CHAPTER I

The Early Nineteenth-century Background: the Conflict – Social, Political, Literary, and Moral

We may state at the outset that the major Romantic poets were both the products and the victims of their age (1789-1832) and that they were in a sense rebels and radicals, unlike the Augustans who were known as conformists and professed neo-classicists. The most notable characteristic feature of the age, therefore, may best be described by the word 'conflict', and the Romantics experienced this conflict rather intensely—it was a double storm, inside and outside, though this conflict was valuable for their poetry. Not that the age did not witness great endeavours, scientific and industrial, social and political. There were enough enterprises and achievements, yet the turmoil, discontent, protests, economic depression, injustice, corruption together with the struggles through which England moved during its Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, left their marks on the poets, intellectuals, and humanitarians of the age. As Shelley writes characteristically in his preface to *Helllas* (composed in 1821 and published in 1822; the first publisher withdrew this passage):

> This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and everyone of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy, and suspend mutual jealousies in the presence of a mightier fear: Of this holy alliance all the despots of the earth are virtual members. But a new race has risen through out Europe nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions

which are its chains, that she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread.[1]

In this connection we should remember that at first Waterloo was as effective an event for the younger Romantics like Byron, Shelley and Keats as the Bastille was for Wordsworth and Coleridge. As Hazlitt pointed out: 'Nothing was too mighty for this new-begotten hope; and the path that led to the human progress seemed as plain as the pictures in the *Pilgrims Progress* leading to paradise.'[2]

In fact the revolution in France in the last decade of the eighteenth century threw the whole Europe into turmoil. The revolutionaries were, as always, champions of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Naturally, the youths of England along with youths of the whole continent were greatly enthused and their imagination was fired. There were great outbursts of jubilation and, to the youth, to re-cite an oft-quoted line of Wordsworth: 'Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive.'[3]

As a matter of fact, it was the French Revolution which was largely instrumental in first rousing Wordsworth to be interested in writing dramas and its after-effects had the same impact on Coleridge. Even the first Act of the play, *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794), that he wrote at the age of twenty-one in collaboration with Southey, his first dramatic effort, bears testimony to his strong reaction to the upheavals in Paris. The dedicatory words too reflect his response to the event. The meeting of the generals at Versailles in 1789 raised great expectations and its outcome was awaited with robust optimism. Also the fall of Bastille was welcomed by the young sparks of England as a signal not only for the regeneration of France but also as an opening for establishing a common field for mutual cooperation and progress. Many were happy that at last the privileges and vested interests of the feudal lords were going to be removed. But the promises and expectations were belied, the illumination of the young

hearts was dimmed and the warmth of enthusiasm cooled down as the revolutionaries indulged in senseless bloodshed.[4]

In Shelley's *Revolt of Islam,* the French Revolution is allegorised in an idealistic manner, but his letters written during the period of 1819-1822 reflect a sense of pessimism at the unhappy course of human affairs in Europe in general and in England in particular. His Prometheus chained to a desolate rock in the Caucasus, is an image of man's mind suffering from hatred and fear, tortured by all the venom that evil mentality is capable of. Shelley's conflict born of the turn of events at home and abroad is evident to the perceptible reader who reads between the seemingly optimistic lines of the Semichorus I in *Helllas*:

> Let the tyrants rule the desert they have made,
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> Let the free possess the paradise they claim;
>
> Be the fortune of our fierce oppressors weighed
>
> With our ruin, our resistance, and our name![5]

The situation after Waterloo was described by Lord Castlereagh, the leader of the House of Commons, as 'the transition from a state of war to a state of peace.'[6]

This is an incurable optimistic and exulting point of view. Actually, since after the defeat of Napoleon by the Duke of Wellington in 1815, England's sufferings began. This is an inevitable post-war aftermath from which no nation could escape. The Romantic poet's millennium of universal peace, love and justice, further receded in real life, but the dreams nevertheless remained in their writings, though refracted in various forces and modes. The conflict between the ideal and real is thus further intensified. In fact wherever one looked one found a dismal picture. As a contemporary described:

