The Geeta and Shelley’s Adonais

Dr B S Tyagi
Poet, Short Story writer, Novelist
U.P., India

Hegel—the great German thinker, said, ‘A poet should make his life poetry.’ The remark is certainly true of no other English poet as of P B Shelley, a great romantic poet. At once spontaneous, passionate and impulsive Shelley is a great genius, ever pursuing his quest for truth or intellectual beauty. His poetical works is the testimony to his firmly rooted belief. Like a metaphysical thinker he looks upon the worldly impressions on man as imperfect shadows of a higher divine world. He conceives of a Supreme Power prevailing through nature as well as human life. No life in the whole universe blooms without supreme consciousness. In Adonais he says:

That Light whose smile kindles the universe,

That beauty in which all things work and move, (Stanza 54)

The more Shelley thinks deeply over life, the more he grapples with the timeless questions related to it. He sets about finding their possible solutions like other thinkers. And it makes him surely a persistent seeker of truth. His serious speculation over life and its purpose in the world sets him apart from all other romantic poets.

Interestingly enough like a student of the Vedanta philosophy Shelley ponders over the grave questions - where do we come from? Why do we come in the world? What is this world where we play our destined roles? Is there any worth seeking in life?

Whence are we, and why are we? Of what scene

The actors or spectators? Great and mean

Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow. (Stanza 21)

Further, Shelley thinks about soul and its nature. Does the soul perish with the body? Do our dreams end with death? Is it all illusion - maya in life? These perplexing questions leave all thinking humans upset. Arjuna is also greatly perturbed at these mind-boggling questions. ‘His mind is clouded, his convictions unsettled and his whole consciousness is confused.’ Then Lord Krishna comes to his rescue and tells him:

Avinasi tu tad viddhi yena sarvam idam tatam
Vinasam avayasya na kascit kartum arhati (2. 17)

Know thou that that pervades by which all this is pervaded is indestructible. Of this immutable being, no one can bring about the destruction.

Again:

Antavanta ime deha nityasyoktah saririnah

Anasino prameyasya tasmad yudhyasva bharata (2. 18)

It is said that these bodies of the eternal embodied (soul) which is indestructible and incomprehensible to come to end. Therefore, fight, O Bharat (Arjuna).

Lord Krishna further explains that soul does not perish even when the body perishes. Man must understand the real nature of soul to attain peace. It cannot be destroyed by any material weapon. What is destroyed or supposed to be destroyed is the body only.

Ya enam vetti hantaram yas caiman manyate hatam

Ubhau tau na vijanito nayam hanti na hanyate (2.19)

He who thinks that this slays and he who thinks that this is slain; both of them fail to perceive the truth; this one neither slays nor is slain.

Shelley says nearly in the same vein:

Like incarnations of the stars, when splendor
Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death
And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath.
Nought we know dies: shall that alone which knows
Be as a sword consumed before the sheath
By sightless lightning? The intense atom glows
A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose. (Stanza 20)

Thus, Shelley believes in the immortality of soul. It hardly matters if body is destroyed. He does not grieve over its destruction. God is the creator of this universe; and all things after
death go back to Him for eternal rest. He is the absolute Brahman. Noble souls shine through various objects of nature. Their pure radiance can be felt. They live with an inner joy and peace.

*God dawned on chaos. In its stream immersed.*

*The lamps of heaven flash with a softer light;*

*All baser things pant with life’s sacred thirst,*

*Diffuse themselves, and spend in love’s delight.* (Stanza 19)

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna:

**Anta kale ca mam eva smaran muktva kalevaram**

**Yah prayati sa mad-bhavam yati nasty atra samsayah** (8. 5)

*And whoever, at the time of death, gives up his body and departs thinking of Me alone, he comes to My status (of being); Of that there is no doubt.*

Again:

**Yam- yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram**

**Tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad-bhava-bhavitah** (8.6)

*Thinking of whatever state (of being) he at the end gives up his body, to that being does he attain, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), being ever absorbed in the thought thereof.*

