

Shelley's Revolutionary Idealism in *Prometheus Unbound*

Abdulkadir HAMARAT*

Abstract

Nineteenth century was a very tumultuous period in which England was experiencing colossal changes in terms of its economy and politics. Industrial revolution was gaining speed and affecting workers negatively. Their demands for higher wages and better working conditions led to their replacement with machines. Also, the government employed very strict measures to curb possible political movements that might be influenced by the principles of the French Revolution and, hence pose a threat to the established order. Despite coming from the ruling class, Percy Bysshe Shelley was not detached from the sufferings of the working class. He actively sought remedies for social evils and injustices. He was "averse" to despotism and the patriarchal order. He believed in a future millenium in which people would live in peace and harmony. In this paper, Shelley's revolutionary idealism in *Prometheus Unbound* will be brought to the fore with textual analysis in the context of the nineteenth century.

Key Words: Revolutionary idealism, Patriarchal Order, despotism, social evils,

* Öğr. Gör. Dr. Munzur Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Bölümü. Türkiye.
Elmek: ahamarat@munzur.edu.tr,

Shelley'nin *Prometheus Unbound* İsimli Eserinde Devrimci İdealizm

Öz

Ondokuzuncu yüzyıl, politik ve ekonomik bakımdan İngiltere'nin çok büyük değişimler yaşadığı çalkantılı bir zaman dilimiydi. Sanayi Devrimi gittikçe hız kazanıyor ve işçilerin hayatını olumsuz bir şekilde etkiliyordu. Daha yüksek ücret ve daha iyi çalışma koşulları için talepleri, işten çıkarılmalarına ve onların yerine makinelerin kullanılmasına yol açtı. Ayrıca, hükümet Fransız Devriminden etkilenmesi ve dolayısıyla yerleşik düzene tehdit oluşturması muhtemel politik hareketleri engellemek için çok sıkı tedbirler uyguluyordu. Yönetici sınıftan geliyor olmasına rağmen, Percy Bysshe Shelley işçi sınıfının sıkıntılarına uzak durmamıştır. Aktif bir şekilde toplumsal olumsuzluklara ve haksızlıklara çözüm aramıştır. Despotluğa ve ataerkil düzene karşıydı. Bütün insanların huzur ve uyum içinde yaşayacağı gelecekteki bir milenyuma inanıyordu. Bu makalede, Shelley'nin *Prometheus Unbound*'daki devrimci idealizmi metin tahlili yöntemiyle ondokuzuncu yüzyıl bağlamında ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Devrimci idealizm, Ataerkil Düzen, despotizm, toplumsal kötülükler.

Introduction

It was a period during which England underwent a change from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation. As a result, industrialists emerged as the new class of power holders. Although some employers provided better conditions for workers, the majority of the workers were suffering from inadequate wages, long hours of work, poor housing and so on. The liberties of the ordinary Englishmen were well understood and had often been asserted. He could not lay claim to equality (Churchill, 1963; 219). Deprived of the right to vote and establish unions, workers held protest meetings and strikes and industrialists responded with introducing machines especially in the textile industry, which, in turn, led workers in the industrialized North to smash those labour saving machines. "In 1812 the government deployed more troops against the Luddite framebreakers (on whose behalf Byron spoke in the Lords) than had been sent to the Peninsula four years earlier to fight the French." (Dawson, 1993: 55) But the penalty to this crime was death. While the working classes were suffering, the ruling and the landed classes were becoming more prosperous. Thus, England was separated into two classes of capital and labour. The Government made no attempt to fill the gap between two classes. This was because of laissez-faire economy according to which the government must maintain a policy of strict non-interference in economics and leave people to pursue their private interests. "The idea that states were responsible for the welfare of citizens was horrifying to laissez-faire economists." (Wilson, 2003:75).

Meanwhile, the French Revolution broke out in France. High principles of the Revolution-freedom, equality and fraternity- evoked enthusiastic support from English liberals and radicals in the beginning. But later, the Revolution lost its intended course in the "Reign of Terror" during which many thousands including the leaders of the Revolution were persecuted. France's offer of armed resistance to all countries desiring to overthrow the government brought England into war against France. Finally, Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815.