> France could only be kept quiet by foreign occupation; Spain was trodden down under the feet of a driveling idiot called king; Poland was manacled to Russia; the dream of Italian independence was at an end when Austria was to

> rule over four millions of the Lombardo-Venetian kingdom. Promises made in the hour of danger had been violated when people had won safety of crowns....[7]

Nearer home, twenty years of war produced no real good worth mentioning, except, of course, in the fields of literature. These wars brought more domestic misery than was ever experienced by England. In the words of another contemporary:

> Thousands thrown out of employment, usual channels closed,—no other as yet adequately opened—were of themselves sufficient dreadful; but when to them were added the dreadful seasons of 1816 and 1817, when the crops failed all through Europe, it is no wonder that an unparalleled degree of distress was the consequence.[8]

True, England's practical control of the sea after the Battle of Nile (1798) was already complete after the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). England now achieved supremacy over Europe and throughout the nineteenth century she acquired huge territories in far-off areas of the world. But at home she was not having a smooth sailing. The expectations of the Waterloo were again belied in the increasing chaos that was created after the war. The restrictions upon freedom imposed during the war were not withdrawn. A struggle ensued between the gathering forces of liberation and dictatorial oligarchy. Of course, the big business interests in the field of commerce and industry gained some power too at the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832.

Further, the evil effects of the Industrial Revolution intensified by the war with France created some problems on the question of the blockade of the continent, a small scale United States (1812-1814). The growth of the textile industry led to enclosures uprooting the small-holders from land. They flocked to the factories for livelihood. The war had provided many jobs, but peace threw millions, soldiers and labourers, out of employment. An explosion in

population made matters worse for the working classes, making bread dearer as import of foreign grain stopped as a result of food riots of 1816 in Northern Europe. The labourers broke down machines in the Midlands as they lay all responsibility on these machines for increasing their misery. There was a mammoth meeting at Spa Fields, organized by "Orator Hunt" (Henry Hunt), which resulted in the "Spa Fields Riots".

The economic doctrines of *laissez-faire*, pronounced by Adam Smith as far back as 1776, had captivated the imagination of Pitt in his boyhood. The young minister carried a rapid reduction and simplification of tariffs. But the process was reversed by the war 1793-1815. War expenditure and the interest on war debt were defrayed by unscientific taxation on almost all articles in common use. Wartime income tax on the middle class continued in peacetime. A revenue tariff taxed raw materials more heavily than manufactured articles. The rising prices and food scarcity increased suffering and unrest. The Act of 1824 is the first case of the impartial application of the doctrine of *laissez-faire* even when it benefited the workmen as against the master. Passed in the days of anti-Jacobin panic (1799-1780), Pitt's 'Combination Law' rendered Trade Union activities illegal. Now the wage-earners could work out their own salvation not only by the repeal of the combination laws, but by analogous legislations passed at various dates, which permitted artisans to emigrate, and legalized 'Friendly and cooperative societies'. These laws were the work of Radicals and political economists of the 'classical' school. (Malthus, Ricardo and even Mcculloch supported the repeal of the combination laws.)

Trading in slaves was another weapon in the hands of reformers in both Tory and Whig groups. In the 'Ministry of all The Talents', Evangelists, Quakers, poets, philosophers all combined to insist on the passage and to get the Bill abolishing the slave trade (*An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 1807) passed. The successful conclusion of the anti-slavery movement in England ushered in immense and beneficent changes in all those European

nations who throughout the nineteenth century shared the burden of the helpless South-African slaves. Among those who should be thanked for the abolition of this ugly system, mention must be made of William Wilburforce and Fox. The former was the follower of Evangelicalism and latter has been compared by G.M. Trevelyan with Shakespeare for his human qualities.[9]

