Chapter - VIII

THE FIFTH PHASE (1820-1822)

The poetical works of the fifth and last phase show as if Shelley had some premonition that he had almost reached his journey's end. The brief poetical career of Shelley can be compared to the course of a river. Normally, a river has three different stages; the initial stage, the middle stage and the final stage. In the initial stage, i.e., near the source of its origin, mostly among mountaneous regions, it gushes out with strong force and fury, removing the hardest obstacles on its way. In the middle stage it is calmer, quieter and slower and it envelopes larger areas and many elements in its fold. And in the final stage it is broadest, calmest and most serene, apparently looks motionless and like a stoic prepares itself for merging its own entity into the vast and wide sea. Similarly in his earliest phase Shelley, like an angry and uncompromising youngman, tries to remove all shades of evil, all forms of oppression and like a bullet-striken tiger tries to pounce upon anything he suspects to be the cause of the majority's woe. In the middle phase he becomes more realistic, tries to see a particular thing from many angles and turns a reformer from a revolutionary. And in the final phase, he is calm, quiet, serene, self-composed; transcends many worldly affairs and turns more or less a philosopher.
After the composition of Peter Bell the Third another qualitative change is discernible in Shelley. It is popularly believed that at this stage Shelley "shrank instinctively from portraying human passion, with its mixture of good and evil, of disappointment and disquiet."¹ That is to a great extent true so far as his poetical works are concerned but his prose work, especially his letters, show his constant interest in political affairs. In a letter to Maria Gisborne he says "I have deserted the odorous gardens of literature to journey across the great sandy desert of politics."² But McNiece points to a different direction when he says, "Shelley rejected an active career in politics. The disciple of the 'religion of humanity' could best arouse his brethren to a consciousness of power for good in the human will by the diffusion of knowledge. This decision did not imply, however, any indifference to political reform".³ It is interesting to note that his thought in the final phase tends to become more and more philosophical; instead of dwelling on social evils and other mundane affairs, he is inclined to lay more emphasis on universal problems. It is only natural because one's interest about the surface lessens with the depth of his penetration. To an astronomer, charting the course of 'heavenly bodies' social problems of men on earth are bound to be insignificant.

¹ Note on The Witch of Atlas by Mrs. Shelley, p.309.
² Shelley to John and Maria Gisborne, November 6, 1819, Vol.II, p.150.
On some important issues, it seems, Shelley formed his broad opinion at early stages of his life and he stuck to these opinions almost throughout his life, with minor shifts here and there. Importance of freedom was one such concept. Prof. McNiece pays a glowing tribute to Shelley on account of his this consistency. "Finally I present and praise him for a quality of heroic persistence in a good cause in a bad time. I have always admired Shelley for the courage and consistency of his political convictions; especially in view of his background and his opposition." Shelley always realized the importance of freedom in the life of a country and his Ode to Liberty (1820) is a re-affirmation of his faith. A keen observer of public events and a champion of liberty as he was, he felt very happy on knowing that "the beloved Ferdinand has proclaimed the constitution of 1812, and called the Cortes. The Inquisition is abolished, the dungeons opened, and the patriots pouring out." Shelley was remorsefully aware of the inglorious state of affairs of the Spaniards since Liberty was not there.

The plight of the common man of Spain was miserable, they being victims of innumerable forms of evil emanating from oppression and tyranny in the political system. They

4 Ibid., p. IX.
6 But this divinest universe
Was yet a chaos and a curse
For thou wert not.... (Ode to Liberty, II, 21-23).
Greason, for beasts warred on beasts, and worms on worms,
And men on men; each heart was as a hell of storms.

(Ode to Liberty, II, 29-30)

And naturally it was hardly possible for Shelley to remain indifferent to such an epoch-making event. "The sword", says Dowden, "which Shelley could fitliest wield was that of keen-edged song."