Further Shelley looks upon nature as possible origin of man’s life and vital significance of death which is not terrible or frightening at all. It ends all worldly evils which eat our body away day and night and weaken it. Nothing can destroy soul. It is ever unaffected. It is eternal and a perennial source of bliss. The Geeta says:

**Nainam chindanti sastrani nainam dahati pavakah**

**Na cainam kledayanty apo na sasayati marutah** (2.23)

*Weapons do not cleave this self, fire does not burn him; waters do not make him wet; nor does the wind make him dry.*

Again:
Acchedyo 'yam adahyo 'yam akledyo 'sosya eva ca

Nityah sarva-gatah sthanur acalo 'yam sanatanah (2.24)

He is uncleavable, He cannot be burnt. He can be neither wetted nor dried. He is eternal, all-pervading, unchanging and immovable. He is the same forever.

Shelley is wholly aware of the fact that soul being the part of the Eternal is awakened, pure, clean and eternal source of bliss and on the way to mingle with Him. Therefore, there is no reason to mourn the death of Keats who has become one with the Eternal. Nothing can tease or tire him. Death can do no harm to him.

Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep!

He hath awakened from the dream of life.

‘Tis we who, lost in stormy visions, keep

With phantoms an unprofitable strife, (Stanza 39)

Again:

He lives, he wakes- 'tis Death is dead, not he;

Mourn not for Adonais -Thou young Dawn,

Turn all thy dew to splendor, for from thee

The spirit thou lamentest is not gone! (Stanza 41)

The Geeta says:

Na jayate mriyate va kadacin nayam, bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah

Ajo nityah sasvato 'yam purano, na hanyate hanyamane sarire (2. 20)

He is never born, nor does he die at any time, nor having (once) come to be will he again cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.

Lord Krishna forbids Arjuna to mourn the death of his kith and kin because it is body (and never the soul) that dies. He must understand this fact of life and try hard to come out of this great
illusion that keeps man ever so low. Due to this illusion he mistakes body for the divine spark and miss a great opportunity to know Him.

\[\text{Avyakto 'yam acintyo 'yam avikaryo 'yam ucyate}\]

\[\text{Tasmad evam viditvainam nanusocitum arhasi (2. 25)}\]

He is said to be unmanifest, unthinkable and unchanging. Therefore, Knowing him as such, thou shouldst not grieve for the body.

Again:

\[\text{Atha cainam nitya-jatam nityam va manyase mrtam}\]

\[\text{Tathapi tvam maha-baho nainam socitum arhasi (2. 26)}\]

Even if, thou you thinkest that the self is perpetually born and perpetually dies, even then, O mighty-armed (Arjuna) thou shouldest not grieve.

Shelley says:

\[\text{He is made one with nature. There is heard}\]

\[\text{His voice in all her music, (Stanza 42)}\]

The Geeta says:

\[\text{Avyaktadini bhutani vyakta-madhyani bharata}\]

\[\text{Avyakta-nidhanany eva tatra ka paridevana (2.28)}\]

Beings are unmanifest in their beginnings, manifest in the middles, and unmanifest again in their ends. So Bharata (Arjuna), what is there in this for lamentation?

Shelley expresses his firm belief:

\[\text{The One remains, the many change and pass;}\]

\[\text{Heaven’s light for ever shines, earth’s shadows fly;}\]

\[\text{Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,}\]

\[\text{Stains the white radiance of eternity,}\]
Until Death tramples it to fragments. -Die, (Stanza 52)

Shelley holds that body is only a means to reach the destined goal, deliverance. It is dust and to the dust it returns; so nothing to be proud of or grieve for. Only the soul remains and it goes back to its eternal source.

Dust to the dust; but the pure spirit shall flow

Back to the burning fountain whence it came,

A portion of the Eternal, which must glow

Through time and change, unquenchably the same, (Stanza 38)

In the Geeta Arjuna says:

Yatha nadinam bahavo ’mbu-vegah, samudram evabhimukhkha dravanti

Tatha tavami nara-loka-vira , visanti vaktrany abhivijalanti (11. 28)

As the many rushing torrents of rivers race towards the ocean, so do all these great heroes of the world of men rush into Thy flaming mouths.