Then there was the barbarous and the meaningless penal code. Samuel Romilly fought bravely against it in the face of vigorous anti-Jacobin prejudices. Sir Thomas Burdett (Shelley dedicated his *The Wandering Jew* to this leader) also joined hands against the government. Among the victims of government repression was William Blake (he was brought to trial on the charge of sedition in 1803) and Leigh Hunt (he was prosecuted in 1811 along with John Hunt for exposing the evils of flogging in the army). William Cobbet too was imprisoned for the same charge against him. An avid Isaac Eaton reprinted Paine's *The Age of Reason* and he was tried for this. (Shelley wrote a letter to Lord Ellen-borough on this occasion.) When the Luddite riots broke out in 1811, the Frame breaking Bill (1812) was passed. If anybody smashed the manufacturing machines, it would be treated as capital offence. (It may be noted that Byron attacked this Bill in the House of Lords.) Many victims of technological unemployment were executed in presence of noisy crowds silenced by the military. In 1817 William Home was tried for publishing parodies on the creed, the Litany and the Catechism, in 1818 Richard Carlile reprinted Home's Parodies and Paine's works. He was fired and imprisoned. This was a step towards the freedom of the press. Naturally, the public suffered from nervous tension, and when the Scottish weavers struck work in 1812, the public became panic-stricken. In Scott's letter to Southey, written at this time, a significant line is found: 'The country is mined beneath our feet.' [10]

But still the administration controlled by the Tories strengthened the vested interests further. George III's fit of insanity during his last years made him unfit to say anything about

the affairs of his kingdom. *The Combination Act* (1799-1780), as we have pointed out, had already abolished all trade union action, and, in the meantime, more repressive measures were imposed. Naturally, a reaction set in. There were cries for freedom. Agitations, processions, and protest meetings were held for bread, employment and fair representation in the parliament. The ideas of Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776), of Thomas Paine (*The Rights of Man*, 1791) and (*The Age of Reason*, 1794), of William Godwin (*The Enquiry into Political Justice*, 1793), of Mary Wollstonecraft's attack (in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1970) on Edmund Burk's contempt of the poor (in his *Reflections in the Revolution in France*, 1790), of James Makintosh's *Vindicac Gallicae* (1791), of Joseph Priestly's *Letters to the right to the Honourable Edmund Burke* (1791), of John Thelwall's *The Pripatetic* (1793), of William Cobbet's *Political Register*, of the French Thought in the Eighteenth Century such as Claude Adrien Helvitin's Romantic theories of education (e.g. the mind is at birth a *tabula rasa*), containing something like Condillac's interpretation of Lock's epistemology and mounting an attack upon convention, kings, priests and hereditary rights, Baron d'Holback's *Systeme de la Nature* (1770), Rousseau's *Discourse* ('return to nature'), among others, had fertilising influence on the thoughts of the intelligentsia. Various associations like 'The London Revolution Society' (1792) and newspapers like *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Morning Post* were better opponents of the repressive laws and championed the causes of liberty. A brilliant newspaper *Anti Jacobin* defended government's tax policies and its contributors satirized radical ideas, including those of Coleridge, Southey and Paine. Revolutionary pamphleteering, especially by William Cobbet's *Republican,* and Wooler's *Blast Dwarf* were widely read for their radical views and were brought to courts.

People's sufferings increased double-fold during 1815-1817. All this was due mainly to Irish immigration and low infantile death rate. Consequently, hellish slums and cheap cellars became the only shelters for the excess population. People slightly better-off, who

crowded the cities among their unemployed counterparts created due to the new machinery, were discharged army men. Gradually power-looms replaced hand-looms: first in the cotton, then in the woolen industry causing fresh problems for the poor.

We have already referred to the unemployment problem, food riots, and the December Spa Fields Meeting (1816). An unfortunate incident added a new dimension to people's distress and discontent. With permission, 'Orator Hunt' addressed a gathering of 60,000 men, women, and children in St. Peter's Field at Manchester (16th August, 1819). But as soon as the meeting began, the magistrates got panicked, and ordered the horsemen and yeomanry who were 'Tory' partisans to disperse the crowds. Cursed and hustled, they charged the unarmed masses with sabers. As a result, eleven persons, including two women, were killed and four hundred people were injured, including over a hundred women*. This is known as 'Peterloo Massacre' which roused Shelley to write *The Mask of Anarchy* although at the time he was putting the finishing touches to *The Cenci*. In December of the same year, i.e. 1819, Shelley significantly composed the Fourth and the last Act of his *Prometheus Unbound*. Further, a plot to blow up the cabinet was discovered. This plot came to be known as 'Carto Street Conspiracy'. Six acts were passed to regulate agitated gatherings, which again inflamed the masses.

