ when he is suffering not so much for himself as for his beloved mankind whose dark bloodstained future he has been shown, and as he was also chained to the rock for his championship of the human-cause.

Shelley's moral concern has perhaps been most appropriately revealed in the following lines:

Very simply, the change that Prometheus from its beginning dramatises, is the reflection of Shelley's hope, a hope assuming in its pertinacity the strength of faith that spring will follow winter, that the reign of mercy and peace will someday succeed the dominion of hatred and oppression.⁶¹

In his *Ode to the West Wind*, Shelley has expressed that hope:

If winter comes, can spring be behind?

For the arrival of this spring, what matters most is the initial reformation of Prometheus during winter. The dispatch of Panthea to Asia, Asia's transformation, her descent to the cave of Demogorgon, Demogorgon's ascent to the throne of Jupiter, the conflict between the two (i.e., Demogorgon and Jupiter), Jupiter's futile resistance and subsequent downfall, the

deliverance of Prometheus from his bondage and so on — all follow from Prometheus's change of heart. Actually, it is no wonder that critics explain Prometheus's determination to revoke the curse as the one crucial act of the entire play and that many of them have interpreted the retraction as required and also as an act of moral recognition and repentance. The casting down of the Tyrant is swift and sure. Carlos Baker's comments are worth quoting here:

This event which in dramatic terms ought to be climactic does not seem to have been so conceived by Shelley. The mental reforms achieved when Prometheus casts hate from his heart in Act I is not only a symbolic anticipation of the cosmic reform achieved by Demogorgon in dethroning Jupiter, but also a direct cause of it. To all intents and purposes the expulsion of Jupiter really took place during Prometheus's first act of recantation. For this play, despite its mythological fabric, is a drama of the inner mind, and evil is represented as a deformity of the mind.⁶²

But it may be noted again that Shelley hints that evil is not expelled for ever. It is important to remember that Jupiter takes Demogorgon with him into the abyss:

Sink with me then —
We two will sink in the wide waves of ruin,
Even as a vulture and as a snake outspent
Drop, twisted in inextricable fight
Into a shoreless sea.

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 70-74)

This event may be explained thus: Jupiter seems in his fall to be subsumed back into the eternity that Demogorgon represents, an aspect of potentiality that is now dispossessed but

that at some future time re-emerge to dominate and tyrannise.⁶³ Then Hercules unbinds Prometheus and this event is explained by the poet in the play:

...thus both strength
To wisdom, courage and long-suffering love,
And thee, who art the form they animate,
Minister like a slave.

(Act III, Sc. III, ll. 1-4)

After liberation takes place on the physical level, all things begin to awake, move, and live in the newly born earth which nourishes its created life with a love that is no longer hindered by Jupiter's tyranny and Prometheus's bondage. There is also a new world of political systems, and a radical change in human behaviour, as mankind becomes free:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself;

(Act III, Sc. IV, ll. 193-197)

But man is still man in that he is not yet and never will be exempt from — 'chance, and death, and mutability'. As Asia and Prometheus withdraw to their cave, we may say that they are thus subsumed into their principle archetypes Adam and Eve, unfallen and in the state of bliss and grace, to preside over the original garden of humankind. This is not an anti-climax so much as a brilliantly calculated measure achieving the freedom of action to be complete — Prometheus has achieved his end, and Jupiter has been overthrown — now the whole earth rejoices. Act IV is the dramatisation of millennial joy and reawakening:

In fact the extraordinary fourth act of *Prometheus* is a piece of writing that defies all normal categories and aspires to the condition of pure Joy through words used as image and as music...to their music comes the final grandeur of a last restatement, the symphonic conclusion by Demogorgon, who brings the work to an end with a triumphant *finale*.⁶⁴

The re-emergence of Demogorgon has been appropriately interpreted by Stuart M. Sperry:

By asserting to the last the primacy of necessity, Shelley was preserving an order essential to the intellectual decorum of his play. Although Prometheus by his endurance may keep alive the millennial spark of hope, it is only through Demogorgon and the comprehensible working of the vast forces he controls that the promised change can come about.⁶⁵

Demogorgon's final speech actually expresses the moral concerns of Shelley; Shelley is sure about the end, but not so about the means. He cannot settle the problem with final assurance; what is there to guarantee the stability and continuance of humanities' new bliss? To solve this problem, Shelley uses Demogorgon as his mouthpiece, and the best he can do is to put forward certain pledge:

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,

These are the seals of that most firm assurance

Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength:

(Act IV, ll. 562-564)

Demogorgon holds out to humanity these means to reclaim self-rule when in future the kingdom of darkness will try to reassume its reign. This concluding speech thus goes deep into the moral centre of the Promethean situation.