Again:

Yatha pradiptam jvalanam patanga

Visanti nasaya samrdha-vegah

Tathaiva nasaya visanti lokas

Tavapi vaktrani samrdha-vegah (11. 29)

As moths rush swiftly into a blazing fire to perish there, so do men rush into Thy mouths with great speed to their own destruction.

The soul gives up the body and mingles itself with its fountain-head. Shelley is further led to propound that the soul after liberation from the body becomes one with nature. In fact, here Shelley’s theism has come out spontaneously; otherwise he is widely believed to be an atheist. His theism, however, is closely akin to the Greek pantheism (i.e.-the belief that God is everything and everything is God)

He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,-

Spreading itself where’er that Power may move

Which has withdrawn his being to its own, (Stanza 42)

Again:

He is a portion of the loveliness

Which once he made more lovely. He doth bear

His part, while the One Spirit’s plastic stress

Sweeps through the dull dense world; compelling there (Stanza 43)

Shelley believes in God’s omnipresence. It is He who is reflected in every soul. Without His presence no life can be imagined in the universe. Arjuna is overwhelmed to see Him in every object of Nature. He fell prostrate in utter blissfulness.

Tvam adi-devah purusah puranas

Tvam asya visvasya param nidhanam

Vettasi vedyam ca param ca dhama

Tvaya tatam visvam ananta-rupa (11. 38)

Thou art the First of gods, the Primal Person, the Supreme Resting Place of the world. Thou art the knower and that which is to be known and the supreme goal. And by Thee is the universe pervaded. O Thou of infinite form!

Neither life nor death has power to blot the brightness of Nature; it may veil it for a while. All human beings are the living entities of that great heavenly beauty in which all beings work and move. Nothing at all is separate from Him. In fact, this world is a reflection of the spiritual world which is within all beings and exist concurrently with the physical world.

...as each are mirrors of

The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me

Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality. (Stanza 54)
The mortal attraction of flesh hampers man’s spiritual growth and inner consciousness. And we are eaten constantly by fears, desires, aspirations, attachments, avarice, hopes, lust, joys, sorrows et al like worms. Living in this world, shrouded by layers of illusion, man has forgotten his true nature -Self.

...We decay

Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day,
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay. (Stanza 39)

Actually, man awakes after enlightenment; he realizes his true nature and meaning of life, human existence. He experiences divine light and then finds the oneness of his soul with the Supreme.

He hath awakened from the dream of life.
‘tis we who, lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance strike with our spirit’s knife
Invulnerable nothings. (Stanza 39)

Man’s whole life is spent in petty worldly pursuits. It is death that frees us from all worldly bondages, weaknesses and vices which bind us to the illusionary world and its mortal things which look joyful outwardly. Man spends his searching for lasting joy and happiness in this transient world. But in fact, this world is a constant source of sorrow.

He has outsoared the shadow of our night;
Envy and calumny and hate and pain,
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
Can touch him not and torture not again; (Stanza 40)

The Geeta says:

Vihaya Kaman yah sarvan pumams carati nihsprhah
Nirmamo nirahankarah sa santim adhigacchati (2. 71)

He who abandons all desires acts free from longing, without any sense of mineness or egotism, he attains to peace.

Death is not a disgusting thing; nor horrible as perceived in general. It is an inevitable phase of life. It makes us unite with the Great Spirit of the universe, annihilates the work of time, only to clothe it with Eternity. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna not to lament for the bodily change.

Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya

Navani grhnati naro ’parani

Tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany

Anyani samyati navani dehi (2.22)

Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new.

It is crystal-clear that Shelley was much more than Arnold’s ineffectual angel. He did speculate on the most philosophical problems of life and made them the plank of some of his most ambitious work such as Adonais. And he has discussed them threadbare in the light of his awakening. To quote Edmund, ‘No man ever preached the triumph of the spiritual over the material more eloquently than he. It is the undertone of all his poetry and in Adonais it bursts forth into a mighty symphony which voices all the warrants of our immortality in everlasting music.’