Popular feeling found another occasion to raise its voice—Queen Caroline claimed

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* The statement in the middle of an otherwise excellent chapter of the *Cambridge Modern History* to the effect that only one man was killed and forty injured does not bear scrutiny. The most recent summary of the evidence on the number of casualties can be read in pp. 81-5 of *Three Accounts of Peterloo*, edited by F.A. Bruton (Manchester University Press, 1921). Also see G.M. Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century and after: 1702-1919*, (Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 193-4, note.)

the right to be crowned at her husband's coronation (1820), when divorce proceedings were brought against her,[11] and Viscount Castlereagh, a target of popular hatred for his association with Acts of repression, committed suicide in 1922. (He figures symbolically in the poetry of Byron and Shelley.)

Actually, dishonesty among the reformers and 'radicals' had been rampant for sometime past, and strong public opinion could not be repressed for long. Some measures of reforms were taken—though slowly. The act of 1819 limited the hours of labour in cotton mills to eleven, thus recognizing, in principle, the parliamentary interference, though the concession itself was negligible. Agitation for harmless recreation for the poor and for working- class education was gaining ground. There were 'Mechanics Institutes' and other organizations run by public bodies. Robert Owen's contention that human personality could develop only in right environment, as contained in his *New View of Society* (Part I, 1813), appealed to the philanthropists. His convictions that the Rift between hand-labour and machine, labour and capital, could be reconciled and that through model communities and a proper labour exchange system many grievances of the working people could be removed appealed to social economists. Such ideas inspired John Ruskin, and influenced many Victorian legislations.

On the other side, the father of the utilitarian school of philosophy, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) questioned the usefulness of the heritage of the past. All traditions should be tested by the revision of the law. Betterment of society in the line of 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' was his chief aim. James Mills (1773-1836) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), great names in the History of psychology and political economy, collaborated with Bentham in giving fuller shapes to his ideas. The Tories in power had to repeal the Test and Corporation Act (1826) and the Roman Catholics were emancipated. Francis Place (1771-1854), the moderate radical, and Joseph Hume, led the movement for parliamentary reforms.

A fuel was added in the meantime to the fire of strikes and violent agitations by the French Revolution of July 1830. Whigs conceded a concession to the agitators for just representation and finally through the Reform Bill (1832) the middle classes gained considerable political power.

A refreshing sense of change was also in the air. This was due to many reasons, namely, writings of the French enlightenment, new interest in scientific discoveries, inspiration from America in her new constitution and philosophical speculations about the perfectibility of men. In the words of a historian: 'Stability and contentment had inspired the glow in the Augustan bosom; an iridescent perspective of unlimited human progress awoke the enthusiasm of the Romantic generation.'[12]

Owing to technological reliabilities, country life was divided in two sections—rich and poor with the middle class left in tension. The problems of production and exchange were not looked into. Wordsworth's impression is noteworthy:

> I see clearly that the principle ties which kept the different class of society in a vital and harmonious dependence upon each other have within these thirty years, either been greatly impaired or wholly dissolved. Everything has been put up to market and sold for the highest price it would buy.[13]

New mechanical contrivances were usual in factories to save wastage of human labour. The steam engine by James Wyatt is a spectacular innovation of the period, but the smoke and flame symbolized the darker aspects of technological progress. The romantic valleys described by Wordsworth in *The Excursion* (viii) were marred by textile mills run by waterpower.