In England, this period was one of the harsh, repressive measures. Because the government feared that a similar outbreak would take place in England. Public meetings were prohibited, advocates of political change were charged with high treason in time of war. Thus, the Napoleonic wars put an end to otherwise possible reforms and political life in England. It prolonged the tyranny of the ruling classes over the working classes till the Reform Bill of 1832.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 into this tumultuous period. His father, Timothy Shelley, was a member of the ruling class and represented New Shoreham in the House of Commons from 1802 to 1818. Shelley was sent to Syon House Academy in 1802. Being an aristocrat, Shelley was exposed to the brutality of the other boys who were coming from the middle classes. In 1804, he left Syon House Academy for Eton College where he had to struggle against the two traditions of the school: fagging and flogging. Because he did not comply with the school's rules, he was an outcast. (Urgan, 1989: 278)

After Eton, Shelly went to Oxford University from where he was expelled because of the pamphlet *On the Necessity of Atheism* he wrote. That year, he married Harriet Westbrook, a friend of Shelley's sister's, simply because he wanted to save her from her father's tyranny. The young couple moved to Ireland where Shelley witnessed the poverty and squalor of Irishmen. Since he was a social reformer, he commenced a propaganda campaign and wrote *An Address to the Irish People*, in which he advised them not to act violently in their struggle for freedom and, was quite hopeful in building a happy state of society with men loving and living in peace with their fellow citizens. But, his efforts fell short and he could not kindle a spark of freedom in Ireland. Mathew Arnold (1954: 730), referring to Shelley's failures in changing society into a better condition all his life, describes him as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

Having spent a few months in Ireland, the Shelleys turned to England. Shelley realized that their marriage was on the decline. Because Harriet could not keep pace with Shelley's high aspirations and intellectual concerns. He left her and began to live with Mary, the author of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and the daughter of William Godwin and Marry Wollstonecraft, out

of marriage. Unlike Harriet, Mary was a perfect match for him. They shared the same philosophical outlook on man's place in the universe as evident in the common topic they both chose for their artistic creation. Shelley's Prometheus steals fire, number, writing, medicine from gods and offers them to Man's use. Mary's Prometheus, Dr. Frankenstein aspires to create life from dead human limbs by means of electricity whose affinity to fire is self-evident. Both their works imply a repudiation of religious outlook favoured in the earlier centuries especially in the Middle Ages. Harriet committed suicide in 1816 and this was a blow on Shelley. He tried to take custody of his children but was refused on the grounds that he would raise them according to his rebellious ways and spoil them.

Shelley paid the price for his rebellious character by isolation from the society. But, this rebellion was not just for the sake of rebellion. He rebelled against the traditions that he believed to be the real source of their misery. He was not a plain daydreamer. There was philosophical basis for his aims. He read many writers of his age and was aware of philosophical and intellectual movements.

Among the philosophers of 18th century it was Godwin who influenced Shelley most. When he was a student at Eton College, Shelley read Godwin's *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* and was impressed by its presentation of social evils and utopian solutions. The resemblance between Godwin's philosophy and Shelley's idea of a future millenium in which people will live in peace and harmony is evident. "For instance, Godwin's notion of the infinitely perfectible nature of the human condition - to be distinguished from a facile belief in the possibility of perfection - runs through Shelley's poetry, reaching a climax at the end of the third act of *Prometheus Unbound*" (O'Neill, 1989: 18-19)

During his Irish campaign, Shelley wrote a pamphlet, the "Declaration of Rights." He borrowed its material from Godwin's Political Justice, Thomas Paine's Rights of Man and two French Declarations of Rights. Paine's basic argument was the necessity of universal suffrage and the abolition of monarchy in this work. Another philosopher who influenced Shelley was John Locke in whose theory rulers derive their authority from the governed, who surrendered part of their natural rights in exchange for the benefits of social order. When these benefits were not received, men were entitled to resume their rights and change their

rulers or form of government. Shelley was also influenced by Rousseau whose doctrine of the people as the only legal basis of government appealed to the radical thinkers of the time as well as Shelley.

