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English (Hons.)

Page - ①

Deg I / Paper II / Lecture No. 6 / Dr. Hemanti Das

Topic : "To A Skylark" by P. B. Shelley

About the Poet :-

Shelley is emphatically the poet of eager, sensitive youth; not animal youth of Byron, but the spiritual youth of the visionary and the reformer. In his earlier years Goethe was the figure which most readily impressed his mobile imagination, and in many of the poems dealing with social subjects, — "Queen Mab" (1813) and the "Revolt of Islam" (1818) — he is little more than more music added to Goethe. In later life Wordsworth's influence is more clearly discernable. But the most potent inspiration came from Greek literature, first brought before his notice by his kindly friend and critic, Peacock.

Shelley, like his admirer Browning, needed the ~~the~~ sunshine of the South to rouse his finest powers. "Alastor" (1816) is the splendid product of his first acquaintance with the Alps; and his loveliest lyrics were written under Italian ~~scenery~~ skies.

Two notes dominate all Shelley's works — epic, narrative, and lyric alike — (i) his devotion to liberty, and (ii) his whole hearted belief in love, as the prime factor in all human progress. The Revolution, to Shelley, was much more than a political upheaval; it was a spiritual awakening, the

beginning of a new life. All that was evil in life he traced to Slavery. Natural development for him was the only development. He believed that men would never be men, never give what was best in them, until they could give it out freely. Master yourself, he cries, and external freedom will enable you to realize your utmost capabilities. These thoughts, as described herein before, are the thoughts underlying "The Revolt of Islam", "The Masque of Anarchy", "Julian and Haddalo", and the noble lyric drama "Prometheus Unbound". Liberty, in Shelley's eyes, was freedom from external restraint. It is opposed to licence, for to "rule the empire of self" was with Shelley a moral necessity. What then, if the force is withdrawn from Society, is to take its place? Shelley's emphatic answer is Love. Love is to reign supreme, for only in an atmosphere of love can liberty efficiently work. Love is, for Shelley, a transcendental force kindling all things into beauty. In his treatment of it we miss the more concrete touch of Keats, and the homeliness of Wordsworth's steady affection. And there are times when his dream pictures float away, like exquisite bubbles, that melt even as we watch them.

But both the strength and weakness of Shelley's verse lie in the fact that his fine idealism and warm human sympathies are clad in shadowy fantasies and lyrics delicate as gossamer. Thoughts and feelings are etherealized,

till their presence is discerned only as one discerns the things of dreamland. He is the Oberon of poets; and even in his most impassioned songs, in such matchless lyrics as "The World's great age begins anew," where our rough glottal tongue becomes an exquisite lyric cry — even here it is as if some fairy child were lamenting the sins and cruelties of mankind: Oberon turned social reformer. Whatever may be the fate of his longer poems, his lyrics are sure to live so long as rhythmic beauty and elfin music appeal to human kind.

Shelley is one of the poet's poet; ~~the~~ ~~for~~ everything that passes through his mind becomes ~~fact~~ ~~singing~~ saturated in poetry; but the singularity of his gift is that he obliterates the defining line between matter and spirit, between the solid earth and man's thought, between the real and the imagined. The two are involved together in his "translucent" pictures of nature, especially regarding the more lawless things, wind, sea and light; but all his imagery, perpetually recurring yet always fresh, has this quality of mingling the spiritual and the material. He has this Turner-esque vision which sees and retains the splendid moments, the ethereal hues, the spiritual beauty

and power of a scene.

Swirburne called Shelley "the perfect singing god". His lyrics possess an extraordinarily musical movement of sweet cadences. Even Arnold, who is somewhat off the mark in his estimate, perceived Shelley's gift of song. "The right sphere of Shelley's genius" wrote Arnold, "was the sphere of music". In this context we may also quote Arthur Quiller-Couch who opines as thus: "Shelley is a superlatively melodious poet. During the last two years of his life ^{he} poured forth lyric after lyric in an, so as to say, inspired state of fecundity.

Lyric

Brinkwater has defined the lyric as "the product of the pure poetic energy unassociated with other energies" the lyric is the result of a swift, passionate impulse suddenly awakening the poet and seizing him and setting him afire. The duration of the emotion is short but possesses the poet completely while it lasts. The lyric mood is dominated by unity of emotion or thought. The one emotion or one thought might be given variations of ~~thought~~ tone, colour or emphasis. Shelley is ~~of~~ supreme in these variations. The lyric is distinguished by simplicity of form and makes little use of ornamentation. The strength and fire of passion burrs up the unessentials...

(To be continued in the next lecture)