These textiles, though cheap, broke down the country economy being fatal to the cottage industry products such as spinning, weaving or knitting.*

Then the enclosure of common lands reduced the living standard of the users to a considerable degree; we find from Thomas Berwick's autobiography that 'the poor men were rooted out, and various mechanics of the villages deprived of all benefit of it.'[15]

We have observed in the beginning that the period under review was, aside from the depressing features, also a period of endeavour and enterprise. Circumnavigation, perfection of chronometer, Captain James Cook's Three Voyages discovering Australia and Sandwich Island, and finding the earthly paradise in the south seas opened new vistas, not only in the fields of geography and commerce, but also in the spheres of ideas. Comparative studies of political and social systems were taken up by theoreticians. The business transaction with the East Indies and Indian Sub-continents as a whole received an impetus through, strangely, the trial of Warren Hastings. The lucrative Indian market; in the Age of Nawabs, drew the attention of the adventures in business. The improvement of ship-building materials, five hundred watt engines, a new communication system, developing and digging canals, opening up of inland districts and Midlands and other developments caused optimism to the general run of the society but the reaction of the poets was somewhat otherwise. The five hundred watt engines, manufactured by Boulton, especially the one installed in Albion Flour mills in Southwark, later burnt in 1790, must have helped to condition the poet's attitude to the new technology. In fact, the 'town' now denoted a dumping ground for excess poor populace, with all its resultant insanitation, squalor and crudity.

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*Samuel Bamford gives two contrasting pictures of the living standard of a working man's family just before and after the invention of the machinery in his *Dialect of South Lancashire*, or Tim Bobbin's *Tummus and Meary* (Manchester, 1850)[14]

On the other side, since the later half of the eighteenth century, the book trade publishing firms were investing heavy capital. This was due to the increase in the number of the literate and upper middle class people. Among the famous reference works, besides Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was published in 1771. (John Harris' *Lexicon Technicum* (1710) and Chamber's Cyclopedia (1728) were of course pioneering efforts.) The book trade throughout the country began to flourish with a high level of organization. Quality of publishing and printing also improved. Writers were engaged for hack writing (Coleridge worked as hack writer for some time). Works of Shakespeare and other poets, writers, dramatists and scholars were printed and reprinted. The basis for professional writers was provided with, but notorious intermediary patron was vanishing fast. Most of the well-known poets of the period except Byron were not connected with any profession either at court, in the church or in the Army. Thus they could afford to go to far-off places and reflect, ponder and meditate on the deeper aspects of life. Though they became rich in sense perceptions, they could not, however, have the opportunity of gaining the practical experiences of life and thus, according to a school of opinion, they lacked adult maturity. (We are reminded of T.S. Eliot's opinion held in his youth that Shelley was a poet of the adolescent.) The prices of books, especially of new books, rose very high. Consequently, lending circulating libraries and reading rooms were formed in large numbers. (One publisher named Lane of Minerva Press had a stock of 17000 books in 1802 which he loaned out at comparatively cheap rate, 2d. a day for one book. Shelley, in his young days was an addict to some such sensational fictional works like *Bride and No Wife*, *German Sorceress*, and *Mysterious Baron* etc.)

Also the Romantics faced a society where class-consciousness among the aristocratic and titled families still persisted. Wealth and position in the court or church still mattered. Shelley saw in his day that 'no class had ever enjoyed such riches as the landed gentry of

England', and he felt pity for the needy poor during the worst winters of 1811-12 and 1816-17.[16] For natural middle class writers—like Keats and John Claris—fame was no passport for them to mix with the nobility or genteel class. Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1816) gives an interesting sketch of status consciousness. However, in the early 1795, one could see at Joseph Johnson's such notable figures as Godwin, Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Blake and Young Scott. Shelley, Godwin and Lamb had their circles meeting together at their houses in turn. Nevertheless, they sometimes associated with the celebrities belonging to the higher classes and gained their assistance, but with less easiness. [17]

We agree that it will not be correct to say that Keats was 'killed' by critics but the fact cannot be denied that the younger romantic poets were often psychologically disturbed by the hostility shown by some of the influential reviewers of the time.[18]

