

Love and Revolution in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*

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Introduction

The Revolt of Islam is Shelley's longest poem consisting of as many as 4188 lines divided into twelve Cantos. Though it is indisputable that the poem has been sustaining a low estimation in the corpus of his work,⁽¹⁾ we should not underrate it, nevertheless.

The Revolt of Islam deals with revolution as well as love. The subject of revolution unfolds, modeling on the real development of the French Revolution: oppression of the people by the tyrant; overthrow of evil by the revolutionaries; horrible counter-attack by the tyrant and priests resulting in the defeat of the revolutionaries. At the same time, it is a love poem of two young radical idealists, Laon and Cythna: growing up together among the Arcadian natural beauties; being forcibly separated by the tyrant; being happily reunited after a long separation; their death and their eternal reunion in heaven.

Structurally, *The Revolt of Islam* presents a Shelleyan proposition which is a problem of the Romantic poetry in general. Indeed, the poem, seen in a broader context, is a typically Romantic attempt dealing with the distinction between earth and vision. This is shown in the poetic structure as a whole in that the narrative begins with the arrival of the two protagonists at The Temple of the Spirit after being burned at the stake, which takes place at the concluding Canto XII. Shelley, in several episodes, discusses earth and vision as a time-timeless dichotomy, by using such words as "sailing," the meaning of which symbolizes a voyage from

time to timeless world. It is needless to say that both revolution and love are related with this poetical structure of a time-timeless dichotomy; though the revolution eventually fails, its memory infuses a hope into the future generation and kindles their revolutionary passion for ever; though Laon and Cythna are finally burned to death, they are admitted to resurrect into a timeless world. This will be further examined later in the paper.

Seen from the political point of view, *The Revolt of Islam* is filled with radical and reformatory idea because Shelley claims equality and justice, redressing and abolishing the existing establishments and orders. This radical idea is time and again repeated and demonstrated through the words and actions of the two protagonists. Among other things, Cythna plays a crucial role in the poem. Indeed, a rebel would never have broken out without her ardent determination to improve the status of women in general, and thereby reforming the world. She envisions a new society at the basis of which is an equal and free relationship between man and woman and even declares, in a startling boldness, that man can never be liberated without woman's emancipation: "Can man be free if woman be a slave? / Chain one who lives, and breathes this boundless air, / To the corruption of a closed grave!"⁽²⁾ This declaration of feminism is the very underpinning of the poem and it is Shelley's unwavering lifelong belief, as well. The same idea pervades throughout *Queen Mab*, his juvenile poem less mature and more dogmatic than *The Revolt of Islam*.⁽³⁾ This feminist idea is, of course, not Shelley's original invention but it is acquired by him through powerful influences of two prominent thinkers of the time, namely, Shelley's father-in-law William Godwin and his first wife Mary Wollstonecraft.⁽⁴⁾

The subsequent discussion, therefore, will be focused on the subjects of close-knit love and revolution, emphatically reflected in the idea of feminism in the context of a time-timeless dichotomy seen in *The Revolt of Islam*. The importance of Cythna's role in

the narrative will be discussed further.

(I)

The Revolt of Islam was originally entitled *Laon and Cythna* with the titular protagonists were brother and sister. But their relationship was changed into that of early childhood friends and the poem was newly "published with a fresh title-page and twenty-seven cancel-leaves on January 10, 1818."⁽⁵⁾ This revision was made because of the publisher's concern both about the anti-social incestuous love and about the ultraradical references against the existing political and religious orders. It need hardly be said that a change from a brother-sister relationship into a more general one dilutes radicalism of love; incestuous love would have been more evident and defying challenge to the established orders.⁽⁶⁾ Yet *The Revolt of Islam* still remains to be one of the most radical poems written during the Romantic period.

In a preface, Shelley explains his intention for the poem:

I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality; and in the view of within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence nor misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish among mankind.⁽⁷⁾

Although such fervid phrases as "those doctrines of liberty and justice" and "faith and hope in something good" sound abstract and grandiose, they clearly adumbrate the succeeding narrative structure waiting to be clothed in specific actions and events.

After the preface, a dedicatory poem to his second wife Mary who is a daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom Shelley eloped deserting his first wife Harriet, follows,

and it is given a considerable significance in relation to the narrative framework. Starting with an address to Mary as “Child of love and light” (I, 1.9), Shelley explains his past loneliness and despair in contrast with his present love and peace brought forth by her. As Michael Henry Scrivener adroitly points out,⁽⁸⁾ Shelley-Mary relationship is presented here as a prototype of Laon-Cythna relationship, and, furthermore, Godwin-Mary Wollstonecraft relationship is suggested, too.