The span of Shelley's prose writings until the composition of *Prometheus Unbound* is wider than that of his poetry. In these also, he has emphasised on the principles celebrated in the drama. Bennett Weaver has noted that as early as 1812 in his *An Address to the Irish People and Proposals for an Association*, Shelley has stressed on six important concepts — (1) Tyranny, Power, and Evil; (2) Virtue and Wisdom reflecting true power; (3) Love as the solution of the conflict; (4) Need for succour for man; (5) the Self-destruction of despotic power; and (6) the ultimate triumph of Good. These are all dealt with symbolically in the play.⁶⁷ Also, as N. I. White points out, in this play the freedom of the will 'is the one quality that bulwarks humanity against an eternity of oppression'.⁶⁷

Mary Shelley, in her note to the play, describes the theme of the play as

...the image of one warring with the Evil Principle, oppressed not only by it, but by all — even the good, who were deluded into considering evil a necessary portion of humanity; a victim full of fortitude and hope and the spirit of triumph emanating from a reliance in the omnipotence of good.⁶⁸

The 'freedom of will' stressed by N. I. White, should be one of the conditions for conquest in the war against the evil, but then another condition is the sprinkling of love. However, it seems that the problem remains. Shelley has not perhaps cared to answer a particular question: how to maintain the delicate but necessary balance between two seemingly contradictory demands: to defy and to love. It may be perhaps pertinent in this connection to go back to the lines 1-73 of the play when, in Prometheus's second recantation, Shelley makes a further attempt to develop the resemblance between Christ and Prometheus, both being impervious to temptation, and serene in self-mastery. Parallelism is reinforced by Prometheus's wishing 'no living thing to suffer pain'. We can also recall that in unreformed Prometheus, clear sins of pride, ambition, and envy — sins of Milton's Satan — were committed though Shelley declares in his Preface that the Titan is free of envy, malice, and

self-aggrandising ambition. In fact, Shelley emphasises here more effectively than in the opening apostrophe that here is a conversion from pride to pity. We may recall Prometheus's regret that in the blindness of suffering he gave way to bitter hatred. Hurting other's feeling was the most heinous act of moral evil to Shelley. In his all-embracing sympathy for all living things and in his renouncing vengeance — the curse standing for all wrong moral attitudes — Prometheus scores a point over his inferior fellow-rebel, Milton's Satan. The moral reformation of Prometheus is thus complete.

Even after more than one hundred and fifty years Shelley is regarded by many as a Romantic extremist 'whose poetry has nothing to do with the twentieth century enlightenment. As Mary Shelley says:

It must be difficult for the present generation rising around to believe that Shelley "looked on political freedom as the direct agent to effect the happiness of mankind" and that to eradicate the misery and evil brought about by it, he sought a means forever. Any new spring, hope of liberty exulted Shelley wildly and intensely. His dream of millennium is still far off perhaps, but the people who are fighting to bring it; to destroy injustice and exploitation may easily find in him a comrade in spirit.⁶⁹

In this context it is interesting to note how Marxist intellectuals regarded Shelley. The following extract from the reminiscences of Marx's daughter Eleanor is revealing in this respect:

The true difference between Byron and Shelley consists on this, that those who understand and love them consider it fortunate that Byron died in his thirty-sixth year, for he would have become a reactionary bourgeois had he lived longer: conversely they regret Shelley's death at the age of twenty-nine,

because he was a revolutionary through and through and would consistently have stood with the vanguard of socialism.⁷⁰

Engels also wrote in the same vein:

Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes. No respectable person could have the works of the latter on his desk without his coming into the most terrible disrepute. It remains true: blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and however long it may take, the kingdom of this earth as well.⁷¹

Engels found that the struggling class in England also enjoyed reading the works of Shelley as he thought that his writings contained socialist thoughts. 'The workers also have in their hands cheap editions of the writings of Thomas Paine and Shelley'. He also noted:

Shelley the genius, the prophet, and Byron, with his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society find most of their readers in the proletariat, the bourgeois owns castrated editions, family editions, cut down in accordance with the hypocritical morality of today.⁷²

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is, as we have already noted, an evidence of this missionary zeal. The optimistic note found in this play is due to his faith that poetry ought to hold up before the mind's eye certain ideals of 'moral excellence'. Shelley always regarded a poet as a legislator or a prophet. In his essay *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley observes:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and writes both these characters.⁷³