The journals with conservative policies—*Blackwood's, Quarterly Review*, and the *Literary Gazette* especially—were biased against Byron, Shelley and Keats—poets who were known for their liberal and radical views. The critics of these journals introduced morality, religion, politics and even personal life of the poet into literary consideration. There were occasional praises here and there, no doubt and Francis Geffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, only one among the hostile groups (Henry Brougham, Sydney Smith and William Blackwood) admitted late in life that he was rather unjust to the romantics.[19] But the unfair judgment on the literary works of Byron, Shelley and Keats, on the whole, made these poets suffer from a sense of injured sentiment. Byron was criticized by John Gibbon Lockhart who originated the terms 'cockney school of poetry' in *Blackwood's Magazine* in an abusive series of articles begun in October, 1817.

The common people of England were suffering from poverty and exploitation. The comments of William, a popular radical leader of the time, bring out vividly their condition:

> No human beings were ever before treated so unjustly, with so much insolence and with such damnable barbarity as the working people in almost of all the countries of England. Here you saw a people...first reduced to a state of half starvation, next setting to a state of half defiance; and then attacked by a standing army sent against them to capture and put them in prison.[20]

The countryside 'proletariat ready for revolt'[21] stood side by side with the urban comrades for fighting the common enemy. The peace of the Augustans was replaced by discontent and distrust. Napoleonic wars caused unemployment and the economic depression was so overwhelming that it made Robert Southey remark that 'to talk of English happiness is like talking of Spartan freedom.'[22] There were, of course, attempts to cool down the temper through the Evangelicals' softening influence, Spunhamland Act etc., but sufferings were made worse by half-hearted palliatives. Repression further aggravated the situation.[23]

By 1832 the condition had already become so bad as to warrant Lord Maucaulay's fears of 'the wreck of laws, the confusion of ranks, the spoliation of property, and dissatisfaction of social order.'[24] In fact, the 'social fabric shattered'[25],and hence, the need for the Reform Bill of 1832, but in the words of a critic:

> The battle had been won—but not for romanticism. The Reform bill ushered in, not Shelley's millennium, a Colridgian pantisocracy, Byron's cant-free republic, or Keatsian paganism, but that reign of economists and calculators, gloomily prophesied by Burke.[26]

This, in brief, is the social, political and historical picture of the period. As for religious condition of the time only this much may be relevant for us to know that until the period of the French Revolution, there was no great pressure on poets to become antagonistic to religion. Of course, the major Romantics were always against the abuses of the church. It is well known that Shelley was punished by Oxford authorities for writing a pamphlet on the

Necessity of Atheism (though he admired Jesus Christ.) The rest of them bothered little about God or religion unless they felt the necessity to make him a villainous figure, but the common people still found comfort in the church. Burke's apprehension is typical of a reactionary intellectual of the period:

> On the side of religion, the danger of their example is no longer from intolerance, but from atheism; a foul, unnatural vice, to all the dignity and consolation of mankind.[27]

Religion in fact, of all varieties, could be assumed to be opposed to the atheistic Jacobinism of the philosophers and their English followers, Rationalist or Romantic. Religion, naturally, could not find favour with the upper classes, since it seemed to encourage insubordination. The lower classes, naturally too, found escape from earthly discomforts in the compensation of fervent nonconformity or Evangelicalism. The Romantic radicals opposed religious practices mainly because some privileged people use religion to justify ruthlessness and inequality and it was shown as a better substitute to reform. Dr. Hourseby's sermon to the Lord, spiritual and temporal (1973), and Hannah Moris' exhortation to the Shipham Club (1801) represent a typical outlook. They referred to: 'a conscientious submission to the sovereign power' which is 'no less than brotherly love, distinctive of Christ's disciples' and the role of 'an all wise and gracious providence to' unite all ranks of people together. Archdeacon Poley's views ('Religion smooths all inequality because it unfolds a project which makes all earthly distinctions nothing'), [29] have an apparent ring of good sense but in fact he propagated against reform or democracy.