As is early stated in Introduction, *The Revolt of Isalm* consists of twelve Cantos, with Canto I differing from the other Cantos, in that it is both introductory and recapitulatory.

Its protagonists are not Laon and Cythna (they appear only briefly in the concluding two stanzas), but a poet-like narrator and a beautiful young woman who takes him to the Temple of the Spirit in a boat.

It begins with descriptions of a poet-like narrator who, like many of the British, experienced disillusionment over the proceeding of the French Revolution :

When the last hope of trampled France had failed
 Like a brief dream of unremaining glory,
 From visions of despair I rose, and scaled
 The peak of an aëreal promontory,
 Whose caverned base with the vexed surge was hoary ;
 And saw the golden dawn break forth, and waken
 Each cloud, and every wave :

(Canto I, I, 11. 1-7)

The dawning described here parallels the awakening of his consciousness for reality. The narrator, indeed, after experiencing the agonizing despair resulted from the horrible evolution of the French Revolution, comes to know the true meaning of it in the context of a human history. Similarly in the preface, Shelley himself positively expresses this dawning of mind for a better society, born after agony and despair :

The revolution occasioned by the atrocities of the demagogues, and the re-establishment of successive tyrannies in France, was terrible, and felt in the remotest corner of the civilised world...But mankind appear to me be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change. In that belief I have composed the following Poem.⁽⁹⁾

Immediately after the opening stanza, the narrator, from "the peak of aëreal promontory," witnesses a panoramic presentation of the two controlling powers over human beings—good and evil—shown in an allegorical battle between a Serpent (good) and an Eagle (evil). The atmospheric calmness suddenly changes into elemental gusty thunder and lightning, and there appear an Eagle and a Serpent locked in a fierce fighting in front of him:

A course precipitous, of dizzy speed,
 Suspending thought and breath; a monstrous sight!
 For in the air do I behold indeed
 An Eagle and a Serpent wreathed in fight:—
 And now relaxing its impetuous flight,
 Before the aëreal rock on which I stood,
 The Eagle, hovering, wheeled to left and right,
 And hung with lingering wings over the flood,
 And startled with its yells the wide air's solitude.

(Canto I, VIII)

A shaft of light upon its wings descended,
 And every golden feather gleamed therein—
 Feather and scale, inextricably blended.
 The Serpent's mailed and many-coloured skin
 Shone through the plumes its coils were twined within
 By many a swoln and knotted fold, and high
 And far, the neck, receding lithe and thin,
 Sustained a crested head, which warily
 Shifted and glanced before the Eagle's steadfast eye.

(Canto I, IX)

This representation of good and evil in the form of allegory recapitulates the underlying concept in history.

The history of human beings, from the outset, has been a continuous fighting between these two forces, with unfortunate dominance of evil so far. A young woman later tells him the similar idea in a story with strangely distorted Biblical connotations, representing evil as a "blood-red Comet" (Canto I, XXVI, 1. 356) and good as "the Morning Star" (Canto I, XXVI, 1. 356).

In both allegorical battles, evil eventually wins. Hence "Legion, Death, Decay / Earthquake and Blight, and Want and Madness pale" (Canto I, XXIX, 11. 379-380) come to rule the world. However, the woman passionately inspires the narrator that these humiliating circumstances should be terminated. Actually, this battle between good and evil applies to that between the ruthless tyrant and the revolutionary army led by Laon and Cythna.

Meanwhile, the narrator boards, together with the wounded Serpent, "A boat of rare device, which had no sail / But its own curvèd prow of moonstone / Wrought like a web of texture fine, and frail" (Canto I, XXIII, 11. 325-327). Its destination is "a Fane" (Canto I, XLVIII, 1. 556) surrounded by "green isles" (Canto I, XLVIII, 1. 558). Without doubt, this voyage symbolizes a journey from this world out into the visionary sphere. It is, in other words, a journey from time to timelessness.

The "Fane" is too marvelously splendid for man to describe in words:

'Twas like Heaven, ere yet day's purple stream
 Ebbs o'er the western forest, while the leam
 Of the unrisen moon among the clouds
 Is gathering—when with many a golden beam
 The thronging constellations rush in crowds,
 Paving with fire the sky and the marmoreal floods.