He moreover regarded imagination as a moral faculty. His constant aim, therefore, was to renovate the world, to bring about Utopia, to reshape the society of his time in accordance with the ideals of the French Revolution. He hoped that institutions of kingship,

priesthood, tyranny, and injustice would soon disappear and the golden age of happiness was not far off. Most of his poems deal with his aspirations for an expression of the interweaving of hope and expectation. In the last two acts of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley is trying to image what kind of world we would live in — at the same time he is trying to claim as he can, while being responsible to his awareness of limiting factors: evil cannot act only if mankind is armed with these qualities: ‘Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance’. There is a warning that in course of ‘eternity’, period of victory will be followed again by defeat and that, therefore, man should be careful. And, if, with infirm hand, ‘Eternity’ should free the ‘serpent’ of evil, these ‘spells’ should be used in order ‘to reassume an empire o’er the disentangled doom’. The secret of victory lies in endurance and suffering. Like Prometheus, man must culture himself, purge his mind of all those illusions that he clings to. The regeneration of mind is the great Promethean value:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, Great and joyous, beautiful, and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

(Act IV, ll. 570-578)

Shelley of course knew that man often remains deprived of the fulfilment of these impulses because he suffers from cynicism, fear, self-interest, and unwisdom. Yet this drama, written in the dawn of nineteenth century, still may play a significant role in the world which

is, at present, facing conflict, violence, and moral degradation. All over the world extremists are acting; rebellions are bursting forth; greedy and corrupt people are exploiting and persecuting the poor and the helpless. Under this miserable situation prevailing in the world, Shelley's warning may show a way to find the means to solve these endless problems.

However, we have to admit that it may be

that he has not been able to maintain a balance between the means and the end; but at least it is true that in order to find out the means (about which Shelley was not sure), we may find his warning through Demogorgon helpful to some extent.*

*Interestingly, Cameron thinks that Shelley anticipates Gandhi.⁷⁴ His view is later maintained by some modern critics. For example, Art Young says:

The courage of the non-violent soldier surpasses that of the violent one for it is courage inspired by love rather than by fear. It is the courage of Shelley's Prometheus, of Socrates and Martin Luther King [Jr].⁷⁵

We have to remember in this context that Shelley was not always a votary of non-violence or bloodless revolution. We cannot forget that in early youth he was one of the two or three first disciples of William Godwin (1756-1836), the English political philosopher whose materialism pervaded his anarchistic trait. But it was the aftermath of the French Revolution, especially the September Massacre that cooled his fiery imagination about a happier and just world, free from exploitation and ruled by love. Further the critics of conventional religion and conservative Christianity will be delighted, however, by the frank and incontrovertible picture of the terrible things which have been done in the name of the religion by the prince of peace, mercy, and mildness:

Look! Where round the wide horizon

Many a million-peopled city

Thus, Shelley explains the real nature of life with a meaningful purpose. It follows from this play that it is a complex symbol designed to evoke the mind of man to the realisation of 'moral excellence' as an all-embracing mode of living:

It was Shelley's belief that human beings were created to love, to admire, to sympathise, to contribute, to assist to rejoice, that they were, in short, intended to fulfil their best potential.⁷⁶

Shelley believed, however, that through individual failure a man was led to moral degradation and that to keep up his moral ideal, a man has to respond properly even to the severest oppression through kindness, fortitude, and a firm determination to transform the oppressor by 'peace and love'.⁷⁷

Sir Geoffrey Ash, a modern critic, states in course of his study on Gandhi that *Prometheus Unbound* is the 'most Gandhian of all long poems'.⁷⁸

*contd.

Vomits smoke in the bright air.
Hark that outcry of despair!
'Tis his mild and gentle ghost
Waiting for the fate he kindled...

(Act I, ll. 548-555)

However, the comparison between Gandhi and Shelley is done because both Gandhi and Shelley believed that a non-violent society will be attained on earth, but that it will not be founded on a single act of heroism and that it will never be a state of static perfection. A non-violent society, such as Shelley described at the end of the Third Act of his play, is one of perpetual creative energy which is constantly reviewing its commitment to non-violence

To the socialist or the Marxist, however, the bound Prometheus will be a type of a champion of the poor, downtrodden, and have-nots undergoing ever-multiplying torture at the hand of a despotic tyrant whose power and glory are hollow within. He may not accept the positive non-violent disposition and Christian-like forgiveness and pity for the tyrant which the suffering Titan clearly displays. But he (the socialist or the Marxist) still heartily subscribes to the picture of the classless human society and the anticipation of Marx's own dream of communism in its final state:

*cont. through the act of love. We may compare Prometheus's significant declaration ('I wish no living thing to suffer pain') to Mahatma Gandhi's statement: 'There is no love where there is no will.'⁷⁹ But we have to also remember that Shelley differs from Gandhi on the concept of 'Ramrajya'. One may argue that ultimately Prometheus was unbound by a symbol of force, i.e. Hercules, and that Hercules in this play represents not mind's strength but the physical strength. to attract people to non-violence by imaginatively portraying its profundity, grandeur, beauty, and promise of Utopia. Still, as we have already said, Shelley himself was not sure that mankind will be able to accept non-violence as the way of their life. At the core of his heart, there was a sad realisation of a 'sad reality' that as 'to err is human', a human being will tend to take a false step and thus will fail in attaining perfection. That sad realisation is reflected in the last speech of Demogorgon, and it is given expression with minute details in the failure of Beatrice in *The Cenci*, which is a human tragedy.

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king.

(Act III, Sc. IV, ll. 193-197)

Thus we find that in *Prometheus Unbound*, perhaps it was Shelley's intention to attract people to non-violence by imaginatively portraying its profundity, grandeur, beauty and promise of Utopia. Still, as we have already said, Shelley himself was not sure the mankind will be able to accept non-violence as the way of their life. At the core of his heart, there was a sad realisation of 'sad reality' that as to err is humane, a human being will tend to take a false step and thus will fail in attaining perfection. That sad realisation is reflected in the last speech of Demogorgon and it is given expression with minute details in the failure of Beatrice Cenci in *The Cenci*, a human tragedy.

In this context it is worth remembering that Prometheus has not always been 'the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature'. He has had an immoral hatred of omnipotence which has given him the necessary courage for never to submit or yield; and he has had a kind of unregenerate pride which can make him exultantly say, even after three thousand years of torture, that when the great hour arrives, it will drag Jupiter from his throne. When Prometheus fulfils his promise to recall his curse upon Jupiter, Shelley emphasises the hero's conversion from pride into pity. The moral reformation of Prometheus being completed, he is able to endure with equanimity almost all the tortures heaped upon him by Jupiter.

As we have mentioned before, Shelley develops resemblance between Christ and Prometheus as both are impervious to temptation and serene in self-mastery. Mercury offers Prometheus some benefits if he submits to Jupiter:

If thou might'st dwell among the gods the while

Lapped in voluptuous joy?

(Act I, ll. 425-426)

Like Christ, however, Prometheus declines the offer, choosing to endure the agonies which yet must come, because he knows that the reign of evil will end after the agony.

PART VIII

The structural design of *Prometheus Unbound* is rather complicated, and even sometimes confusing, though the essential theme of the play is fairly simple: the removal of that repressive force which now restricts and tortures the human mind; would not only provide an opportunity for the rebirth of the power of love in that mind, but would enable man to realise his tremendous potential of intellectual might and spiritual bliss which has for so long been stifled by fear, hatred, selfishness and despair. Shelley is not suggesting that these things have happened, but only that they ought to happen. As a matter of fact *Prometheus Unbound* is one of those visions of what ought to be or may be in the distant future. Shelley works out his vision of man's achievement of ethical perfection in a broad socio-historical perspective, the groundwork for which is provided by Asia's exposition in Act II. He pays no attention to specific historical details. His references to French Revolution, persecutions of Christians and also the crucifixion of Christ, are in passing and moves upon a highly mythological plane. The mind of man in the age of Saturn was undeveloped and mind simply vegetated. Subsequently, in the age of Prometheus 'mad disquietudes and shadows of unreal good' began to appear. Prometheus granting Jupiter dominance upon only one condition, namely that man is to be free, means in effect that the mind of man be allowed its

'fierce wants' and 'mad disquietudes' assume command, while at the same time retaining the power of freedom of choice. The mind may at any time shake off these agonies if the inward deception is so strong that almost limitless possibilities inherent in an act of self-reform have long been ignored and thus the mind of man has been subjected to the severest of tortures. Eventually, however, the Great Hour arrives. The mind resolves to rid itself of the attitudes which have kept it chained into the darkness. With this resolution the way for the expulsion of mind's Demon is prepared. This resolution and the preparation provide Shelley with ethical scheme in Act I. Precisely at the moment of the expulsion (represented in a preliminary way by the departure of the last of the Furies and finally by the fall of Jupiter) the way is made ready for the entry into the human mind of a harmonising power (dramatically represented by Prometheus's reunion with Asia.). The mind is ultimately released by its own strength (Hercules). We are given to understand that the 'mad disquietudes' may return, although, such a contingency, is for the time unlikely. Some critics have asserted that the poet thought it necessary only for mankind to resolve 'that there should be no evil and there would be none while certain qualifications must be clearly stated. One of these is that even under the new dispensation, (assuming, as he does, the power is achieved on a world-wide scale), man will still have to contend with 'chance, and death and mutability'.

