INTRODUCTION

In the present study, Shelley has been presented as a Romantic dramatist and his moral concern as reflected in his works has been discussed in particular. Therefore, a few words must be said regarding the failure of the Romantic Drama in general. Usually two reasons are pointed out by the early critics: lack of grip on the actual current affairs of the world around and imitation of Shakespearean verse pattern. It is said that the very Romantic nature went against dramatic writing as it was lacking in objectivity and the Romantics were more interested in life *as it should be* than in life *as it is*.

There are other arguments put forward by latter-day critics against the Romantic dramatists: they refused to accept adverse criticism; hated lowering their dignity by mixing with the stage people, and were naturally unfamiliar with stage and performance techniques. The critics also point out that by temperament they were self-centered and, therefore, their plays are, necessarily as if, little more than dramatic monologues about themselves. In short, they should be treated as spoilt children.

Such criticism sheds some light on the value of the Romantic drama no doubt, but the critical prejudice against the Romantic playwrights is so strong to this day, that even sober critics find little time to rethink and discover intrinsic merits of the plays. Their die-hard contention against the Romantics—that they never grasped the basic principle that 'those who live to please must please to live'—therefore lingers on. This may all be true from the critics' point of view, but we do not agree to the opinions of historians and critics when they say that the dramatic literature of the nineteenth century is a formless mass of mediocrity, dull and repetitive, lacking literary merit and thematic value, a realm that remained dull almost for a hundred years while the glorious achievements of Shaw and Wilde waited in the horizon 'pregnant with momentous art'. We rather believe that these plays have been judged through

'second intentions' and they indeed await a reappraisal.

However, for the present study, we have chosen Shelley as a Romantic dramatist whose plays incarnate the conflict between the Good and the Evil. He hopes that the Good will ultimately come out victorious and a new era will begin with the spirit of Love reigning over the world. But the poet-dramatist does not seem to be sure about the means to attain this end, and we have tried to reveal his moral anxiety over this confusion as reflected in his dramatic works including his full-fledged plays, dramatic fragments, and translations from dramatic pieces of other languages.

Allardyce Nicoll's attitude towards Shelley perhaps represents that of the other detractors of Romantic drama:

> None of the poets turned to ordinary modern life for the subjects of their plays. Thus it happens that the poetic drama, though more serious than the stage plays, was almost equally removed from life; it reflected inadequately, but not distortedly, the thought and aspirations of the age but it did not afford a criticism of the life of the people. It was as far removed as possible from realism.[1]

If lack of realism is a major charge against Romantic drama, we have to remember that Shakespeare himself could hardly escape it. That this situation of realism is ambiguous is further evident from Earnest Watson's observations that the later Victorian theatre-goers thought that Shakespeare's 'realism' was 'remote and poetical.'[2] A similar refrain is echoed by S.C. Chew as he maintains that the Romantic playwrights did not offer a criticism of 'the life of the people' because their plays were 'as far removed as possible from realism'.[3] Yet, in the same breath, he declares that the Romantic poets somehow managed to reflect 'the thought and aspirations of the age'. His self-contradiction is too glaring to require further comments.

In defence of the above criticism, we would like to point out that Romantic drama lacks realism in the ordinary sense of the term, and the term 'realism' itself is ambiguous. The Romantic poets are 'realists' in the deeper sense, and there is a kind of inner realism behind the superficial realism. Rightly does G. Wilson Knight observe:

> We should not look for perfect verisimilitude to life, but rather see each play as an expanded metaphor, by means of which the original vision has been projected into forms thereto with greater or less exactitude according to the demands of its nature....The persons, ultimately, are not human at all, but purely symbols of poetic vision.[4]

This means that while the dramatist must not be too remote from life, he should seize the eternal truth existing in the universe. As a matter of fact, to produce through poetic means a dramatic commentary on human existence, that at once will be contemporary and timeless, has always been, in the words of Fellies Schelling, 'the ideal of most dramatists in most Ages.'[5] It was more so with the English Romantic poets who responded rather shyly to the call of the third Muse.

