

PESSIMISTIC AND OPTIMISTIC ASPECTS OF SHELLEY'S POETRY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *ODE TO THE WEST WIND*

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P. B. Shelley (1792-1822) was a great romantic revolutionary poet who looked at the present condition of the society with a pessimistic outlook; he abhorred priests, kings and all the machinery of government as well as the social customs and traditions that, instead of helping mankind emerge from ignorance to recognition, keep them stick to conservative ways of thinking and push them into the abysmal depth of despair and despondency, but Shelley had full faith in the ultimate perfection of human nature and the inception of Golden Millennium. Before the discussion of the poem, *Ode to the West Wind*, an attempt has also been made to discern this blending of pessimism and optimism in his other poetic works e.i. *Queen Mab* (1813), *Alastor* (1616), *The Revolt of Islam (Laon and Cythna)* (1817-18), *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-1820) and *Adonais* (1821), which, besides being an attack on some unwanted and problematic issues, incorporate Shelley's optimistic perception of prospective Golden Age and an unswerving confidence in human potentiality. The poem *Ode to the West Wind* begins pessimistically representing the West Wind as the destroyer of the dead leaves, which symbolically represent corrupt social institutions or system with which Shelley was utterly disappointed. His hopelessness and frustration in life reduce him to wish to be 'a dead leaf' so that the wind might carry him with it far away from the 'fever and fret' of life. But the poem culminates on a very bold optimism which embodies Shelley's conviction of Golden Millennium: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (579)]

P. B. Shelley (1792-1822), a prophet of faith and hope, was one of the most revolutionary of the younger revolutionary Romantic poets. But he was not satisfied with the society he was living in because, as Carl Grabo rightly says:

Pessimism and distrust of humanity to which he had come in his last years are not therefore to be adjudged characteristics of his youth. They are the result of the bitter experiences of his intense though brief life . . . There were various adequate reasons for his weariness of spirit, his sense of futility. He had been deceived in friendship, disappointed in love, had been denied an active part in the amelioration of social evils. (412-413)

Carl Grabo further says:

He wished to be free both in body and soul and a similar freedom he wished for everyone. His social philosophy and his metaphysics are based on this desire. (419)

Actually Shelley looked at the existing system of society with a pessimistic outlook, but simultaneously the system, that will replace the present one in near future, is looked at from an optimistic perspective. Some unfortunate incidents that occurred in his personal life and the

world around him contributed to develop a pessimistic attitude in him but they could not completely squash his confidence in human potentiality for healthier conditions. This blending of pessimism with the status-quo and optimism for the Golden Millennium in Shelley's personality is traced back ever since *Queen Mab* (1813), the first poem of any importance written under the influence of William Godwin, the revolutionary philosopher. Reflecting his iconoclastic creed, it is a lacerating assault on the existing order of social system: doctrinaire religion, government, industrial oppression and war. The corrupting impact of the kings and priests on, and their misguided manipulation of, the common people are exposed and assaulted bitterly but a streak of optimism is also maintained in the poem through the prophecy of the Golden Age in near future. In *Alastor* (1816) Shelley condemns the self-centred idealism rampant in the existing order of society and concurrently looks forward to the amelioration of mankind through the promotion of human love. *The Revolt of Islam (Laon and Cythna)* (1817-18) underlies his pessimistic outlook on Theism and Christianity along with his anticipation for bloodless revolution and the regeneration of man by love. His despondency with the mission of priests, kings and custom, and a faith in the inevitable elimination of evil from the world and consequent supremacy of love is also discernible in his poetic drama, *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-1820). At last Prometheus is re-united to his beloved Asia and the Spirit of the Hour describes the new emerging image of man, stripped off his evil nature:

The painted veil, by those, who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside;
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; just, gentle, wise; . . . (253)

James E. Barcus presents the review of the *Prometheus Unbound* rendered by "The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review" (1820) which demonstrates Shelley as a bold optimistic poet who establishes the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil:

In Mr. Shelley's piece, the deliverance of Prometheus, which is attended by the dethroning of Jupiter, is scarcely other than a symbol of the peaceful triumph of goodness over power; of the subjection of might to right; and the restoration of love to the full exercise of its benign and all-penetrating sympathies. (244)

Adonais (1821) begins with his lament on the death of John Keats (1795-1821) who, he thinks desperately, will not be brought back to life to join him (Shelley), but it ends with a note of expectation and contentment when he feels that his spirit is being carried to some far-off place where he will join the soul of Keats:

Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (444)

The poem, *Ode to the West Wind* begins with a note of pessimism. It portrays the West Wind as destroyer, the 'breath of autumn', the month of decay. The fierce gust of the West Wind breaks away the withered leaves from the tree and drives them away just as a magician coerces the ghost to abscond. The dry leaves are described as yellow, black, pale and red; their redness being

the symbol of decay and ‘fever and fret’ which are the underlying features of the society. They (leaves) seem to be afflicted with some fatal disease. The “winged seeds” are dispersed far and wide in the forest and are covered with dust and mud where they are buried underground lying throughout the winter, lifeless and immovable like a cadaver in his dark grave. Thus the West Wind is represented as the destroyer of the existing system with which Shelley was unreservedly disappointed and in which Shelley perceives nothing to look forward for the betterment of mankind. But he has represented the West Wind not only as the destructive force but also as the preserver. If it is the demolisher of the present order, it is the conserver of the new as he says, “the winged seeds” lying underground are infused with new life with the coming of the spring which helps them sprout into plants and bear flowers and fruits filling the whole valley with smells, sweet and charismatic colours. This is the sweetness that Shelley looks ahead to be found in the order replacing the present one. The winter and the withered leaves are the symbols of dead conventions of the present social system which renders nothing but discontentment and hopelessness to Shelley; on the other hand the spring, which regenerates the winged seeds lying in the earth into flowers and fruit, symbolises the Golden Millennium which Shelley anticipates optimistically in near future. The following lines incorporate the merging of Shelley’s pessimistic and optimistic standpoint:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
 With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear! (577)

In second stanza also the West Wind is represented as a great force making commotion in the sky where the wild West Wind scatters the patches of clouds as it did with dead leaves on the earth. The West Wind has been likened with frenzied Bacchante (a female follower of Bacchus) who seems to be gnashing her teeth at the present condition of society and wants to annihilate its debilitating effects on mankind. He presents West Wind as mourning over horrendous state of affairs vitiating the present society. His pessimistic concern with the present order is evident when he presents the West Wind as a funeral song over the death of the dying year. From the aggregated vapours in the sky will fall “black rain”, lightning and hailstones. Thus Shelley seems to represent West Wind as creating lightning and hailstones to wipe out the existing order

of the world; rotten organisations and institutions that are gnawing into the fabric of the society. Addressing the West Wind he says:

Thou dirge
Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear! (578)

The ferociousness of the wild West Wind is now seen in the sea making furrow on the surface of the water. In the fourth stanza, which is the most poignant and pessimistic delineation of Shelley's personality in the whole poem, Shelley sets up a link between his personality and that of the West Wind. He is so disappointed with the ways of the world that he wishes that he were "dead leave" so that the West Wind might carry him away on its wings to the distant isolated place where, like the dead leaves lying buried underground, he might be living a reposeful and tranquil life beyond the din of the society. Again he wishes to be "a swift cloud" so that he might be able to soar with the West Wind into the sky beyond the constraints of the world. He also craves to taste the aggressive power of the West Wind in order to shake off the fetters of social conventions and customs impeding the free flow of his cerebral faculties. He is overwhelmed with the irrepressible and unconstrained freedom of the wind and hankers after the same. The poet too has a sense of liberty, but he, being shackled by social norms, is not capable of experiencing that sense of freedom which the West Wind enjoys. He cries very pathetically:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! (578)

His revolutionary thoughts are totally incompatible with the conservative ways of the society. Therefore, he recalls his boyhood days and yearns to revive them when he could easily accompany the West Wind in its ascendant flight or "wanderings over Heaven" and even he could exceed its speed in the sky. The misfortunes of life have crushed him. If he had possessed that vivacity and energy which he enjoyed in his boyhood, he would have never urged the West Wind for help in his anguish. Life has become thorny for him and he is bleeding hopelessly. He appeals the West Wind to lift him as a wave, a leaf and a cloud because he has no expectation from the world. He feels almost trampled and incapacitated under the colossal burden of misfortunes; otherwise he was also once as uncontrollable, swift, proud and energetic as the West Wind. Addressing the West Wind very hopelessly he appeals:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tame less, and swift, and proud. (579)

The whole stanza gives a clue into the personality of Shelley as pessimistic, helpless and hopeless man before the insurmountable trials and tribulations of life.