Shelley borrows the subject of *Prometheus Unbound* from Greek playwright Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in which Prometheus is the benefactor of mankind who brought fire, number, writing, medicine and the arts as gifts from Heaven to humankind and started civilization. This angers Zeus who wants to suppress humankind and prevents them from attaining civilization. Zeus chains Prometheus to a rock with a vulture torturing him in the Caucasus. Prometheus knows a secret that if Zeus marries Thetis, he will beget a son more powerful than himself and this son, Demogorgon, will overthrow his father. Prometheus reveals this secret to Zeus and is freed from torture. But Shelley, a born rebel, in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1904: 231) says he "was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind". Shelley brings forth a new version of the play. In his version, Prometheus suffers torment without submitting to Zeus, whom Shelley calls Jupiter, until Demogorgon overthrows him. Shelley's aim, as Baker (2007: 210) states, is to emphasize "... his two most persistent themes; the necessity of social reform and the necessity of societal love, in such a way that they supplement and complement one other."

The play begins with Prometheus' address to Jupiter.

Monarch of Gods and Daemons, and all Spirits.

But One, who throng those bright and rolling worlds.¹

(Act I, Sc. I, lines 1-2)

Jupiter has everything under his control except Prometheus.

... regard this Earth

Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou

Requittest for knee-worship, prayer and praise

And toil, and hecatombs of broken hearts;

With fear and self-contempt and barren hope. (Act I, Sc. I, lines 4-8)

¹ All subsequent lines are taken from The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, V.1 Oxford Edition-An Electronic Classics Series Publication 1904, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, M.A.

Jupiter made humankind submit to him. He forced them to pray and worship him. Humanbeings are leading a beastlike and primitive life. Jupiter is a tyrant and does not want humankind to attain civilization for fear that they will question his authority if they do so. Prometheus would rather suffer three thousand years of agony and torture than be a part of Jupiter's tyranny. He thinks that suffering is nobler than reigning on a throne stained with the blood of subjects.

*Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours
And moments aye divided by keen pangs
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,
Scorn and despair; - these are mine empire.
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest
From thine unenvied throne, O! Mighty God!
Almighty, had I deigned to share the shame
Of thine ill tyranny ,... (Act I, Sc. I, lines 12-17)*

If we evaluate these lines in the light of historical and political circumstances of England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a direct paralelism can be found. To prevent the spread of the revolutionary fever, the ruling classes took strict measures in England. A crowd of people demonstrating for political reform were attacked by the cavalry on the orders of the government in St.Peter's Fields, Manchester in 1819. Some people died and many were injured severely. This event, having cynical implications, was named as Peterloo. The government passed the six Acts of December 1819 which deprived the citizens of their already limited rights. For example, they could not hold meetings with more than fifty people and many other such repressive measures were taken

After three thousand years of torture, Prometheus forgets his curse he uttered when he rebelled against Jupiter. Prometheus asks his mother (Earth), mountains, the springs, the air and the whirlwinds what his curse was. They abstain from repeating the curse because they are afraid to be subjected to Jupiter's anger. Then Prometheus asks the Phantasm of Jupiter.

Phantasm repeats the curse:

Fiend, I defy thee! With a calm, fixed mind,

All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;

Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Humankind.

One only being shalt thou not subdue. (Act I, Sc. I, lines 262-65)

After hearing the curse, Prometheus says:

It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;

Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.

I wish no living thing to suffer pain. (Act I, Sc. I, lines 303-5)

He is, now, repentant of his curse. Long periods of suffering made Prometheus wise and he does not hate Jupiter now. Shelley believes that humankind can establish a peaceful society only if they confront violence with love and forgiveness. Thus, he once again stresses the principle of non-violence in these lines by making Prometheus not wish suffering and pain even for his enemy.

If we consider these lines in historical context, the reason why the principles of the French Revolution failed and there came a period of terror and bloodshed after the Revolution was that the former trampled slaves, now victors, sought to take revenge on the aristocracy.

Mercury comes as a messenger from Jupiter and tries to reconcile him with Jupiter. He does not want Prometheus to suffer more.

... bend thy soul in prayer,

And like a suppliant in some gorgeous fane,

Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart:

For benefits and meek submission tame

The fiercest and the mightiest, (Act I, Sc.I, lines 376-9)

But Prometheus does not yield.