Under such inhuman religious propaganda, much of the romantic poetry and drama would naturally counter through anti-religion rhetorics. It was no shared experience. Thus the age of compromise was slowly giving way to an age of extremism. Romantic literature is a manifestation of such extreme sensibility.

Thus we find that there was conflict everywhere between the aristocracy and the middle class, between capital and labour, between town and the village, between the government and the general people, between the machine and the mind, between faith and distrust, between agriculture and industry, between home and abroad. The world was too much with most of the people of the time most of whom tried in the words of a contemporary poet dramatist T.L. Beddoes:

> To outstrip the world in the race
>
> For gold or glory – [30]

Under the circumstances, it is satisfying to note that the Romantic poets were neither divorced from life nor did they forget the eternal truths of life. It is natural, therefore, that Byron would replace Scott and Keats would welcome Wordsworth's *The Excursion* in 1818 as 'one of the things to rejoice at this Age'. The Romantic poetry (the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, for instance) was suddenly found to represent the discontent, the profound melancholy temperament of the sensitive heart. The popular sentiments of the age were given expression only by the Romantics in their poetry of revolt and disillusionment, of millennium and regeneration.

As we shall see later, Shelley's plays, too, reflect the problems of the age and the spirit of the times, though the final tune transcends the immediate. Behind the façade of an Elizabethan diction and behind the themes persistently devoted to liberty and the retributive passion of remorse, this involvement of contemporary social and political complexities of the period in their plays is not easy to detect yet it is very much there under the garb of 'Romantic idealism'. We do not agree with S.C. Chew that the subject of the Romantic drama

written by the poets 'were mostly remote from contemporary interests.' [31] In fact, as a Romantic dramatist, Shelley chose the medium of drama to project his views about the world 'as it is' and also the world 'as it should be' for '... the connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form.' [32]

Nineteenth Century Poetic Drama

The Romantics were irresistibly attracted towards the poetic drama. But their nature did not suit to this way of writing. They were at a distance from the general current of life and that has become to some extent a demerit of their plays. They did not regard drama as a point of contact offered in the theatre between the writer and the society. It was to them only a form to give an expression to their passions. As they lived in isolation, they were unlike the Romantics on the Continent:

> It is perhaps difficult to conceive of Romantic egotists such as Shelley or Byron submitting to the discipline of the theatre; yet the history of nineteenth century drama elsewhere in Europe suggests that the Romantic approach could find satisfactory expression of the stage. To Schiller or Hugo the theatre offered a challenge which they rejoiced to accept. To the English Romantic poets it was something which they mostly preferred to ignore. [33]

The Indian scholar, Anniah Gowda, however did not agree with Rowell and says: 'The Romantic temperament did not realize that the play is something which exists for an audience.' [34]

While discussing the poetry in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot comments that the cause of the failure of the plays of the Romantics is their imitation of Shakespeare's blank verse:

As for the versification, I was only aware at this stage that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare for I was persuaded that the failure of nineteenth century poets when they wrote for the theatre (and most of the greatest English poets had tried their hand at drama) was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language; and this was due largely to their limitation to poetry which had lost the flexibility which blank verse should have if it is to give the effect of conversation. [35]

William Archer also alludes to the limitations of those 'sedulous' dramatists who copied Shakespeare:

Dramatic literature was at a low ebb.... The ghost of Romantic drama stalked the stage decked out in threadbare frippery and gibbering blank verse... whatever was least essential to Shakespeare's greatness was conscientiously imitated; his ease and flexibility of diction, his subtle characterization and his occasional mastery of construction were all ignored. Laboured rhetoric, whether serious or comic, was held to be the only legitimate form of dramatic utterance. [36]

In this respect, F.R. Leavis comments that *The Cenci* of Shelley is 'Shakespearean in inspiration and abounds in particulars echoes of Shakespeare, echoes protracted, confused and wooly; plagiarisms, that is of the worst kind' [37]