Further, the critical judgment of William Archer, T.S. Eliot, and F.R. Leavis may lead us to support the view that the poetic plays of the early nineteenth century were mainly imitative of Shakespeare's. Archer's comments are rather stringent and comic:

> Whatever was least essential to Shakespeare's greatness was conscientiously imitated; his ease and flexibility of direction, 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.[6]

T.S. Eliot gently, but firmly, alludes to the main cause of the failure of the poetic plays of the Romantics when he discusses the poetry of his own in the *Murder in the*

Cathedral:

> 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 the 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 a strict blank verse which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse must have if it is to give the effect of conversation.[7]

The process of Shelley's reinstatement began in the middle of the twentieth century mainly with the publication of two pioneering studies: Carlos Baker's *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton, 1948), and Kenneth Neill Cameron's *The Young Shelley* (New York: Macmillan, 1950). Cameron especially pointed out the fact, ignored by both Victorians like Arnold and Browning and moderns like T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, that Shelley 'was the product of a school of thought, its most penetrative creative thinker in fact—stretching from Jefferson to Cobbett, from Diderot to Godwin; a school arising out of the American and French Revolution and the English reform movement.'[8]

Cameron's argument was supplemented in David Lee Clark's *Shelley's Prose* (Albuquerque, 1954) in which he established that Shelley was influenced by the British empirical tradition represented by Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. These critics thus were of the opinion that Shelley's prose reflected the gradualist and the cautious reformer whereas his poetry was that of a millenarian.

However, Shelley was judged from a fresh perspective with the publication of R.B. Wooding's *Shelley: Modern Judgments* (Macmillan, 1968) in which G.M. Matthews points out in his '*A Volcano's Voice in Shelley*' (1957):

> Major paroxysmal eruptions of Mount Etna occurred in 1763 and 1792, and of Vesuvius in 1760, 1779, and 1794, besides minor ones early in the new century. Shelley himself, climbing Vesuvius in 1818, found the mountain 'in a slight state of eruption' (letter, 22 Dec. 1818), and Etna, too, erupted again towards the close of 1819.[9]

According to Matthews, Shelley considered this incessant volcanic activity as a symbol for the earth's capacity for change and renewal which is necessary for the elimination of evil. Revaluation of Shelley was further affirmed with the publication of Art Young's *Shelley and Non-violence* (Mouton: The Hague, 1975). A chapter in this book, 'Shelley and Gandhi', views the poet as a pioneer of non-violence, forbearance, and passive resistance in early nineteenth-century England. Young points out:

> Shelley's interpretation of history is remarkably similar to Gandhi's. In the words of Professor Duerksen, Shelley interprets history as a persistent "struggle between dictatorship and liberty, in which the general tendency is towards liberty". Gandhi's 'course of nature' is very close to mature Shelley's concept of Necessity, an amoral force in time with which moral man aligns himself through an act of will to escape from the vicious cycles of history.[10]

Art Young further argues that non-violence seeks to overcome the human degradation that inevitably results from violence and also to promote human liberation through the abjuring of hate and revenge. He considers *Prometheus* as the 'most Gandhian of all long poems'.

The recent Shelley criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century has focused on Shelley the visionary and the futurist. Patricia Hogart's *Shelley's Philosophical Beliefs* (*A Preface to Shelley*, Longman: London and New York, 1981)[11] explores the impact of Enlightenment as well as that of Godwin, Rousseau, and the Greeks on Shelley's mind. She

thinks that the anticlerical, rationalistic, and scientific stance of the Enlightenment liberated Shelley from the world of the Gothic Romances and the tales of horror. To him, Necessity was the key to the riddle of existence which governed both the material world and the mind of man.