Drawing a picture of the miserable plight of the people, Shelley rightly points out that ignorance of the great ideal of 'liberty'

is to a great extent responsible for brutality and war among the savage people; it is on slavery that monarchy and its accomplice tyranny subsist and in turn give rise to other oppressive institutions which augment human misery:

Into the shadow of her pinions wide
Anarchs and priests, who feed on gold and blood
Till with the stain their inmost souls are dyed;
Drove the astonished herds of men from every side.

(Ode to Liberty, III, 42-45)

As regards remedial measures, Shelley suggests that if the spirit of liberty can implant strong will power in men, only then they will be able to stand against oppressive forces and defend the rights of their suffering brethren. The wisemen should simultaneously prepare the masses subjectively by suggesting ways and means of doing away with the tyrannical

8 If on his own high will, a willing slave,
He has enthroned the oppression and the oppressor.

(Ode to Liberty, XVII, 244-245)
institutions. However, Shelley holds that wisdom and the exercise of will by men are a must for the attainment of liberty as without these virtues liberty will remain a distant dream.

O Liberty! if such could be thy name
Wert thou disjoined from these, or they from thee:
If thine or theirs were treasures to be bought
By blood or tears, have not the wise and free
Wept tears, and blood like tears?

(Ode to Liberty, XVIII, 266-270)

Brooding deeply over the fallen state of man all over the world, Shelley came to the dismal conclusion that in life itself there is present some active principles of distortion and corruption that have veiled from man's eyes the supreme glory of Beauty and Love. Shelley holds that man is responsible for this self-imposed blindness on him and on seeing the cruel treatment meted out to man by man, Shelley, like Wordsworth, shudders to think 'what man has made of man'. The Letter to Maria Gisborne is a sincere record of Shelley's shattered faith. Carl Grabo is of the opinion that the thoughts described in this poem "suggests man's cruelty to man, the loss of hope of liberty, and the final comforting assurance that earthly life is illusion and that a happier one lies beyond." 9

To understand the note of sadness in this poem we must take note of the fact that Shelley's spirit was at a low ebb at that time. His

9 Carl Grabo, op. cit., p. 327.
Prometheus Unbound had been severely criticized in a review of the Quarterly and the reviewer made "use of the domestic calamities of Shelley the theme of the foulest and the falsest slander... with the cowardice no less than the malignity of an assassin."\(^{10}\) Leigh Hunt was one of the very few who appreciated Prometheus Unbound. In a letter dated May 1, 1820 addressed to Leigh Hunt thanking him for his kind appreciation of Prometheus Unbound, Shelley justifies his claim to have an immense understanding of the position of man in social context when about his publisher, Ollier's lack of moral courage he says, "It is less the character of the individual than the situation in which he is placed which determines him to be honest or dishonest; perhaps we ought to regard an honest bookseller, or an honest seller of anything else in the present state of human affairs as a kind of Jesus Christ. The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims and of forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits. This remedy does not seem to be one of the easiest...If faith is a virtue in any case it is so in politics rather than religion..."\(^{11}\)

About the background of the composition of the poem Carl Grano says, "Written in Henry Beveley's workshop amid engines, tools, and eddments which Shelley enumerates whimsically, the poem nevertheless glances at graver matters which suggest the preoccupations of his thought."\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) Shelley to Leigh Hunt, May 1, 1820, Vol. II, p.191.
\(^{12}\) Carl Grano, op.cit., p. 326.
Mrs. Gisborne in London will see friends dearer to Shelley and
whom Shelley would most like to meet, Leigh Hunt among them.

You will see Hunt — one of those happy souls
which are the salt of the earth, and without whom
this world would smell like what it is — a tomb.

