

***Shelley and Al-Shaby:
a Comparative Study***

***An M.A. Thesis Submitted to the
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Preface

The object of this thesis is to investigate the similarities and differences between P.B. Shelley and Abu al Qassem al-Shaby, two romantic poets in whose life and work one can trace, in spite of their widely distinct cultural backgrounds, significant affinities.

The thesis consists of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter "The Poet As Rebel" shows how typically Romantic in their rebellious attitudes the two poets are. It gives a survey of the life of each of the two poets, with a special emphasis on their respective involvement in the politics of their times.

Chapter two "Romantic Thematics" attempts a comparative study of a number of poems by the two poets in order to find out their common romantic elements, mainly: the rejection of traditional institutions, the freedom of the individual, longing for a paradise lost, the glorification of innocence and the love of nature.

Chapter three "The Romantic Poet – Prophet" is a study of the two poets' concept of the poet-prophet. It undertakes a comparative analysis of Shelley's A Defense of Poetry and al-Shaby's The Arabs' Poetic Imagination emphasizing the dilemma of the romantic artist. Relevant poems by the two poets are also discussed.

Chapter four "Nature in the works of the two poets" is a comparative study of the two poets' attitudes to Nature, the pathetic fallacy which they share, their transcendentalism and the difference between Shelley's European pantheism and al Shaby's oriental spiritualism. Moreover, the chapter deals with the effect of Wordsworthian associationism of the noble and beautiful on both poets. In addition, it undertakes an application of the activating and animating principle of nature.

III

In the conclusion the reception of each of the two poets within his own cultural context and the contribution of each is discussed. Also conclusion sums up the findings of the thesis.

The thesis attempts a close reading of the two poets' texts, the content and form are analyzed in relation to each other emphasizing the accumulative structure peculiar to romantic poetry.

I should like to point out that references on Shelley and English romanticism in general were numerous, those on al Shaby and Arabic romanticism were scarce and often of no importance. The Arabic part of the thesis was much more difficult to accomplish, most of the time I had to depend on myself for both the analysis and the comparison.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The historical and comparative approaches enable us to place a given work precisely by relating it to other works and to other manifestations of culture. We cannot, of course, take all of world literature for our province; the most we can do is to view each as the horizon against which our own tradition may be finally measured. But, just as the anthropologists discover similar processes working through diverse cultures, so - through our peculiarly specialized branch of the science of man-underlining patterns are to be found. (Levin x).

The object of this chapter is to investigate the conditioning factors that nourished the rebellious feelings in Shelley and al-Shaby, to correlate the two poets comparatively to measure each against the other and by so doing, underline patterns of similarities and dissimilarities.

The discussion of al-Shaby's and Shelley's poetry makes it necessary to explore the cultural and political context of each of the two poets. For literature and politics are often organically related to each other:

... if between sentiments and ideas there is a natural connection so close as to amount to a kind of identity , then the connection between literature and politics will be seen as a very immediate one It is a connection which is quickly understood and as quickly made and acted upon by certain governments ... the literature of the modern period, of the last century and a half, has been characteristically political.. the writers of the last hundred and fifty years ... turned their passions, their adverse, political, and very intense passions, upon the conditions of the policy. (Trilling 9-10)

Though the two poets lived in different ages and distinct environments and witnessed different political changes, tyranny was their common enemy. Both had the reformer's zeal in them, which expressed itself on every occasion.

War between England and France had broken out when Shelley was six years old. This devastating conflict ended in 1815 when Shelley was twenty three. Thus it covered a large part of his life span. The adult Shelley found himself in a country at war, with more than twenty thousand dead British soldiers and terribly bad economic conditions.

The labouring population at that time underwent deplorable conditions. Their wages fell while prices soared. Bread became expensive. The war had stopped the importation of cheap corn from France. The situation became worse as a result of a series of bad harvests, the prices of wheat trebled between 1792 and 1812. Consequently, about 500 riots broke out in provincial areas for want of food. Not only were the poor citizens burdened by high prices but also by increasing taxation imposed by Pitt, minister of war:

The government which had borrowed 4.5 m. Sterlings in 1773, requires 44 m. Sterlings by 1779. Pitt had little alternative to savage increases in direct taxation, indirect taxes though traditionally favoured, hit the people too hard to allow much further increase ... Pitt accordingly trebled the 'assessed taxes' on luxuries like servants and carriages in 1797 ... He announced proposals for an income tax in his 1798 budget speech ... (Eric 79).

Most of the English gross national income was spent on warfare in 1811 and 1815. It was the poor who paid the price indirectly. Purchase taxes on food and other essential items to the ordinary people extracted 67 million pounds. Thus, the British people were to suffer greater sacrifices in the second phase of the French wars. For besides sharp taxation, subsidies to allies were much larger. Unemployment and high prices were more common than ever.