In his poetic play, *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley has dealt with Necessity in the final speech of Demogorgon. This element of moral concern is present in all his dramatic works—complete or fragmentary. As we go through these works and try to re-evaluate Shelley as a dramatist, we have to agree with T.S. Eliot over his inadequate grasp of dramatic art and dramatic dialogue which often indulges in declamatory speech and lyrical effusion. But we must not overlook in these writings his capacity to analyze the spiritual dilemma of the age, his persistent moral anxiety exposing the ailments afflicting the social order, and his power to scrutinize the possible modes of freedom. A recent critic, Kelvin Everest, has established Shelley as a poet esteemed by the moderns: 'He is understood as the greatest poet of the political left.'[12] But we have to remember the fact that his writings reveal him also as a person who is not at all in favour of bloodshed and violence. He believes in the active role of the principle of Love, symbolized by the character of Asia—the beloved of Prometheus in his poetic play *Prometheus Unbound*—for the elimination of the spirit of Evil responsible for the exploitation of humanity. It is, however, true, that the crusader in Shelley, in search of truth and deliverance, often turns into an incorrigible idealist, over-soaring 'the loftiest star of unascended heaven, pinnacled dim in the intense inane'.[13]

The object of the present study is not to re-evaluate Shelley as a successful dramatist, but to reconsider him as a dramatist with moral concerns, with a sense of admiration for some moral values for the protection of human society. Therefore, we should bear in mind that Shelley is not always an idealist. Though a dreamer, he is also aware of the potential evils inherent in the human society itself. He is also a realist who knows that human mind itself is

responsible for the generation and nurturing of the principle of Evil. In *Prometheus Unbound*, therefore, Demogorgon, the destroyer of the spirit of Evil incarnated in Jupiter, utters a warning for the error-committing humanity:

> And if, with infirm hand, Eternity
> Mother of many acts and hours, should free
> The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
> These are the spells by which to reassume
> An empire o'er the disentangled doom.
> 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; ...
>
> (*Prometheus Unbound*; Act IV, ll. 562-575)

The hope expressed in this play gradually becomes weaker in his later dramatic writings. In his tragedy *The Cenci*, the heroine Beatrice is not able to love in spite of being tortured, not able to forgive the Oppressor and, therefore, is compelled to resort to the principle of Evil in order to take revenge. In his dramatic poem *Hellas* also, the poet is apprehensive that mankind may not embrace the principle of Love and Forgiveness:

> Oh, cease! must hate and death return?
> Cease! must men kill and die?
> Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
> Of bitter prophecy.

The world is weary of the past,
Oh, might it die or rest at last!

(*Hellas*, ll. 1096-1101)

Mary Shelley in her Note on *Prometheus Unbound* has pointed out this fact that 'Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil and there would be none'.[14] At the same time, the poet was aware of the 'sad reality' of *The Cenci*. He knew that often man is not able to control his will-power and thus he becomes a slave to the principle of Evil. Therefore, throughout his dramatic writings the poet has struggled to find out a means for helping man to curb his will-power, to find out the nature of the principle of love, necessary as the strong foundation of human moral values.

The present study will focus on certain aspects of this struggle of the poet in his search for the truth, his moral anxiety which has haunted all sensitive rebels through generations. Shelley the poet does not differ much from Shelley, the dramatist. He is a rebel, a reformer, a visionary, and almost always the champion of the causes of the sufferers, victims of corruption and superstition, might and pride. He is a revolutionary against inequities and injustice, and, above all, a humanist who is disturbed by the wretched condition of the oppressed humankind. He is in search of a means which would eradicate the menace of Evil in order to establish a happier world. The romantic, sensitive rebel in Shelley, on the other hand, was on the side of moderation and non-violent means. In spite of his zeal for radical reform, he had to turn to Christ's philosophy of love. This reminds us of our reformers: Buddha with his emphasis on 'Ahimsa'; Shree Chaitanya with his religion of love; and Mahatma Gandhi with his non-violent, non-co-operation movement. The reading of history of each of these thinkers has much in common with that of Shelley. We have also to remember Marx's and Lenin's praise of Shelley in spite of the poet's faith in winning a man's heart through love and reforming the erring person by creating remorse in him.

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