(Letter to Maria Gisborne, 208-210)

Shelley has often been appreciated for wrong reasons and it is a
common allegation that in his works there is too much treatment of evil
and To a Skylark enjoys popularity to a great extent because of his
aversion in it of evil and the horrible. Of course there is an
undercurrent of deep dejection and frustration when he says:

Our sincerest laughter/With some pain is fraught
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

(To a Skylark, XVIII, 88-90)

Shelley makes the plight of mankind appear more miserable by
juxtaposing it with the joy of the bird with whose 'clear keen joyance'
'laughter cannot be' and who 'lovest', but never knewest 'love's sad
satiety. Charles Baker finds an expression of Shelley's humanitarian
thought and reforming zeal in To a Skylark when he observes 'The
comparison of 'The Skylark' to a poet 'hidden in the light of thought',
whose singing converts the world to 'sympathy with hope and fears it
needed not' might be construed as evidence of Shelley's continued
hopefulness about the possibility of the world's redemption through
the power of human thoughts when it is given memorable expression in
And if we look into the imaginative pattern of Shelley's mature thought through this poem, we will realize that Shelley tried 'to see the world in a grain of sand', because the bird is, what G. Wilson Knight calls "a window through which to examine the universal substance; in it he focuses the cosmic." 14

The Witch of Atlas (1820) is an important poem so far as Shelley's treatment of evil is concerned, though it is a difficult poem which defies proper critical evaluation. To Desmond King-Heb it is "nothing but a carefree extravaganza", 15 but Harold Bloom has all praise for this poem since it is "a brilliant congregation of ideas such as his senses gathered, and his fancy coloured, during his rambles in the sunny land he so much loved." 16

So long Shelley had been championing the cause of 'Love' in eradicating a bulk of evil from the fabric of human society; but of late he has come to realize that man's desire of 'love' and 'beauty' is insatiable as it is akin to the 'desire of the moth for the star'.

At first the Witch was self-contained and lived alone in her wild lovely home completely immersed in her own thoughts but that could not satisfy her thirst. She became affection-starving and eagerly longed

15 Desmond King-Heb, op.cit., p. 256.
for communion with man and subsequently she passed through 'the peopled
haunts of mankind'. For the first time in her life she sees the stark
realities of the world:

... all the code of custom's lawless law
Written upon the brows of old and young;
'This', said the wizard maiden, 'is the strife
Which stirs the liquid surface of man's life.

(The Witch of Atlas, LXII, 541-44)

The Witch saw the glaring contrast between the lives of the
privileged rolling in luxury and that of the underdogs starving for food.

And she saw princes couched under the glow
   Of sunlike gems; and round each temple-court
In dormitories ranged, row after row,
   She saw the priests asleep -- all of one sort --
For all were educated to be so, --
   The peasants in their huts, and in the port
The sailors she saw cradled on the waves,
   And the dead lulled within their dreamless graves.

(The Witch of Atlas, LXIV, 553-560)

In the later phase of Shelley's life the influence of Plato has
been the greatest and The Witch of Atlas points to the great influence
on Shelley of Plato's doctrine of love. Shelley translated Plato's one
of the Dialogues, entitled The Banquet which deals with the concept of
'love'. Shelley thought The Banquet to be "the most beautiful and
perfect among all the works of Plato" (Shelley's preface to The Banquet).
Echoing Plato's view about the two kinds of love, the Uranian and the
PaRdian: the divine and the carnal, Shelley observes, "I will endeavour to distinguish which is the love whom it becomes us to praise, and having thus discriminated one from the other, will attempt to render him who is the subject of our discourse the honour due to his divinity... but since there are two Venuses... of necessity must there also be two Loves, the Uranian and Pandian companion of those goddesses." The Pandian Love is of the flesh, "But the attendant on the other, the Uranian... is the Love who inspires us with affection, and exempts us from all wantonness and libertinism." The neo-Platonists also expounded this doctrine of the two loves, the sensual and the intellectual. "The intellectual Love is the attribute of Diety, of the One in whom exists the perfect Love, Truth and Beauty to which the soul aspires. Earthly Love is but the shadow of the Divine Love, its material or sensuous manifestation in the world of created things... The duality of love in its heavenly and in its earthly manifestations is implicit in the personification of love in the Witch of Atlas."  