Submission, thou dost know I can not try;

For what submission but that fatal word,

The death-seal of mankind's captivity, (Act I, Sc.I, lines 395-7)

Then, he is exposed to the torture of Furies, executing ministers of Jupiter.

*Ye conregated powers of heaven, who share
The glory and strength of him ye serve,
Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent.
All else had been subdued to me; alone
The soul of man, like unextinguished fire,
Yet burns towards heaven with fierce reproach, and doubt,
And lamentation, and reluctant prayer,
Hurling up insurrection, which might make
Our antique empire insecure...* (Act III, Sc. I, lines 1-9)

Jupiter summons gods at a feast and tells them that the only threat to his sovereignty is the soul of man.

*Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,
That fatal child, the terror of the earth,
Who waits but till the destined hour arrive,
Bearing from Demogorgon's vacant throne
The dreadful might of everliving limbs
Which clothed that awful spirit unbeheld,
To redescend, and trample out the spark.* (Act III, S.I, lines 18-24)

He thinks his fatal child, Demogorgon, will extinguish the fire of man's soul. Here the traces of the despotic rulers' anticipation to pass the sovereignty to their children's hands as their successors can be seen. They think it is their right by birth to rule their poor, wretched and contemptible subjects. But, Demogorgon comes and tells Jupiter that he is to follow him down the abyss. Demogorgon, representing the necessity or fate, implies that everything has an end even if it is seemingly everlasting. Jupiter struggles, then begs mercy in vain and, finally finding out that there is no escape, falls with Demogorgon into the everlasting darkness. Jupiter, in fact, has begotten nothing. What Shelley emphasizes is that tyranny prepares its own fall and evil begets nothing favourable.

*Most glorious among spirits! thus doth strength
To wisdom, courage and long-suffering love,
And thee, who art the form they animate,
Minister like a slave.* (Act III, Sc.III, lines 1-4)

Hercules, representing strength, releases Prometheus and Prometheus remarries Asia, his wife in exile, implying that strength should serve to bring about Man's union with Nature or Love. Thus wisdom, tolerance and forgiveness which Prometheus stands for are combined with love and nature which Asia represents.

Prometheus sends a spirit of the hour to spread the news of triumph all over the world. The spirit turns with what he saw "among the haunts and dwellings of mankind."

... but soon I looked

And behold, thrones were kingless, and men walked

One with other even as spirits do,

None fawned, none trampled... (Act III, Sc.4, lines 130-3)

None frowned, none trembled, none with eager fear,

Gazed on another's eye of cold command, (Act III, Sc.4, lines 137-8)

The loathsome mask has fallen, the Man remains,

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man:

Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,

Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king

Over himself; ... (Act III, Sc.4, lines 193-7)

The effects of triumph on earth are quite positive. People are no longer serving a tyrant and trembling because of fear. Everyone is equal and there are no class distinctions. The winds of redemption fill the earth after a long period of cold winter. At the end, Shelley's millenium is achieved through universal love and forgiveness. Because Shelley's hero, Prometheus, does not seek revenge once he has been released.

Conclusion

Percy Bysshe Shelley lived in an age when working classes of Britain suffered immensely at the hands of the ruling class. They were not only exploited economically but they were also deprived of their basic human and political rights. Although Shelley came from a wealthy family, he chose to become the champion of the oppressed. He also went against the moral, religious and cul-

tural institutions of his society, and like Prometheus, he, too, was punished for his rebellious ways.

Contrary to the notion of the romantic poet withdrawing from society and singing songs for his own sorrows in his ivory tower, Shelley was absorbed in finding solutions to social evils and bettering the conditions of the society. Shelley, in his *A Defence Of Poetry*, points out that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” It can be said that his reformist aspect outweighs his poetic aspect. Urgan (1989: 285) points out that “Shelley’s passion for reforming the world was not the gild of his poetry but it was his poetry itself.” Holmes in his Introduction to *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974: ix) writes in the same vein, “Throughout his life, Shelley’s major creative effort was concentrated on producing a series of long poems and poetic dramas aimed at the main political and spiritual problems of his age and society.”

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