(Canto I, XLIX, 11. 562-567)

In this place, the narrator is to meet Laon and Cythna who are returning from the mortal world, and it is he who will listen to their story which is told in the following eleven Cantos.

The narrator's journey from time to timelessness is equivalent to that of Laon and Cythna, though the routes of their voyages differ. Therefore, their respective sailings to this heavenly Temple are described in a similar way; both of the sailings are made in a boat of rare device, skidding swiftly over the enchanted sea. The narrator, Laon and Cythna share the same insight into the meaning of history due to their sufferings; the evil of the society is so powerful that it cannot be destroyed in one blow. But the fact that they are finally allowed to come to the heavenly Temple clearly signifies an importance of their task. Even though both of them are burned to death at the stake, they are to be enshrined in the Temple of the Spirit, thereby keeping on encouraging a revolutionary passion in mankind. Love between Laon and Cythna, inseparably united by their radical idealism, is worth being enshrined in the timeless world. And the narrator (Shelley) earnestly listens to their story to inseminate it to all over the world.

(II)

From Canto II onward, the narrative of Laon and Cythna, told in the form of Laon's recollection, unfolds. Cythna's story is interpolated in this recollection, the narrator of which is Cythna herself. It extends to three Cantos (VII, VIII and IX), and Canto IX chronologically links to the foregoing Canto VI. The time sequence is thus dislocated, and, in addition, the story which has many sub-plots evolves around various places studded with such characteristic Shelleyan imageries as water (sea, streams and lake) and light (meteor and stars), hence, making the poem more convoluted.

As is described in the introductory Canto I, the present world is rife with evil and injustice. This is characteristically shown

by vicious tyrant's despotism, against which Laon resolutely determines to oppose :

It must be so—I will arise and waken
 The multitude, and like a sulphurous hill,
 Which on a sudden from its snows has shaken
 The swoon of ages, it shall burst and fill
 The world with cleansing fire: it must, it will—
 It may not be restrained!—and who shall stand
 Amid the rocking earthquake steadfast still,
 But Laon? on high Freedom's desert land
 A tower whose marble walls the leaguèd storms withstand!
 (Canto II, XIV)

Cythna, too, is determined to fight against evil and injustice. From her childhood (she was twelve years old when she first appears in Canto II), she seems to understand the miserable situation of the world. But in contrast to Laon's somewhat abstract declaration against oppression, Cythna's defiance, from the outset, leans toward a definitely feminist orientation; a truly ideal society must be built on a perfectly equal relationship between man and woman, overthrowing the deep disparity existing now.

Thus, from the very beginning, Shelley strongly suggests a love story be unfolded against the backdrop of radical idea of feminism. Accordingly, Cythna's role both as Laon's beloved and a liberator of women assumes a great significance: she is not subservient and weak but active and independent; she behaves and thinks on her own. Isn't it Cythna that comes to rescue Laon who is about to be captured by the enemies in Canto VI, riding on a black Tartarian horse? Isn't it Cythna herself, too, who persuades the tyrant's sailors to mutiny against him and leads them to join the revolutionaries in Canto VIII?

This feminist idea which is embodied in Cythna is one of the byproducts of the French Revolution. Though the Revolution became distastful to many of the British, it cannot be denied that

it brought forth a Copernican change of consciousness in the relationship between man and woman.⁽¹⁰⁾ It was brought to Britain across the Channel; William Godwin, first of all, professed this egalitarian idea. His well-read *Political Justice*, in which he emphasizes reason and perfectibility, severely attacks the institution of marriage and advocates free love.⁽¹¹⁾

More than Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft exerted a stronger influence on Shelley in regard to feminism. Paul Foot summarizes this influence as follows:

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, written in 1792, makes a series of assaults on the various fortresses of society: on the standing army; ... on the clergy; on property; ... Her appeal to woman "To endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, to stop behaving to man as his toy and rattle," had its root in her condemnation of society founded on despotism and submissiveness...It followed that women's independence was crucial to any genuine relationship between man and woman. "It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of man; nay it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers."⁽¹²⁾

Indeed, we are not so far wide of the mark to see Wollstonecraft's figure in Cythna. Moreover, Cythna overlaps Shelley's second wife Mary, a daughter of Wollstonecraft.

Cythna, in Canto III, is suddenly snatched away from Laon by the bloody tyrant's followers and is forced to be one of his concubines. After being deflowered by him, she becomes deranged and is imprisoned in the dungeon under the sea. Several years pass before the prison is destroyed by an earthquake freeing her from the sea. She is saved by a vessel which turns out to be a slave ship of the tyrant. Cythna, however, ardently inculcates an idea of liberty into the sailors and eventually succeeds to make them mutiny against their master.