Notwithstanding his personal frustration, Shelley always took interest in political developments affecting the lot of common men and he used to feel elated on receiving any news of the victory of the oppressed in any corner of the globe. Neapolitans achieved hard-earned success in the struggle for freedom. Shelley's joy knew no bounds and he gave expression to his feelings in Ode to Naples (1820). His  

17 Carl Grabo, op.cit., p. 239.  
18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid., pp. 239-240.
enthusiasm reached such a height that he hailed the victory as the signal of greater liberty to come.

Naples: thou heart of men which ever pantest
Naked, beneath the lidless eye of Heaven.
Bright Alter of the bloodless sacrifice,
Which armed Victory offers up unstained
To Love, the flower-enchained:
Thou which wert once, and then didst cease to be,
Now art, and henceforth ever shalt be, free,
If Hope, and Truth, and Justice can avail,
Hail, Hail, all hail.

(Ode to Naples, 51-65)

Shelley was practical enough to understand that the road to freedom was not a smooth one as the oppressors would always try to frustrate the plan of the oppressed to attain freedom and even when freedom was attained, they would try to sabotage that. Shelley knew that liberty lays under the shadow of a sword and, therefore, he concludes the poem with a clarion call to protect the spirit of freedom on the face of ruthless opposition. Simple attainment of freedom is not enough; it has to be maintained and perpetuated. Taking lesson from the failure of the French Revolution, Shelley thinks that love among the people, where revolution has brought about freedom, is a pre-requisite for the perpetuation of liberty.

Queen Caroline was publicly tried for infidelity. As an incident it was not something very significant for Shelley as he was never favourably inclined towards kings and queens. But in this case the incident aroused Shelley’s indignation because the trial of queen Caroline appeared to
Shelley to be a symbol of oppression of the womenfolk signifying the act of stifling the freedom of women and secondly her enemies were worse than she. This was the occasion for Shelley's composition of Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant (1820) which according to Mary Shelley "breathes that deep sympathy for the sorrows of humanity and indignation against its oppressors." Since the trial was the complete public display of dirty royal linens, the wings came forward to champion the cause of the Queen. Nevertheless, in Shelley's drama a "serious sense of impending revolution underlies the entire action and hints that the author's jesting is almost consciously against the grain."

The King George IV is involved in all kinds of sensual pleasure and is naturally indifferent to the miserable plight of his subjects. The King miserably fails in his duty to make arrangements of the bare necessities for the starving masses and to cover his own failure suggests like an escapist, various measures to reduce population. Shelley was bitterly critical of this short-sighted policy of drastic population control propounded by the great reactionary economist, Malthus, who suggested that to make any system of government to work, population should be curbed, as normally, while the food-production increases in Arithmetic Progression (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), the population increases in Geometric Progression (1, 2, 4, 8, etc.) in a given time-span. Hence the cynical economist suggested that to keep the poor on the subsistence level was

20 Note on Oedipus Tyrannus by Mrs. Shelley, p. 410.
the only effective means of checking the growth of population. Shelley
could see the fallacy of Malthus's argument and time has proved beyond
doubt that Malthus was erroneous otherwise the majority of the
population of world would have been wiped out. In Oedipus Tyrannus Shelley
caricatured the plan of reducing population in an irrational way.

Moral restraint I see has no effect,
Nor prostitution, nor our own example,
Starvation typhus—fever, war, nor prison—
This was the art which the arch-priest of Famine
Himself gave to the charge to the Theban clergy—
Cut close and deep, good Moses.

(Oedipus Tyrannus, I, 1, 74-79)

Introduction of money has been another positive evil as since then money has been given importance out of proportion and the human society which previously was 'value-oriented' (honouring values like honesty, truthfulness, moral courage, perseverance, tolerance, etc.) has become 'money-oriented'. And the introduction of the 'Paper-Money' was a great hoax since this was the result of defective fiscal policies which resulted in huge National Debt. Shelley was of the firm conviction that notwithstanding all high-sounding words ultimately the burden of National Debt would fall on the shoulders of the poor. As such he fervently

22 Do the troops mutiny?—decimate some regiments;
Does money fail?—come to my mint-crown paper,
Till gold be at a discount, and ashamed
To show his bilious face, go purge himself,
In emulation of her vestal whiteness.

