

ANALYSIS OF REVOLT OF ISLAM BY P.B.SHELLEY

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ABSTRACT

The Revolt of Islam is one of the most favorite narrative poems of P.B.Shelley. It may be considered his longest narrative poem. In this paper I will try to give an overview of this poem, but first it is worth pointing out the most important facts about the author himself, his life and literary work in general. However, I am going to present the plot, and then get into a detailed analysis of its themes, style, artistic values etc of The Revolt of Islam. In fact this poem had undergone some changes until its final version was published as The Revolt of Islam. Despite the title, the poem doesn't have to do with Islam as a religion, but it talks about the struggle between the good and the bad, authorities, state, in other words, it can be considered as an ABC of morality and political education. On the other hand, I'll give a poetical analysis, dealing with the structure, meter, rhyme, symbolism, i.e. esthetical elements of the poem. Through this poem, we can clearly notice the greatness of P.B.Shelley, his artistic mastery and the characteristics of romanticism represented in the poem.

Keywords: Shelley, Romanticism, Narrative poem, Politics, State, Authorities.

Romanticism is one of the most interesting and fruitful periods in English literature. We know that it is a reaction against neoclassicism, so instead of giving importance to reason, writers of romanticism expressed their emotions, feelings, imagination and their individualism in their works. This is better stressed and expressed in verses, so major literary form was poetry, which in fact is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, as Wordsworth said. Among many famous poets of this period, as for example Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, there is a special place for Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley is a typical poet of romanticism, who wrote about nature, good, evil, freedom, etc, and shared his imagination, emotions and feelings with the readers. His literary opus consisted of lyrical poems, narrative poems, meditative poems, literary criticism, etc, where he expresses his artistic mastery. Themes, structure, ideas, symbolism in his poems are diverse and actual for his time, but not only, so they became accepted and read at his time, and are valued and republished even today. Many of his works, like *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*, *Ozymandias*, *The Ode to the*

West Wind, Ode to the Nightingale, The Cloud, Alastor, etc, are famous and translated in many languages.

However, in this paper, I will concentrate on one of his famous narrative poems, named *The Revolt of Islam*. The original title of *The Revolt of Islam* is *Laon and Cythna: or The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, written in 1818. It is another narrative poem written by Shelley. The major conflict of the poem is the war between the good and the bad, personified in the characters of authorities, like the king, priest, etc. As the longest of Shelley's narrative poems, it is a '*caricature of his soberer intentions, fanatical in tone, undisciplined, and breathlessly urgent*'.³

Shelley changed the original title in order to hide the attacks on public order and authorities. These attacks were related to the theme of religion and the exact nature of a relationship between the male and female protagonists, who in the original version were brother and sister. Another change was the omission of the last paragraph of the preface, where Shelley discusses the moral sensitivity of the reader. So, the major theme of the poem is a battle between good and evil, that Shelley equals with the battle between authorities' power and men's struggle for freedom. No matter that the protagonists get executed, this poem is thought to be an ABC of morality and political education. In 4176 verses, it represents the uprising history against the tyrant attack on the golden city.

This Golden City is compared to The French Revolution, but having a simpler and a general character. This poem can be considered the most Godwinian one, since Shelley defined it as a continuation of the progress of an individual mind which strives for perfection. William Godwin, the famous philosopher had an impeccable influence in the development of Shelley's ideology about freedom, his intolerance of political and religious institutions, effectiveness of reason, hatred towards priests, tyrants, and rich oppressors.

The preface reveals the epic character of the poem, and poet's aims, as well as '*ethereal combinations of the fancy, rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a poem*'.⁴ The second paragraph exposes the real nature of the poem and can be considered as a great manifesto of evil. However, the poem above all celebrates love, need for love, it is dedicated to Mary Shelley, poet's wife, who in fact is his companion in his struggle against evil.