In her passionate speech to the sailors, the radical idea of feminism clearly rings. She proclaims that the present world is filled with sexual inequality. There dominate rule-and-obey, "Hate" and "fear." "Woman as the bond-slave dwells / Of man, a slave; and life is poisoned in its wells" (Canto VIII, XIII, 11. 3314–3315).

““ Woman? ... she is his slave, she has become
 A thing I weep to speak—the child of scorn,
 The outcast of a desolated home;
 Falsehood, and fear, and toil, like waves have worn
 Channels upon her cheek, which smiles adorn,
 As calm decks the false Ocean: ... well ye know
 What Woman is, for none of Woman born,
 Can choose but drain the bitter dregs of woe,
 Which ever from the oppressed to the oppressors flow.
 (Canto VIII, XV)

After entering the Golden City with the sailors, she again appeals to the women:

‘ But chiefly women, whom my voice did waken
 From their cold, careless, willing slavery,
 Sought me: one truth their dreary prison has shaken,—
 They looked around, and lo! they became free:
 Their many tyrants sitting desolately
 In slave-deserted halls, could none restrain;
 For wrath’s red dire had withered in the eye,
 Whose lightning once was death,—nor fear, nor gain
 Could tempt one captive now to lock another’s chain.
 (Canto IX, X)

Cythna’s role as a women’s liberator is again emphasized here.

Instigated by her passionate and ardent address, a revolt soon ensues. Laon, too, takes part in this revolt, though he does not know that it is led by her. In Canto V, the battle between the revolutionaries and the tyrant is described in detail, and the evil tyrant is defeated. The victory-immersed people do not know,

however, that his defeat is only temporary.

A festival to celebrate the victory follows. It is "A rite to attest the equality of all / Who live" (Canto V, XXXVII, ll. 2048–2049). "The Altar of the Federation" (Canto V, XI, l. 2072) is erected to rejoice at the fall of the tyrant. A throne is at the top of the altar and "a female Shape" (Canto V, XLIII, l. 2106) whose face is covered with a veil sits there. This woman is Cythna (alias Laone) who performs a role of "the Priestess of this holy rite" (Canto V, XLVIII, l. 3246). Cythna, as a priestess, expresses her homage to "Equality" in a hymn. In this hymn, the idea of the world of millennium that is equivalent to the visionary world is evidently expressed.

‘Calm art thou as yon sunset! swift and strong
As new-fledged Eagles, beautiful and young,
That float among the blinding beams of morning;
And underneath thy feet writhe Faith, and Folly,
Custom, and Hell, and mortal Melancholy—

(Canto V, Song 1, ll. 2182–2186)

She preaches that the world where "Equality" dominates is one where there is no evil, hence everything is in perfection. The advent of the new and perfect world at the basis of which is equality is revealed with the imagery of light: "The coming, thou in light descending / O'er the wide land which is thine own / Like the Spring whose breath is blending / All blasts of fragrance into one, / Comest upon the paths of me..." (Canto V, Song 3, ll. 2219–2223). The present world will be transformed into a brightest sphere if equality prevails, Cythna declares. A notion of a time-timeless dichotomy is clearly manifested here.

Cythna's hymn to liberty and equality enthralls the crowd:

Her voice was as a mountain-stream which sweeps
The withered leaves of Autumn to the lake,
And in some deep and narrow bay then sleeps

In the shadow of the shores ; as dead leaves wake
 Under the wave, in flowers and herbs which make
 Those green depths beautiful when skies are blue,
 The multitude so moveless did partake
 Such living change, and kindling murmurs flew
 As o'er that speechless calm delight and wonder grew.
(Canto V, LIII)

Here, her voice is compared to "a mountain-stream," whereas "the multitude" is compared to "Autumn leaves." As the dead leaves are driven by the stream to the lake, the crowd is driven by Cythna's voice. The dynamism seen in this comparison is adroit as well as subtle and the change of the crowd's attitude from that of calmness to agitation is deftly expressed with such phrases as "kindling murmurs." This stanza is one of the most impressive poetic evocations seen in this poem and it reminds us of the opening part of "Ode to the West Wind."

