CHAPTER - VIII

ARNOLD ON SHELLEY
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Arnold has very little to say about Shelley's poetic performance. The entire bulk of his criticism, both in prose and verse, is aimed at projecting Shelley as incoherent and ineffectual. His essay on Shelley is largely a comment on Dowden's *Life of Shelley*, and does not say much about his poetry. It is quite true that Arnold does not regard him high as a poet, but his attitude towards Shelley was evidently sympathetic. He conferred on him due praise in his essay on Heinrich Heine where he spoke well of both Byron and Shelley for having at any rate attempted to apply freely the modern spirit in poetry, although they failed.

"Byron and Shelley will long be remembered, long after the inadequacy of their actual work is clearly recognised for their passionate, their Titanic effort to flow in the main stream of modern literature; their names will be greater than their writings."\(^1\)

Arnold's first utterance on Shelley was in the well known lines from *Grande Chartreuse*:

What boots it, Shelley! that the breeze carried thy lovely wail away,
Mystical through Italian trees
which fringe the soft blue spezzian bay?
Inheritors of the distress
Have restless hearts one throb the less?

On closer analysis the passage discloses, Arnold's criticism of Shelley, (the earliest perhaps) that Shelley's poetry is evanescent, lovely, sad, musical, but inarticulate and ineffectual.

Both these criticisms reveal one thing that Arnold was certainly on the 'angel's side' at least in two issues; Shelley's modernity consisting in his belief in the essential democracy and the abolition of tyranny. On the whole, however he seems to be unsympathetic towards Shelley's modes of thought.

He adds "I will not now inquire how much Shelley achieves as a poet, but whatever he achieves, he in general fails to achieve the natural magic in his expression; in Mr. Palgrave's charming Treasury may be seen a gallery of his failures."²

²Ibid., p. 81.
Shelley's influence on Arnold is undeniably great as was Wordsworth's. This fact has been brought out by Swinburne when he says, "he is too good a poet not to have appreciated Shelley, and has in fact written at least one poem. A Question, so exactly after the manner of Shelley that both in style and in spirit, it is not unworthy of the honour to be mistaken for a genuine lyric of the second order among the minor poems of our greatest lyric poet."

Arnold's essay on Shelley is an instance of biographical criticism with all its fallacies. It is quite a long one but unfortunately Arnold was too much upset by the anarchic and the squalid details of Shelley's personal life as presented in the account of Edward Dowden, we find Arnold reflecting on Dowden's presentation of the full details of Shelley's private life. While disapproving of Prof. Dowden's account of Shelley, Arnold does nothing more than give a compact biography of Shelley's life up to the date of his second marriage. In his preoccupation with the biographical details, Arnold does scant justice to the poetic achievement of Shelley.

Swinburne - Miscellaneous, p. 112.
The major part of the essay abounds in Arnold's declamatory statements about Shelley the man - calling him insincere, unstable, immoral. Arnold ascribes Shelley's self-deception, selfishness, hypocrisy and his cruel treatment of Harriet - to Shelley's personal traits, primarily to inflammability and an inhuman want of humour. Only at the end does he turn to the ideal Shelley, 'the angelic Shelley'.

Arnold appears to be totally unsympathetic towards Shelleyan thought. Over and above this, Arnold appears to be antagonistic towards Shelley's ineffectuality and the essay also reveals Arnold's neglect of Shelley's Platonism. Hence his inadequate understanding of Shelley's poetry. Leon Gottfried states, even if Arnold could have known how profound a Platonist Shelley was, it is doubtful that he would have been favourably impressed. This must have been the reason for Arnold revealing himself as an unsympathetic reader of Shelley.

In spite of his condemnation of Shelley's personal life and despite his inadequate understanding of his truly romantic qualities of Shelley the poet, Arnold finds it possible to discover in Shelley, qualities which make him
angelic - almost idealistic.

He quotes from Shelley's poem 'Among the poor'

'I am friend of the unfriended poor', - to illustrate the truly attractive side of Shelley. Arnold presents Shelley as a perfect gentleman, entirely without arrogance or egotism and as a testimony to it, he quotes from Shelley's letters to his father and William Godwin. He quotes extensively from Dowden and Miss Rose, to reinforce his picture of Shelley - 'the Shelley with his flushed feminine face blushing like a girl'.

Arnold is aware of the prophetic quality of Shelley's poetry but his complaint seems to be, it does not take seriously into account this earth with all its imperfections, where we are rooted. Arnold, while calling him an angel, points out that he is a beautiful angel, ineffectual, in poetry no less than in life.