(Oedipus Tyrannus, I, 1, 103-107)
pleaded for the disbandment of the standing army and immediate withdrawal of the privileges of the clergy and the aristocracy. Thus, Oedipus Tyrannus reveals not only the facts of the intra-royal family dispute but also Shelley's "indestructible resolution to strike back at authority." 23

Often ignorance leads to some unique achievement. In 1821 John Keats died of consumption. Even for about more than a month after Keats' death, Shelley was thoroughly ignorant of the fact and when he came to know of the tragic end of 'the most accomplished specimen of the Romantic School', Shelley was again under a misconception about the immediate cause of Keats' death. He had the idea that it was the inhuman and malicious criticism of his works which pierced this noble soul. The immediate result was the composition of Adonais (1821) which is still one of the best elegies written in English language.

Shelley had a life-long obsession for a positive evil, intolerance, which emanates from narrow principles of taste. Adonais is an unmistakable record of Shelley's "known repugnance to the narrow principles of taste." 24 As Shelley firmly believed that "the brutal attack in the Quarterly Review excited the disease" 25 that led to Keats' death, he wrote this "Lament on the death of poor Keats, with some interspersed stabs on the assassins of peace and of his fame." 26 Shelley championed the cause

24 Preface to Adonais, p. 480.
26 Ibid.
of the oppressed. Through Adonais he paid glowing tribute to Keats and hurled abuses against Keats' oppressors not because Keats was a good friend of Shelley and in fact, they were not close to each other, but simply because he sincerely felt that some injustice had been done to a noble soul. It can be surmised that had any other person been the victim of such oppression, Shelley would have been among the front-rowers to register his protest as he had done earlier in A Letter to Lord Ellenborough when a publisher was unjustly prosecuted for publishing Tom Paine's Rights of Man, and on many other such occasions.

Adonais reached such a height of elegance because Shelley got himself fully involved in the composition. Shelley reasonably thought that so far as the ill-appreciation of creative work was concerned, his position was as vulnerable as Keats' had been and the attack, to which Keats succumbed, had been tormenting Shelley since long. We fully agree with Newman Ivy White when he says that Shelley's championing of Keats' was "strengthened by his constant view of himself as a victim of persecution."27 Though Shelley's immediate purpose was to put venom on the assassins (?) of Keats but he could soon transcend his initial rage which enabled him to dress Adonais with "a highly spiritualized modern thought."28

Shelley decided to fight back the injustice done to his fellow-poet, though by the time he set to compose Adonais he had realized that

revenge was one of the greatest of human errors. Notwithstanding his 
shift in mental attitude, he was convinced that the reactionary 
reviewers, at the instance to their pay-masters, were determined to 
stifle the voice of the artists trying to raise the oppressed and 
frustrated mankind to Hope and Faith through their prophecies, he 
estimates the Quarterly Reviewers:

Live thou, whose infancy is not thy fame:
Live: fear no heavier chastisement from me;
Thou notewless blot on a remembered name,
But be thyself, and know thyself to be:
And ever at thy season be thou free
To spill the venom which thy songs o'er flow;
Vengeance and Self-contempt shall cling to thee;
Not Shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,
And like a beaten bond tremble thou shalt — as now.

(Adonis, XXXVII, 325-333)

The influence of Plato on Shelley reaches its climax in Adonis.

Meditating deeply on the metaphysical problems on a cosmic scale, he 
came to believe with Plato that the perfect is 'One' which is in Heaven 
and which is beyond Time and Space; the manifestations of that ideal 
'One' are 'Many' which are mundane, bound in 'Time' and 'Space' and hence 
distorted and corrupt. The 'One' is permanent.

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light for ever shines, Earth's shadows fly,
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments...

(Adonis, LTI, 460-468)
If Shelley's religion had to be defined in one sentence, that would be a blending of Platonism and Pantheism. For Shelley, all Nature is the expression of a pervading impersonal spirit of good, which is very close to the Platonic prototype 'One'. To Shelley, as to Plato, the 'One' stands for 'good'. The 'Many' for 'evil'.