³King-Helle, Desmond; *Shelley, The Man and the Poet*, Thomas Yoseloff, publisher, New York, 1960, f.82

⁴ Courthope, C.B.; *A History of English Poetry, Vol. VI (The Romantic Movement in English poetry, the Effects of the French Revolution)*, MacMillan and Co. Limited, London, 1910. f.306

The poem is divided into twelve cantos or songs. The first song is an introduction to the main part of the poem. The narrator gets high at: *The peak of an aerial promontory, / Whose caverned base with the vexed surge was hoary*, v.130-1, and he watches a battle between an eagle and a snake, where the eagle throws the snake. The narrator arrives at the shore, and there he meets a woman who is curing the snake, since according to her, the snake is the spirit of goodness, and the eagle of evil. The narrator describes the place, with thrones decorated with sapphires, where the great people are buried. From the disturbed sea two spirits appear, they were Leon and Cythna. Leon tells his story, and the symbolism of the poem becomes clearer, a story of the poem consisted of 11 cantos. Laon, a young Greek, witnessed the oppressive tyranny over his nation and country, Greece. The tyranny comes from the Turkish oppression, and the only rebels against this tyranny are Laon and his companion Cythna, who motivates and supports him in his revolutionary and ideas and poems. In the original version Cythna was Laon's sister. They lose their tranquillity when their house is raided by a gang of the tyrant army, Cythna is sent to the harem, while Laon is handcuffed and tortured physically, mentally and sexually. There we see him lying in fever, dreaming about four corpses, one of which is Cythna's. Cythna is raped in the harem and thus loses her sanity and imprisoned in an underground cave. Fortunately, an earthquake takes the cave on the surface of the sea, and Cythna is saved by some occasional sailors. However, as a result of the rape, she gives birth to a baby girl, and it took them many years to recover their mental and physical health, and start their life anew. As soon as Leon felt better, he joined the rebel forces against the emperor. These rebel forces were now more organised, and lead by a woman, who turned to be his friend, Cyntha. He saluted her with a hymn:

*My brethren, we are free! the plains and mountains,
The gray sea-shore, the forests and the fountains,
Are haunts of happiest dwellers; — man and woman,
Their common bondage burst, may freely borrow
From lawless love a solace for their sorrow;
For oft we still must weep, since we are human..... LI 4...2227-32*

Nevertheless, the tyrant emperor attacks again, and we suddenly have an image of a city that disappears. When everything seems lost, Cythna appears, who saves Laon, and takes him among the ruins of mountains. They spend some magical moments, hiding in a ruined building, and consoling each other, sharing memories of their past moments and moments they were separated. Even though the war revolt was broken, the warriors continued looking for the rebels, and eventually caught them. There Laon has a speech before the tyrant's senate, where he refers to America as a:

*A land beyond the Oceans of the West,
Where, though with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth*

*Are worshipped*XI.xxii.4415-17,

and talks about how human rights are respected there, so he wants Cynthia to be taken there. This is not acceptable for Cynthia so they both end tragically, sacrificing themselves.

Thus, the most important aspect of the poem and the most important theme as well, is the war for freedom, clearly expressed through the battles, but mainly through revolution and revolutionary ideas against tyranny itself. War for freedom, which is strongly intertwined with romantic love, is presented in the myth of the first canto. The lifelong conflict of Laon and Cynthia against the tyrant corresponds to the struggle between the snake and the eagle. The aim of this epic battle is rejection of evil.

So, the major, and perhaps the only heroes in *The Revolt of Islam* are Laon and Cynthia. Laon is undisputable leader of revolutionists, and according to King-Helle, '*He is a religious leader, fit hero for a poem which is more of a divine text than a weighing of rights and wrongs.*'⁵ He is a portrait of a passionate and propagandistic person, similar to some other characters created by Shelly, like Alastor, but reflects Shelley's character as well. Laon's love towards Cynthia is similar to Alastor's love towards his beloved, a love of his ideal ego. He fights to create a reality that can be compared to his ideals so that he could engage himself into politics, which attempt results unsuccessful. Cynthia is considered an ideal heroine, who reflects feminism, and on the other hand offers a bellicose support for the person she loves. This is a reflection of Shelley's 'spiritual beauty' personified in a character of a woman, and this in fact is Shelley's originality.