The Shelley of actual life is a visionary and a picture of radiance, in the end availing and affecting nothing. His opinion of Shelley, is in a way, decidedly negative, lacking in depth.

Arnold regrets that he has not the space to speak of Shelley's poetry. He does proceed to speak of it in four
sentences towards the close of the essay. The passage is worth quoting:

"The man Shelley, in very truth, is not entirely sane, and Shelley's poetry is not entirely sane, either. The Shelley of actual life is a vision of beauty and radiance, indeed, but availing, nothing, effecting nothing. And in poetry, no less than in life he is "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."^4

Arnold is not the only critic to find Shelley wanting. There have been others siding Arnold. Arnold does not make clear, what Shelley ought to have effected. One thing is evident from the essay. That is, for Arnold it was impossible to avoid mixing his personal with his literary estimates. In the essay On Spinosa, he observed

"The power of imagining, the power of feeling what goodness is, and the habit of practising goodness, were therefore, the sole essential qualifications of a 'true prophet.'^5

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^5Ibid., p. 187.
Later in the same essay he remarks:

"But to do this is only enough to make a philosopher noteworthy; it is not enough to make him great. To be great, he must have something in him which can influence character, which is edifying; he must, in short, have a noble and lofty character himself ...."  

Though this biographical aspect of Arnold's criticism of Shelley forms the bulk of the essay, which is highly questionable, it is true, from the essay that for Arnold, the critic, the poet must combine the offices of prophet and philosopher. Arnold, while appraising Shelley's poetical performances, in the light of Shelley personal life, in other words, basing his assessment of Shelley, the poet, on his personal estimation of Shelley, the man misses several aspects of the greatness of Shelley's poetry.

There are many things in Shelley's poetry which, intentionally or unintentionally, Arnold avoids talking about. Notable among these varied aspects of Shelley's greatness as a poet is the lyrical quality that characterizes

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6Ibid., p. 205.
the entire body of his work.

According to many critics, his lyrics represent, the highest achievement of the romantic movement.

"Truly never was the soul of a poet so spontaneously lyrical" writes Casamian. His lyrics are the crown of his work. By his lyrics, above all, will he live." As is evidenced by Frederick A. Pottle "the consensus of late victorian and late Romantic criticism was that Shelley's minor works, were his major works, that admirable as his longer works may be, they show his limitation in a way, that lyrics do not, that Shelley was England's greatest lyric poet."

Arnold, unfortunately is indifferent to this vital aspect of Shelley's poetry. "Ode to the Skylark" is the finest example of the lyricism of Shelley apart from the lyrical parts of Prometheus unbound. The wonderful juxtaposition in the poem of the pathos of human life, and the rapture and delight of the Skylark, the rich, figurative language, its intensity of feeling, its mood of longing and yearning - all these put together, make it a matchless and

exquisite poem.

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or hear it
Sourest thy full heart

In profuse strains of unpremeditated art

(To a Skylark)

'unpremeditated' conveys both a sense of creative and new moment but also 'a joyous opening of the gates of future'.

The later part of Act I of Prometheus unbound is devoted to prophetic lyrics, sung by a troop of spirits. Each spirit seems to represent an admirable human quality. Together they prophesy Prometheus's liberation.

The last spirit has love as its theme - love with its shades of pain and ruin,

The tender hopes which in their hearts the best and gentlest bear;

Who, stood to false repose by the faming plumes above,

And the music-stirring motion of its soft and busy feet,

Dream visions of aerial joy, and call the monster Love,
and wake, and find the shadow of pain, as he whom we greet.

(225, 772-9)

Therefore, Shelley's poetry we may say, was much too expressive and therefore, romantic to satisfy the demands made by Arnold's anti-romantic stance.

Arnold also overlooks another feature of Shelley's poetry. That is the nature descriptions and the fact that nature is the sole source of materials for genuine romantic poetry. Arnold hardly makes any reference to this, except in a derogatory sense.

"Those who extol him as the poet of sunsets are only saying that he did not lay hold upon the poet's right subject-matter." 8

"'Ode to the West Wind' is the best example to illustrate, the importance of Nature in Shelley's poetry, and natural objects as symbols of his emotional patterns.

'loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed'.

Of vapour from whose solid atmosphere,

Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst
On hear!

What if any leaves are falling like its own?
Like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.

Arnold, on the whole, seems to have felt that Shelley has not shown mastery of his medium of words apart from sounds. On the contrary, it is noticeable, that much of Shelley's poetry is substantial in thought, though generally clothed in symbolism.