The strong grip of the influence of Plato, and especially his concept of 'love', on Shelley can be seen from Shelley's Epipsychidion. Shelley here idealizes Emilia Viviani and speaks of 'true love' which is another name for Platonic love. The profound influence of the symbol of 'cave' on Shelley can be traced to Plato and in a direct allusion to the parable of the cave in Plato's Republic, where imprisoned mortals sitting in a cave with their back towards the source of light, see only shadows cast on the inner wall by idols moving past the opening of the cave, Shelley writes:

In many mortal forms I rashly sought
The shadow of that idol of my thought.

(Epipsychidion, 267-268)

Carlos Baker has thrown much light on Epipsychidion in relation to Plato's three fold division of the soul: (1) an immortal spirit, the higher soul; (2) higher mortal or rational soul and (3) a desiring part, the appetite soul. Plato's immortal soul corresponds to epipsychidion, the Sun-symbol symbolizing imagination; higher mortal soul corresponds to Shelley's moon-symbol, symbolizing reason and the
appetitive soul corresponding to Shelley's Comet, symbol of worldly desire.

It may be inferred that Dante's *Vita Nuova* influenced Shelley's *Epipsychidion* and Emilia Viviani reminds us of Dante's Beatrice when we hear Shelley speak:

-Seraph of Heaven: too gentle to be human,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
All that is insupportable in thee
Of light, and love, and immortality:
Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse:
Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe:
Thou Moon beyond the Clouds: Thou living Form
Among the Dead: Thou Star above the Storm.

(*Epipsychidion*, 21-28)

Though *Epipsychidion* is the most outspoken and eloquent appeal for 'free love', 'transcendental love' and total involvement, there are various other aspects of this bewilderingly problematical work.

As Shelley becomes more and more pessimistic about his own

29 True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.
Love is like understanding, that grows bright,
Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
Imagination! which, from earth and sky,
And from the depths of human phantasy,
As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
The Universe with glorious beams, and kills,
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow.

(*Epipsychidion*, 160-166)

30 Would we two had been twins of the same mother! (*Epipsychidion*, 45).

31 I am not thine: I am a part of thee. (*Ibid.*, 52).
affairs and course of life, he clings more to outright optimism about
the future of mankind. Shelley misses no opportunity of suggesting
the global victory of the oppressed on the basis of some local victories.

Shelley is always lyrical about the contribution of Greece to
modern civilization and says with emphasis that the Greeks stand above
all in "their sensibility, their rapidity of conception, their enthusiasm,
and their courage." So the very fact that the Greeks were being
oppressed and exploited tortured Shelley and in his poem Hellas (1821)
he suggests "the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the
cause of civilization and social improvement." In the same preface
Shelley says "this is the age of the war of the oppressed against the
oppressors, and every one 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 their mutual jealousies in the
presence of a mightier fear." Rogers is of the opinion that the
real beauty of Hellas consists in the "conflict that it represents -- a
conflict between East and West, barbarism and civilization -- all that
was symbolized in darkness and light." The Turks are out to ruin the Greeks even by the application of
the inhuman means of torture against the peace-loving and innocent people
of Greece and it is an irony that the Turks should try to turn this

32 Preface to Hellas, p. 447.
33 Ibid., p. 446.
34 Ibid., p. 449.
35 N. Rogers, op. cit., p. 291.
'cradle of human civilisation' into a graveyard. In an indignant
tone Shelley gives an account of the nefarious activities of the Turks
as revealed in the order of the Commander:

Go! bid them pay themselves
With Christian blood. Are there no Grecian virgins
Whose shrieks and spasms and tears they may enjoy?
No infidel children to impale on spears?
No heary priests after that Patriarch
Who bent the curse against his country's heart
Which cleft his own at last? go! bid them kill,
Blood is the seed of gold.