However, when we have two protagonists, man and a woman, it is inevitable that the issue of female and male position, or their gender role and position should be discussed. So, it is *Revolt of Islam* where Shelley stresses the principles of gender equality. As we mentioned above, in the original version Laon and Cynthia are brother and sister, and this is maybe because in Shelley's time, incest was a popular motive. This relationship faced a harsh criticism, a criticism which maybe misunderstood the notions of freedom and incest, so Shelley was forced to make changes, so in the new version Cynthia was an orphan, not Laon's sister.

Symbolism of the poem is very important, so we can notice that the most frequent symbols are four: the Aeolian Lyre, the river, the veil, and snake-eagle. We get the idea that these symbols are presented spontaneously in Shelley's ideas. The snake is obviously the source of Shelley's conscience. Cynthia's cave is a real prison, which later, in verse 3101 becomes a metaphor for her mind, so we can consider it as a symbol of mental power.

⁵ King-Helle, Desmond; *Shelley, The Man and the Poet*, Thomas Yoseloff, publisher, New York, 1960, f.83.

The revolt brings a lot of problems that we can notice in the poem, being conceptual or structural, and one of these problems is the disassociation of the private from the public. This problem is analysed by King-Helle, according to whom, in order to feel the positive aspect of the revolt, one should set aside the public problems and concentrate on the private ones. The best parts of the poem are exactly the parts when the two protagonists face each other and get away from the shameful crowd. Both of them do not save the country by creating new armies, but they withdraw in the rocks, preferring their private pleasure over their mission to save the oppressed, what means that their personal wellbeing comes first, but not forgetting about the problems of the community.

This is where we notice the presence and influence of Godwinan doctrine of the universal love.

*And such is Nature's law divine, that those
Who grow together cannot choose but love,
If faith or custom do not interpose,
Or common slavery mar what else might move
All gentlest thoughts; VI.xl. 2686-90*

However, it is not the private only that preoccupies the protagonists; they try to make a fusion of public life with their private. For Laon and Cythna there is no confrontation between revolutionary principles and love statements, in fact they complete one another, each is a part of the other, and their love becomes noble through their political battle. This unification of interests, personal and public, shows Shelley's interest and desire to unify the public with the private, which covers the most important part of the poem. On the psychological side, there is a parallel between the dialectic liaison between the split individual and the divided society in classes, and between the social integration and the individual integration. The 'divorce' between love and politics was only an aspect of the failure of the radicals.

A very important role, an essential part in the poem is the element of madness and wisdom, or reason. Cythna is considered mad, and that is why she is removed from the harem, and Laon suffers a lot. Their imagination while captured can be considered a kind of madness, and the hope that they have, refers to reason. Remuneration is wisdom, and wisdom for Shelley is recognition of Necessity, as well as of freedom and love. Another specific and important element in the poem can be cannibalism that represents an essential part of tyranny, so that Cythna and Laon can unhorrorifiedly oppose this show of human lechery, since it is something they have experienced in themselves. Shelley is brave enough to present this element which is considered a

central metaphor when the occupying armies buy and eat human flesh, and their action expresses 'complex association of lust, sadism and selfishness on which tyranny is based.'⁶

In their madness, both the protagonists experience cannibalistic fantasies, as if they are eating each other's bodies. As a result, their revolutionary principles are more powerful than those of 1790 radicals'; they understand and accept the fact that tyrant actions and deeds that they hate, cannot be naively prescribed to an innocent human being, but are developed and rise from the active forces deep within the human soul. The most horrific barbarities that Cythna and Laon learn of during their madness are in fact personifications of human dreams only.

The War, revolution, romantic love, collection of unimportant characters, etc, are also very important elements. Politics is combined as well, and we can say that *The Triumph of Life* is a political tale, a theme that is carefully structured. The history of revolt is represented in the conflict between the snake and the eagle in the first canto. At the beginning the snake seems to be somewhere up, but the eagle finds it and throws the wounded snake into the sea, claiming a victory that we know is temporary. Similarly, the political history in the poem describes a successful revolt, which is immediately broken by a counterrevolution which culminates in the execution of Laon and Cythna. However, the tyrant's victory is temporal, just like the eagles.