Secondly as may be inferred from Demogorgon's final exhortation to the assembled cosmic hosts, there is no absolute guarantee of a permanent expulsion of moral evil. Jupiter, the destructive force, has been cast down into the pit. But there is always the possibility that in some distant point of time in the future, some infirmity will develop in mankind to set this destructive force free once more and once more evils will hold sway.

If the forces of moral good were capable of being set in motion only through a regeneration into the mind of man, the forces of moral evil can reassume their formal dominance only through a degeneration in the strength of the mind. But as long as

'Gentleness', 'Wisdom', 'Virtue' and 'Endurance' remain in a man, he will have always weapons with which to fight moral evils. Truly, as a myth of moral regeneration, this play needs rather to be understood than justified. One has only to grasp, respective psychological attitudes of the self-enslaved and the self-liberated mind, as it now is, with reasons. The rest is a show of the mind of man set free, made perfect, made whole – 'One harmonious soul of many a soul whose native is its own divine control'.

Shelley's drama thus provides poetic affirmation for his belief in 'a kind of optimism' which 'is tempered by his appreciation of the imperfections which now exist in both the moral and physical world'. In this regard we may note what a modern critic says:

Shelley sensed and expressed the need for people to be daring in intellect, intelligent in recognising love as the essence of humanity and humans in applying a loving intellect in social situation. It is for this reason that Shelley's poetry is vitally alive today. Far from being 'an ineffectual angel', Shelley, from the early *Queen Mab* to the climatic *Prometheus Unbound* and the final fragmentary *Triumph of Love*, urges a brave, responsible, involved and loving confrontation of the events and questions of life. By its consistent assertion of the viability, efficacy and necessity of the tirade of intellect, love and social enlightenment Shelley's poetry defines true humanity.⁸⁰

Actually the socio-economic and the political forces of his time were never absent from Shelley's mind and most of his longer poems and poetic plays, even some love lyrics reflect the poet's awareness of these forces. Often this awareness and concern – a sort of moral concern – are expressed through symbols. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus, Mercury and the Furies represent particular social classes or particular types of people: the people who were protesting types, intellectuals who wanted reforms; the middle class people who used to sit on the fence and who were unable to make up their mind; then there were

military-minded people, exploiters, robbers and parasites who used to thrive on the powers bestowed upon them by the high and the mighty. Jupiter symbolises the ruling aristocratic class who is opposed by another symbol, Prometheus who represents the intellectual class thirsting for reforms, the Furies represent the forces of the ruling aristocracy, as well as the Quadruple Alliance, they also represent the large armies, the cunning judges, low practitioners and money-lenders all of whom keep the parasites on bondage. Mercury symbolises an agent of the higher classes. The torture of Prometheus in Act I direct our attention to how the intelligentsia of Shelley's time were painfully disturbed by an image of Europe destroyed by wars and oppressions during the twenty five years of the century. Mercury also becomes the representation of the meek oppressed people who are harassed by the morally disturbed conscience. Mercury's in-between 'poetical mind' feels sorry for the intellectuals who are tortured by the fact that a devastated Europe cannot rise again. Ione and Panthea, on the other hand, the companions of Prometheus, hold out the torch of hope of a new world order and they also point out to an inspiring fact that history of the struggles for liberty in the past will live on in the hearts of mankind as inspiring memories and this in spite of despotic forces trying to make the memories dead. By the way we may note here that the recantation of the curse on Jupiter in Act I by Prometheus may represent the idea that the intellectuals of his time were thinking of channelising the revolutionary forces of the time by peaceful means instead of taking recourse to hatred, spirit of revenge and violent means. Shelley's moral conscience then is pricked when in a moment of anger Prometheus curses Jupiter with bitter hatred and revengeful spirit. We may equate Asia with Love and Demogorgon with Necessity without any fear of contradiction. This interpretation of the symbolical significance of the play is not very far from what Mary Shelley herself suggests at various places, including her Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.

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