The Romantic playwrights tried to imitate Shakespeare, to recreate the spirit of his plays in their own, but their attempts were almost in vain. Beddoes, for example, in his *Death's Jest Book* has tried to capture the spirit of an Elizabethan age, but he lacks the strength of characterization. Moreover, in these plays the Romantics delineated almost all the characters as ideas rather than individuals. The character of Beatrice in *The Cenci* is an example of this kind. Another striking feature coupled with this is that of their 'the comparative rarity of prose, the vehicle of everyday communication.' [38]

From 1800 onwards poetic drama was written when prose was a developed medium so that the question remains why at all the poet dramatists should write their plays in verse. In fact, the supremacy of prose made the novel the predominant form of the age through which the largest possible audience could be secured. Rightly it has been remarked that as the Elizabethan age was the age of drama, the nineteenth century has been the age of the novel. [39] So it would have been quite in keeping with the natural course of events that drama which is essentially an expression of objective imagination and implies an appeal to the collective mind should have been in this age invaded and conquered by prose. But the apparent failure of prose to make its presence felt in this sphere was auspicious for poetic language. The poets could persuade themselves unhampered in resuscitating poetic drama. There was the tacit expectation of verse in tragic expression. There was a theatre where plays in verse were often accepted also. Then there was the enthusiastic goal over the rediscovery of the Elizabethans — the newly awakened interest in the masterpieces of the poetic drama, much encouraged by the publication of Lamb's *Specimen of the Dramatic Poets* (1808). Mention must also be made of Joanna Baillie's *Plays of the Passions*, the publication of which significantly coincided with *Lyrical Ballads* in the year 1798. If the latter sought to rediscover poetry by giving language to emotions, the former sought to rediscover tragic theatre by giving passions to dramatic characters. In the long preface attached to her work, Baillie said that the tragic poets in the past

> ... have made use of the passions to mark their several characters and animate their scenes, rather than to open to our view the nature and portraitures of these great disturbers of the human breast, with whom we are all, near more or less, called upon to contend.... [40]

Evidently, here is one weighty answer to the question why verse should find place in drama — to give expression to the mighty stirring of the human breast through bold and

fitting figurative language naturally by poets, admiring those bold expressions with a mind labouring with ideas too strong to be conveyed in the ordinary forms of speech. [41]

All this was good augury, but the paradox of the century is that success in the poetic theatre was achieved by men like Milman, Maturin, and Sheil, men who had no poetic *locus standi* and whose works today are dead and long-forgotten. The real poets of the age, who were the legitimate writers of poetic drama — for it was they who had the command of poetry and could call it into the service of drama — sadly kept away from the theatre.

The paradox had its genesis, as we diagnose, in the popularity of fiction and in the vast novel-reading public, whose taste was fostered by such works as Walpole's *Mysterious Mother* and Lewis' *Castle Spectre* and who wanted in the theatre similarly sensational mystery and horror-mongering incidents and emotions as were found in the notorious Gothic novels. Since there is truth in the dictum that *drama's rule the drama's patrons give*, audience became the purveyor of the sensation and the spectacular melodrama, of the easy imitations of the works of Kotzebus. Joanna Baillie's directive to invest dramatic characters with passions — so that a natural pitch was acquired by tragic verse — was employed, in the absence of any clear-cut advice from her regarding dramatic action, to display passion not through dramatically co-ordinated action but through theatrically devised incidents and episodes. In the vast theatre-halls with the picture-frame stage and sets, other accessories were not fit to tragic poetry. Consequently, Scott had to lament that '... show and machineries have therefore usurped the place of tragic poetry.' [42]

Bred in this theatre-atmosphere of the sensational and the spectacular, the audience grew notoriously evil in their callousness to sentiments. Poets with artistic conscience and integrity fell out with it. Their aloofness has been too hastily denied, their failure too hastily condemned. Unjustly, the fact has not been given its due recognition that behind this aloofness and this failure, there was the critical feeling that the existing commercial theatre

was not the right place for verse and that something else in manner and matter must be applied to establish real poetic drama. Of course, their critical feeling was not steady, and in practice their effort was often hampered on one side by a contagion of the existing standard and on the other side by a blind imitation of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans.

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