There are two dominating ideas in his poetry. His devotion to liberty and his firm belief in love as the prime factor in all human progress. For Shelley, the French revolution was much more than a mere political upheaval. It was indeed a spiritual awakening. The underlying thoughts of many of his poems, such as The Revolt of Islam, Prometheus unbound, The Masque of Anarchy was this sense of liberty: a deep desire to usher in a new life. Liberty, according to Shelley, was freedom from restraint. The moral philosophy of Shelley, consists in the withdrawal of force and the promotion of liberty. Liberty could flourish in an atmosphere suffused with love based on Shelley's belief that love is the prime factor essential for human progress. It is, in this
sense that *Prometheus unbound* is a modernized myth, a magnificent illustration of the victory which the genius of man pursues even through suffering and which is accomplished by virtue of the force of love.

The whole of Shelley's poetry is marked by a plea for liberty for the down-trodden, hope for the oppressed, peace for the careworn. Poems such as *Ode to the West Wind*, *Prometheus unbound*, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, *the Masque of Anarchy*, are certainly examples of works consisting of ideas applied to life: In spite of a certain amount of appreciation for Shelley's modernity, Arnold somehow, did not admire any of these aspects of Shelley's thought. He found Shelley, lacking in thought and language. Arnold could not afford to take notice of the remarkable way in which these poems embody themes and thoughts, clothed in superb imagery, tending to symbolism and the logical development of thoughts from individual to the universal plane of understanding.

A true poet will not refrain from actively 'mingling in the social struggles of his time and place, and Shelley too, is found to be a poet not shut within an ivory tower, but sincerely feeling his social responsibility.
He declared in the *Defence of poetry* "A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively."\(^{10}\)

It must be so - I will arise and waken the multitude .......

(The Revolt of Islam II & XIV)

Such is the power of his words at the service the general good and progress of mankind. He is also convinced thoroughly that 'the future is contained within the present, as the plant within the seed'.\(^{11}\)

The image of the west wind "the trumpet of a prophecy" - to Shelley is a means of expressing his dissatisfaction with anything, local, or national, or human, and a harbinger of hope, a renewed life.

O, wind

If winter comes can spring be far behind

(Ode to the west wind, 61)

To apply Arnold's terminology, for felicity and perfection of diction, and manner and for truth and seriousness of


\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 226.
substance and matter, Shelley's poetry, entirely is known for moral and aesthetic values. Shelley's alleged unsubstantiality, lack of intellectual content, can be substituted by recent judgment of him as a prophetic poet.

For Shelley 'poets not other wise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians are in one sense, the creators of their age'. The recurrent Shelleyan motif, that 'regeneration of Nature through the seasons is a symbol of the regeneration through poetry of thought and intellectual beauty' cannot be brushed aside.

It is lamentable that Arnold did not have the time, nor inclination, to dwell upon the optimistic note, a true romantic quality - a general characteristic of Shelley's writings. Arnold feels that with all his capacities for musical diction and movement, with all his charm of soul and spirit, Shelley never had a firm and sound hold upon the right subject matter. He finds his translations much more satisfactory.

The interesting fact to note is, in the poem Ode to the West Wind, the poem begins with an invocation to Autumnal

breath, the spirit of destruction and the welcome note to the spring — indicating the principle of regeneration.

The lyrical rhapsody in the fourth act of Prometheus Unbound, in which the power of nature rejoice at their liberation is a romantic assertion of general good.

The loathesome mask has fallen,
the man remains,
Sceptreless, free uncircumscribed

From the above analysis, one finds Arnold being very unfair in his readings of Shelley — the poet, and that he is over generous to Shelley, the man. It is somewhat strange that Arnold who expected the critic to avoid the biographical and the historical fallacy, should have allowed himself to be influenced by Shelley's 'morals in his criticism of Shelley's poetry'. Not that he was not sensitive to the noble idealism of Shelley. Only he found it to be too revolutionary and too idealistic to be of use to the reader of his poetry. As a corollary, Arnold felt like most new critics that Shelley's diction and imagery loose and vague. They were appropriate and organic as they have been shown to be by Richard Fogle and others, in their reply to the modernist attack on Shelley's poetry.
Eliot's complaint against the content of Shelley's poetry has been similar to Arnold's if not identical, that his ideas have been too idealistic and vague, that they could be called an adolescent rather than an adult and serious. Arnold as a moralist, naturally found them to be not very useful for suffering mankind. He wanted from poetry consolation and stay and not just grandiose ideas. He found him too angelic to be true.