(III)

In Canto VI, it is described that the once-defeated tyrant musters up his power and the revolutionaries led by Laon are beginning to suffer from the savage counterattack :

...—and ever
 Our myriads, whom the swift bolt overthrew,
 Or the red sword, failed like a mountain-river
 Which rushes forth in foam to sink in sands for ever.
(Canto VI, XIV, 11. 2457–2460)

The revolutionaries are all killed except Laon and he himself is almost captured by the enemy :

...—of those brave bands
 I soon survived alone—and now I lay
 Vanquished and faint, the grasp of bloody hands

I felt, and saw on high the glare of falling brands :

(Canto VI, XVIII, ll. 2493–2496)

Just then, “A black Tartarian horse of giant frame / Comes trampling over the dead” (Canto VI, XIX, ll. 2449–2500) on whose back a woman in white “waving a sword” (Canto VI, IXX, l. 2503) is riding. The woman tells Laon to mount the horse and they run away. Eventually they come to “A rocky hill which overhung the Ocean:” (Canto VI, XXIII, l. 2533). The woman, there, reveals her identity as Cythna and she leads Laon to “a mountain,” “whose crest / Crowned with a marble ruin, in the ray / Of the obscure stars gleamed” (Canto VI, XXII, ll. 2529–2531).

An intimation of something remote and mysterious which may be called as otherworldliness is implied here. The two lovers are too absorbed in their respective loves to be troubled with the urgent problem. They forget severe realities for a while :

We know not where we go, or what sweet dream
 May pilot us through caverns strange and fair
 Of far and pathless passion, while the stream
 Of life, our bark doth on its whirlpools bear,
 Spreading swift wings as sails to the dim air ;
 Nor should we seek to know, so the devotion
 Of love and gentle thoughts be heard still there
 Louder and louder from the utmost Ocean
 Of universal life, attuning its commotion.

(Canto VI, XXIX)

...Oblivion wrapped

Our spirits, and the fearful overthrow
 Of public hope was from our being snapped,
 Though linked years had bound it there ; for now
 A power, a thirst, a knowledge, which below
 All thoughts, like light beyond the atmosphere,
 Clothing its clouds with grace, doth ever flow,
 Came on us, as we sate in silence there,

Beneath the golden stars of the clear azure air:—

(Canto VI, XXX, 11. 2595–2604)

In stanza XXIX, Laon compares their drifting spirits entangled with love to “Bark” that is borne away on the “whirlpools” of “the stream / Of life:”, and spirits’s “wings” are compared to “sails” heading for “the dim air.” This use of imageries is quite similar to that described in the starting Canto I and the final Canto XII, where a voyage to the Temple of the Spirt (a journey from time to timelessness) is described as a voyage in a boat over the enchanted streams. Viewed in this context, Laon’s comparison of their passion’s drift to a voyage “to the dim air” is another evident example of the poem’s structure of a time-timeless dichotomy. Thus, a crucial episode to the narrative of Laon and Cythna is, at the same time, a revelation of poem’s structure, and this lovemaking scene, furthermore, intimates their eventual death.

This suggestion of a voyage to the timeless sphere is further expressed in the following stanzas in which Shelley shows their physical consummation :

The Meteor to its far morass returned:
 The beating of our veins one interval
 Made still; and then I felt the blood that burned
 Within her frame, mingle with mine, and fall
 Around my heart like fire; and over all
 A mist was spread, the sickness of a deep
 And speechless swoon of joy, as might befall
 Two disunited spirits when they leap
 In union from this earth’s obscure and fading sleep.

(Canto VI, XXXIV)

In the quoted stanza XXXIV, sexual joy or pleasure is compared to an ecstasy that might be felt by the spirits when departing the earth. Platonic connotation is quite obvious here.

Was it one moment that confounded thus
 All thought, all sense, all feeling, into
 Unutterable power, which shielded us
 Even from our own cold looks, when we had gone
 Into a wide and wild oblivion
 Of tumult and of tenderness? or now
 Had ages, such as make the moon and sun,
 The seasons, and mankind their changes know,
 Left fear and time unfelt by us alone below?

(Canto VI, XXXV)

I know not. What are kisses whose fire clasps
 The failing heart in languishment, or limb
 Twined within limb? or the quick dying gasps
 Of the life meeting, when the faint eyes swim
 Through tears of a wide mist boundless and dim,
 In one ocean? What is the strong control
 Which leads the heart that dizzy steep to climb,
 Where far over the world those vapours roll,
 Which blend two restless frames in one reposing soul?

(Canto VI, XXXVI)

In the above quoted stanzas Shelley boldly expresses sexual pleasure that should be equally shared by man and woman. He asserts that physical pleasures should not be negated but must be enjoyed by both sexes. This idea of sexual liberation is one of the important aspects included in feminism. And influence of Mary Wollstonecraft is again obviously seen here.