The Industrial Revolution seemed to raise the hopes of the working class. But the naked truth was that those labourers earned scarcely to survive. In the meantime, the Industrial Revolution led to the prosperity of the higher class:

It was transforming the face of the countryside and the way of life of its people. In all this turmoil it was not likely that the poets, who tend to be in the vanguard of opinion, would sit quietly. A revolution in poetry had indeed, been brewing from the middle of the eighteenth century and Gray, Collins, Cowper, and others had all gone a certain way in the Romantic direction. (Quigly 17).

The impact of the Industrial Revolution was deeply felt in 18th century England. It led not only to great wealth but also to great misery in rural areas and new urban centres. Moreover, poverty-stricken peasants worked under enclosure and were at the end of their tether. Worse still,

Some parishes became closed de facto as land use changed and labourers moved away; more were deliberately created by ruthless owners who pulled down labourers' cottages and drove them off ... Many labourers had to travel long distances to work and the system produced comparably overcrowded and under-supervised open parishes where, according to early Victorian commentators, vice, immodesty, laziness, and drunkenness were rife. (Eric 141).

People's discontent was kindled by the American and French Revolutions. The American Revolution had a strong impact on the consciousness of Europe, especially France.

The American war had great repercussions in France. On the other hand, from a political point of view, the American Revolutionaries stroke an example. Among the French who were fighting in the United States, many returned with sentiments for republic. There was a strong desire for

liberty and equality. The declaration of rights written in America spread among the public who were so enthusiastic. On the other hand, the war was too costly. It increased the deficit and resulted in a financial crisis rendering the revolution inevitable (Malet 113).

Also the French Revolution was inspiring to the English intellectuals. The destruction of monarchy and the ancient regime, the ideals of justice, fraternity and equality, the first declaration of the rights of man and the revolutionary zeal attracted the first and second generations of English romantics.

It was in July, 1789 the ancient fortress of the Bastille had been stormed and its wretched prisoners were set free. French soldiers had abandoned their oath of loyalty to the country's supposed magical king and their duty to God as defined by the Christian Church. They had joined the oppressed people of Paris in open rebellion. They had accepted the message of those idealistic intellectuals who argued that a viciously hierarchical society could be transformed into one of justice, equality and love. (Pirie 17)

The French people were at great pains to make the Revolution a success, yet their cause drew a complete blank. While the Revolution was in the melting-pot, revolutionaries became other tyrants, especially Napoleon; not to mention economic burdens. These bad circumstances had a strong impact on the English romantics.

Shelley's England was a country exhausted by war whose citizens suffered the evils of warfare, especially economically. Shelley witnessed the evil consequences of The French Revolution - the Napoleonic war and the tyranny of monarchs in England. As a romantic and a reformer, he gave full vent to his rebellious feelings through poetry.

To say that Shelley's poetry is only romantic in the sense of celebrating nature and finding refuge in it, is, of course, wrong. For even a cursory glance at his poetry shows that it is political:

Politics, in the broadest sense, is the subject of nearly all Shelley's best verse; for he believed that men and women would never be fit to govern their society until they had learnt to free their own minds from a set of unconscious assumptions. His verse insisted that the tyranny of such prejudice operates even in the most intimately personal moments of sexual love or the most solitary observations of wild landscape. (Pirie 5).

Shelley did not take flight into Nature; rather, he ventured on a head-over - heels struggle.

Shelley grew up in a war beaten nation whose citizens did not care much for a poet who had a zeal for reform. This was one of the reasons which caused frustration to the young poet. Another was that the government tightened its grip on those poets who called for justice :

... the muzzled England of early nineteenth century offered neither a propitious time nor place for such enthusiasm. In due course Shelley, like Wordsworth and Coleridge before him, was under surveillance from the Home Office intelligence service. In 1812 Shelley's Irish servant, Daniel Healey, was arrested in Barnstaple for posting copies of A Declaration of Rights (a broad sheet composed in Dublin and drawing succinctly on Shelley's reading of Paine and Godwin). (O'Neill 21).

It was a period of coercion; tyranny and oppression went hand in hand. The country of Shelley's adult life, of 1819 in particular, was undergoing political turmoil. Two groups emerged: " Political Protestants" and "Unions". They called for parliament reform and for the repeal of the corn law of 1815. Frequent mass meetings took place culminating in a meeting scheduled for August at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester. And Shelley, as usual:

... interested himself in British politics again when he heard the news of the so called Massacre of Peterloo. On

the 16 August, 1819 a great crowd of people had gathered at St. Peter's Field in Manchester to hear a chartist orator called Henry Hunt make a speech in which he was to advocate universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the abolition of the corn laws, which raised the price of imported wheat. Fearful of anything which looked like insurrection, the authorities called out the mounted militia who charged the unarmed and peaceful crowd, killing eleven and injuring more than hundred. (**Jarvis 19**).

The Whigs and Tories played a part in this corrupt politics. Intoxicated by the success of The French Revolution, the Whigs welcomed it, later, however, they felt threatened by the increasing popularity of radical books among the working class. As the demand increased for such political books, book-sellers and publishers were being persecuted. As for the Tory government,

[it] responded with savagely repressive legislation not only against freedom of speech but also against freedom of assembly . It suspended habeas corpus, the law that had traditionally protected British citizens from imprisonment without trial. It employed a network of spies and agents provocateurs to collect victims for its show trials and public executions. (**Pirie 8**).