(Hellas, 242-249)

The big powers stood silently as spectators showing all the
time lip-sympathy for the Greeks. "Russia desires to possess, not to
liberate Greece; and is contended to see the Turks, its natural
enemies, and the Greeks, its intended slaves, enfeebled each other, until
one or both fall into its net. The wise and generous policy of England
would have consisted in establishing the independence of Greece, and in
maintaining it both against Russia and the Turks; -- but when was the
oppressor generous or just?"36 The oppressed Greeks, being denied
support of others, stood alone against their oppressor.

The Greeks
Are as a breed of lions in the net
Round which the kingly hunters of the earth
Stand smiling. Anarchia, ye whose daily food
Are curses, groans, and gold, the fruit of death,
From Thule to the girdle of the world;
Come, feast! the bearded groans with the flesh of men;
The cup is foaming with a nation's blood,
Famine and thirst await! eat, drink, and die.

(Hellas, 931-939)

36 Shelley's preface to Hellas.
Shelley always nurtures the unshakable faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil; of the oppressed over the oppressor; of the haves over the have-nots. And on that day only the world will be a fit place for the good to live when

The world's great age begins anew,
   The golden years return,
   The earth doth like a snake renew
   Her winter weeds outworn;
   Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
   Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

(Hellas, 1060-1066)

Shelley rightly believes that vice breeds its offsprings as does virtue and that "circumstances make man what they are; and that we all contain the germ of a degree of degradation or of greatness whose connection with our character is determined by events." Bondage debases a man by lowering his self-esteem as slavery degenerates a whole nation by lowering the social, political, religious and moral standards. Hence for Shelley liberty is a yardstick to measure the stage of attainment of any people. Thus, Hellas summarizes in the words of Charles Baker "the end-result of Shelley's career as a political poet."

Shelley's last poem The Triumph of Life (1822) was started just before his death. While composing the poem, it seems, Shelley had some premonition that his days were numbered and his The Triumph of Life

37 Notes on Hellas by Shelley, p. 479.
38 Charles Baker, op.cit., p. 182.
was ready a triumph of his artistic life over death.

One single idea haunting Shelley almost throughout his life was the ascertainement of the root-cause of human predicament and emancipation therefrom. It was, it seems, his desire "to utter his sentiments on the inefficacy of the existing religions no less than political systems for restraining and guiding mankind." Notwithstanding his personal frustration and the consequent pessimism, he was singularly optimist about the future of mankind. He fervently believed that the future was bound to be bright and not bleak. Dealing with the question of theme and its relation to the title of this poem, King-Hele rightly concludes that "... The title is doubly ambiguous. 'Triumph' may mean simply 'procession', for the existing fragment describes a procession of phantoms. More probably, 'triumph' means 'victory'. If so, is it the victory of Man over Nature and the restraints now stifling him, as in Prometheus Unbound? or is it the victory of Life over men.... The settled melancholy of the existing fragments and references to Life the 'conqueror', might imply the gloomier alternative. But it would be unwise to jump to conclusions: for Act I of Prometheus Unbound was just as grim, and gave no sign of the happy ending; also the title Triumph of Life strikes a buoyant note, and the gloomier interpretation would imply an irony quite foreign to the poem's tone, which is placid and objective, with more of sorrow than of sarcasm. On balance it seems more probable that Shelley intended to show Man triumphing over his present.

travails..."  

After the gay and cheerful first forty lines Shelley suddenly proceeds to the sombre vision of the destiny of man.

Methought I sat beside a public way
Thick strown with summer dust, and a great stream
Of people there was hurrying to and fro,
Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,
All hastening onward; yet none seemed to know
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
He made one of the multitude.

(The Triumph of Life, 43-49)

Approach of evil is hinted at by contrast. The noblest creation, man, is moving like an animal being totally devoid of rationality. They live entirely in the present learning nothing from the past and foreseeing nothing in the immediate future. Man moves, walks, rushes, runs, dances with revelry apparently without any purpose or plan. This utter confusion among the masses arises from inefficacy of the existing systems. People pin hope on and are afraid of institutions — social, political and religious. Since they are confused, it is difficult for the people to find the right way to salvation. In the midst of this mad rush appears a chariot emitting a cold glare — light without heat, since it is the chariot of worldly life. The glare of the chariot is the light of Life; the Sun's light is that of Nature and the stellar light is the light of imagination and creative process. Nature's light obliterates that of the 'imagination'.