In the final stanza Shelley appeals the West Wind to treat him as its ‘lyre’ and blow on him as it blows on the forest which is a stringed musical instrument of the wind and on which it produces harmonious sounds. He finds a semblance between him and the forest, particularly in the month of autumn. He is undergoing the autumn of his life, just as the forest is passing through the autumn, the month of destruction of the greenery of the tree. His green leaves of hopes and high spirits are now passed away like those of the forest. As the trees become naked and desolated like a skeleton, his life has also become tedious, barren and deserted. He is thwarted into the abysmal depth of despair, totally frustrated and disappointed. With an appalling sigh he implores the West Wind:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own! (579)

When the West Wind strikes the forest and the poet, it will generate the music full of sadness and despondency, because both the forest and the poet, being in the autumn of their lives, will respond grimly. But the music will certainly contain a note of sweetness, as in one of his poems, *Ode to Skylark* (1820), he says, “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.” (603) He addresses the West Wind as “Spirit fierce” and “impetuous one” and entreats it to be one with him so that he might be as energetic and spirited as the West Wind. Although he is entirely broken and his thoughts, being ineffective in the society that is dominated by the institutions having conservative norms and values, have consequently become lifeless and inoperative yet quite hopefully he appeals the West Wind to transmit his thoughts all through the universe like the withered leaves in order that his thoughts might give birth to a new era of emancipation and freedom from the constraint orthodox conventions inherent in the present social system. He wants the West Wind to broadcast the sparks of insurrection lying hidden in his thoughts all over the mankind just as it scatters the sparks buried in the ashes of the half-extinguished hearth. He suggests very optimistically and confidently that his words are ground-breaking and they will bring about new revolutionary phase in human history and regenerate the mankind which is still dormant beneath the cosy sheet of old habits of thought, worn-out customs, unrewarding institutions and worthless traditions. He would like the West Wind to act as his trumpet to announce his prophecy regarding the arrival of Golden Age on the earth. He appeals the West Wind:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth.

The trumpet of a prophecy! (579)

Winter, bearing harsh conditions, is looked upon in western countries as the season of great anguish and distress due to its chilling cold. Shelley has also represented winter symbolically as the period of great misery, adversity, teething troubles and hardships. Spring, on

the other hand, is the season of recreation and reincarnation in nature. Just as winter is followed by spring in natural pattern, in the same way the present era of difficulties, wretchedness and evil practices will be followed by the Golden Age which, Shelley believes very confidently, will regenerate the new and innovative period of perfect happiness, contentment and progress; and then nothing but justice, love and beauty will reign supreme all over the universe. In the concluding lines Shelley gives outlet very optimistically to his utmost conviction of the Golden Millennium:

O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? (579)

Prometheus Unbound and *Ode to the West Wind* published in the same year (1820), incorporate the symbolical representation of Shelley's vision: obliteration of the evils from the present order and its replacement by the Golden Age. Kelvin Everest rightly perceives resemblance between these two works when he says:

The Spirit of the Hour recalls the darkness of the past and its demise under the triumph of Prometheus. As *panic-stricken* suggests a statement here parallel to that of the *Ode to the West Wind*, so this 'new birth' is the universal manifestation of the quintessential light. With the death of the old tyrant and his worship, all negative religions based on self-hate also die, and the world is free to rejuvenate itself. (23)

To sum up the West Wind is symbolical representation of those revolutionary forces which exterminate the old worn out modes of life, detrimental institutions and traditions hampering the free spirit of mankind; and commence new ways of thought and new patterns of life which endow mankind with new direction leading to a drastic constructive modification in social structure for his betterment. The final stanza establishes Shelley as a great idealist and a visionary optimist who has unconditional and uncompromising faith in the ultimate perfection of human nature when forces of good will eventually get triumph over the forces of evil. James E. Barcus provides the review of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, published in "The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review" (1820), which is applicable to the over-all optimistic conception of Shelley in his works about the perfectibility of human nature, and which is worth-quoting here:

In man were undeveloped capabilities of excellence; stores of greatness, suffered to lie hidden beneath basest lumber; sealed up fountains, whence a brighter day might loosen streams of fresh and ever-living joys. In the worst and most degraded minds, vestiges of goodness are not wanting; some old recollections of early virtue; some feeling of wild generosity or unconquerable love; some divine instinct; some fragments of lofty principle, some inextinguishable longings after nobleness and peace, indicate that there is good in man which can never yield to the storms of passion or the decays of time. (245)

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