Shelley's rebellion was rooted in the coercive conditions of the first decades of 19th century England. It was a rebellion against a concrete historical situation.

... Shelley's early writings ... only came into focus where their growingly explicit radicalism is recognized ... The Irishman's song ... anticipates Shelley's involvement in contemporary Irish politics 1812 when he visited Dublin and wrote pamphlets in support of Catholic Emancipation . (**O'Neill 13**).

However, the political conditions of Europe were not the only influence on the young poet. His family background had a strong effect in forming his opinions. At home, Shelley was ill treated. It began to look like that the mother-son relation was at stake. Moreover, with the passage of time, such a relation faltered into the worst:

... the feelings between mother and son were exceptionally close and warm up to the time that Shelley went to school . After this Shelley seems to have found his mother increasingly distant and unresponsive, and there are indications that he felt deeply rejected.

(Holmes 11).

His relationship with his father was even worse. Shelley:

was later to develop a story that he suffered continually from illness, while on one occasion his father Timothy tried to have him certified and taken away secretly to a madhouse. (Holmes 12).

At school Shelley stroke an attitude as he was the boys' pet aversion. Ostracization and neglect at school again brought into retrospection family disturbance. Thus, the school nourished Shelley's hostility, the basis of which was the parental neglect.

His mother, who liked men of a sporting and military sort, didn't like him. While his father, who was the personification of an outraged parent, opposed the posthumous publication of his works. (Quigly 10).

As a boy, Shelley felt estranged. He was cut off from his peers, even bullied and persecuted by them. When he was twelve he was sent to Eton:

the story of his Eton days have become a part of the Shelley legend; how he refused to fag, was known as "mad Shelley", was the victim of organized "Shelley-hunts" .(Quigly 11).

Shelley's character was to a great extent moulded by his social background. Even his elopement calls to mind his grandfather who began the tradition. In 1757, his grandfather eloped with a well off 16-year old girl. After her death he inherited the estates. In 1769, he repeated the process eloping with an aristocratic girl. (See: Holmes 10).

Like his grandfather, Shelley eloped with Harriet whose father, though he was well-off, kept a Coffee House. Therefore, she was socially beneath Shelley. However, the reason of such a marriage was:

the desire to cut loose from, and violate the taboos of, the class to which he belonged by birth, a desire strengthened by his growing compulsion to offend his father. (O'Neill 31).

Not only did Shelley violate the family lore but he also became a black sheep after being sent down from Oxford as a result of writing a pamphlet entitled " The Necessity of Atheism ". The essay was based on Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" in which the ideas of Christianity and God are doubted. "The Pamphlet syllogistically refuted the proofs of a Deity". It pleaded the right for atheism on the plea of the fact that disbelief as well as belief is a passion of mind. (Holmes 50).

What worsened matters was that Shelley published " A Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things ". As a result he was summoned to a meeting of the Master and Fellows of University College. The meeting ended with Shelley expelled from Oxford.

At Oxford Shelley may be said to have but one bosom friend, Hogg. They had much in common:

A shared feeling of ridicule for the college authorities, and a mutual enthusiasm for speculative opinions and heretical tastes rapidly drew the two young men together, and the friendship became by far in a way the most important influence on Shelley at Oxford, while Hogg was later to call Shelley ' a whole university in himself to me' ... One

can say that T.J.Hogg was Shelley's first love affair. (**Holmes 40**) .

Like Shelley, the political and social circumstances were the germinating seeds of the poet in al-Shaby. Al-Shaby (1909 - 1934) lived in the period between the two world wars; a period of radical, political and social changes . Tunisia was occupied by the French, a fact which had a major formative influence on the young poet. Paradoxically France, the seat of the Revolution and the great ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, was a colonial power. The Ottomans, who ruled Tunisia gave foreign merchants franchises to trade as they wished. The weaker the Ottomans became, the fiercer European countries exploited the state politically, economically and socially. Thus the French had to pull a few strings to get what they wanted.

France concentrated its imperialist activities in North Africa. The French Expedition to Egypt (1798 - 1801) was followed by the occupation of Algeria in 1830. Then, the French saw to it that they should have the Tunisians on a string. The Tunisians fell in evil days and got entrapped as the noose of loans was tightened around their necks.

The first world war broke out. The French, under the pretext of protecting their presence in Algeria, took control of Tunisia: " The French handled the budget, encouraged French people to immigrate, gave them general posts and rich soil, and divided the mineral wealth among French companies.

Owing to the decreasing rate of birth in France, most of the immigrants to Tunisia were from the island of Corsica. They landed in Tunisia as black death would. Worse still, France divided the land among those foreigners by issuing different legislations with the aim of evicting the Tunisians from their land. The new settlers dominated commerce, industry and administration. The Tunisians were dominated both politically and economically.

The French occupation authority had seized fertile and arid lands and bushes. On 24 September 1885, water, which in the south is as vital as cultivated land, became state property. Water springs which, before the