40 Desmond King-Hele, op.cit., p. 350.
only to be destroyed in turn by the light of Life. Furthermore, the charioteer has four faces, all blindfolded. The 'Shape' is "the evil side of human society in the earthly order, those elements, terrible and alluring, in the rush of circumstance and in the passions of men that combine to falter, deform, and crush personality."41

Since the poet is utterly confused and cannot make any sense of the whole show, a one-time sufferer and a 'distorted root' turns out to be Rousseau who narrates a running commentary of the procession as well as his own idealized history of life and his fall.42 He explains what led him and his companions to the procession. He attributes Napoleon's fall to the latter's reign of disorder, blood and misery:

I felt my cheek
Alter, to see the shadow pass away,
Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak
That every pigmy kicked it as it lay;
And much I grieved to think how power and will
In opposition rule our mortal day,
And why God made irreconcilable
Good and the means of good.

(The Triumph of Life, 224-231)

Shelley was very much concerned about the conflict between 'power and will'; it was a conflict between the power of the rulers and the will

41 F.W. Stowell, Shelley's Triumph of Life in Essays and Studies, pp. 113-114.
42 For in the battle life and they did wage,
She remained conqueror, I was overcome
By my own heart alone, which neither age,
Nor tears, nor infancy, nor now the tomb
Could temper to its object.

(The Triumph of Life, 239-243).
of the people; between the power of the have and the will of the have-nots. In a conscientious bid to bring about an equilibrium between institutions and opinions, he urged the people to resort to passive resistance and to patiently await 'The Hour' when evil will bring about its own decay. The main stumbling block between 'good and the means of good' was 'blood and gold' -- the wealth which oppressed mankind with all the tools at its command.

In the procession Frederick, Paul, Catherine and 'hoary anarchists, demagogues' are present as they symbolize despotism, cruelty and inequity. Looking back to his own life and action in the world, Rousseau gives a detailed account of "the process of 'growing up', of passing from boyhood to manhood, or from dependence upon nature to recognition that it is dangerous to depend upon nature for too much."43 It is interesting to note that Rousseau's idealized history of his own mind reveals his thoughts, beliefs, superstitions, imaginings. He presents the whole hierarchy of earthly tyrants and their satellites. King-Hele points out that the question in the last line of the poem is probably "Shelley's advice to today's harassed men-of-affairs, who waste their energies trying to run ever faster in the treadmill of worldly life."44

Shelley's growing respect for Christ reaches its fore when Shelley says that in the procession 'all but the sacred few' are present and one of the two sacred persons is Jesus Christ, the other person being

43 Harold Bloom, Shelley's Mythmaking; New York; 1969, pp.263-64.
44 Desmond King-Hele, op.cit., p. 359.
Socrates. The influence of Dante is discernible throughout this fragment. Dante seems to control the structure of the poem as well as its theme. The poem attempts a vision of judgment, and Dante seemed to be the inevitable model. The poem bears testimony to the influence of Dante and especially the 'Purgatorio' of Divine Comedy. As Virgil was to guide Dante, so there is Rousseau to guide Shelley. The sufferers in the 'Ninth Circle' of Dante's Divine Comedy know the immediate cause of their suffering but they are totally ignorant of the real cause. Similarly in The Triumph of Life the victims do not know the real reason of their fall.

The main threads of his thought during the last phase are: ignorance of liberty breeds savagery; will and wisdom are the yardsticks of the extent of liberty; world's emancipation depends upon the power of thought; there is no wealth except the labours of man; the oppressors and the oppressed are pitted against each other; circumstances make man what they are and there is a conflict between 'power' and 'will'.