The two great movements of the political fable of the poem, the weakness of the oppressive force, followed by its own flow, are kept together by a series of wild contrasts. There is a revolution and a counterrevolution, there is a divine altar to celebrate the success of the revolution, and later, when things change, another altar is built by the oppressive armies, an altar of sacrifice, where the execution of Cythna and Laon is planned. However, the second altar is far from being artistic;

Ere night the pyre was piled, the net of iron
Was spread above, the fearful couch below;
It overtopped the towers that did environ
That spacious square; for Fear is never slow
To build the thrones of Hate, her mate and foe; 4162-4170.

Laon accompanies Cythna to the triumphant pyramid, and Cythna accompanies Laon to the sacrifice altar. The major themes of the poem, those of love and politics, are typical for poems of 1790, which Shelley imitates, like: *Joan of Arc* of Southey, 1796, where the major conflict is the request for retreat and internal happiness, and claims

⁶ Croning, Richard; *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts*; MacMillan press Ltd., 1981, f.103

for active engagement in the political movement; then, *Gebir*, by Landor, which very similar. Both of these works during the conflict between England and France, and both discuss the negativity and bad aspects of the foreign invasion. In *Exursion*, The Hermit is not interested at all in politics, till the moment his wife and children die. These are some of the literary works Shelley clutches his ideas to write the *Revolt*. However, beside the thematic aspect, *The Revolt* is structurally and symbolically similar to other great literary works, like for example Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. The common elements that appear in both *The Revolt* and *Kubla Khan* are: the cube, the cave, the river and the fountains, as far as the propagandistic part of the poem is influenced by *Empire of the Nairs*, by sir James Laurence, another of Shelley's contemporaries. Laurence's literary work is a propagandistic novel, about an oriental land, where free love is practiced for everybody's sake, where purity is considered one of the most absurd prejudices, where incest is not a crime, etc. *The Revolt* has some similarities with some other Shelley's poems, for example he compares Cythna with the Aeolian Lyre, that appears in his other famous poem *Ode to the West Wind*, and where he uses phrases like: *The basis of Autumn drive the winged seeds/ Over the earth-*. This in fact turns the season cycle into an occasional allegory and change in human fates. The tenth canto of *Revolt* is similar to *Essay on Christianity*. The paradise image here evokes pity and powerful emotions.

As far as structure of the poem is considered, we can say that this poem is consisted of 4818 verses, divided into 12 songs, or cantos, organised into Spenserian stanzas, that means each stanza is composed of nine lines, first eight which are in iambic pentameter, and the last one, the ninth, is an alexandrine, or iambic hexameter.

*Mo/tion/ess re/sting /on/ the /lake/ a/while,
I/ saw/ its/ marge /of /snow/-bright/mount/ains/ rear
Their/ peaks/ a/loft/; I/ saw/each/ ra/di/ant/isle;
And/ in/ the /midst/, a/far/, even/like /a /sphere
Hung/ in /one /holl/ow/ sky/, did /there/app/ear
The/ Temple/ of /the/Spi/rit;/on /the/so/und
Which/ iss/ued/thence. /drawn/ near/er/and /more/ near/
Like the swift moon this glorious earth around,
The/ cha/rmèd /boat/ appr/oached,/ and/ there/its/ haven/fo/und.*

This beautiful poem is preceded by a dedication for Shelley's wife, Mary. There is a lot to be said and analysed in *The Revolt of Islam*, and everything is for sure not exposed in this paper. However, we have to admit how visionary Shelley was, since we can find the truth that is related to the present. And as a conclusion, we can say that people should avoid all kinds of tyranny and become ones' own rulers, if not, we are not real humans. As one of the greatest poets of romanticism, Shelley became an inspiration to

many poets and writers. His revolutionary spirit and poems motivated many people raise their voice for their rights, freedom and equality, so in this way he proved his idea that Poets are the unacknowledged leaders of the world.

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