The pleasure which arises from any relationship for a man, in other words, depends on how much pleasure, including sexual pleasure, the woman gets from it. The structure of that sentence and the passage which surrounds it express what was then almost blasphemous: that women could enjoy sexual pleasure as much as men.⁽¹³⁾

Freedom, independence of mind and body, equality—all these

were essential for women, and without them all the relationships between adults and children, all family life and all sexual passion were distorted and corrupted.⁽¹⁴⁾

Besides this lovemaking scene, there is one more crucial episode in the poem which shows a time-timeless dichotomy. It is Cythna's proclamation for the belief in the future, in Canto IX, told in a grand-scale background of mythology. After telling her ordeal to Laon, she changes the subject into the fate of revolution and love. Cythna presages their death and failure of revolution, but, at the same time, she is assured of their resurrection. Clearly, she transforms from a mortal woman into an immortal prophet presiding over mankind. In this respect, Cythna may be called as "prophet, reformer, and martyr" who "is a creation unique in the whole range of literature."⁽¹⁵⁾

Death and resurrection is described with such mythologically elemental imageries as autumn and spring:

' The blasts of Autumn drive the wingèd seeds
 Over the earth, —next come the snow, and rain,
 And frosts, and storms, which dreary Winter leads
 Out of his Scythian cave, a savage train ;
 Behold ! Spring sweeps over the world again,
 Shedding soft dews from her ethereal wings ;
 Flowers on the mountains, fruits over the plain,
 And music on the waves and woods she flings,
 And love on all that lives, and calm on lifeless things.

(Canto IX, XXI)

' O Spring, of hope, and love, and youth, and gladness
 Wind-wingèd emblem ! brightest, best and fairest !
 Whence comest thou, when, with dark Winter's sadness
 The tears that fade in sunny smiles thou sharest ?
 Sister of joy, thou art the child who wearest
 The mother's dying smile, tender and sweet ;
 Thy mother Autumn, for whose grave thou bearest
 Fresh flowers, and beams like flowers, with gentle feet,

Disturbing not the leaves which are her winding-sheet.
(Canto IX, XXII)

Cythna's apostrophe from stanza XX onward through stanza XXXV is tinged with her strong determination of the revival of the revolutionary hope, as a return of spring after winter, among the later generations, and it strongly reflects the theme of *The Revolt of Islam*.

' This is the winter of the world ; —and here
We die, even as the winds of Autumn fade,
Expiring in the frore and foggy air.—
Behold ! Spring comes, though we must pass, who made
The promise of its birth, —even as the shade
Which from our death, as from a mountain, flings
The future, a broad sunrise ; thus arrayed
As with the plumes of overshadowing wings,
From its dark gulf of chains, Earth like an eagle springs.
(Canto IX, XXV)

' The good and mighty of departed ages
Are in their graves, the innocent and free,
Heroes, and Poets, and prevailing sages,
Who leave the vesture of their majesty
To adorn and clothe this naked world ; —and we
Are like to them—such perish, but they leave
All hope, or love, or truth, or liberty,
Whose forms their mighty spirits could conceive,
To be a rule and law to ages that survive.
(Canto IV, XXVIII)

These quotations clearly stress that love and revolution are immortal, though they are temporarily doomed to fail. And the comparisons of the death of Laon and Cythna to autumn, and the hope for the future generation to spring signify this idea of inevitable rebirth. Autumn is doomed to be felled by winter, but it stores seeds underground for spring to make them grow. In this

regard, their death and a failure of revolution are not ultimate failures. They will arise again from the underground and gain a victory over the tyrant in the end.

It is needless to reiterate that this contrast of death and rebirth expressed against a mythological backdrop is also one of the instances of a time-timeless dichotomy. Death (succession of winter after autumn) represents inevitability of the mortal beings and rebirth (return of spring after winter) represents deliverance from time, namely the advent of timelessness. However, unlike the earlier examples, a time-timeless dichotomy represented here has a strangely peculiar characteristic. Although Cythna's words manifestly show a distinction between time (earthly world) and timelessness (vision), her hope for the future generation ceases to present this strict dichotomy divisively. Instead, the idea that a vision (timelessness) is sure to illumine the earthly world (time) is strongly emphasized. In other words, time is submerged in timelessness and a time-timeless dichotomy doesn't constitute a striking contrast, but it at last converges into one uniform sphere. The earth is transformed into the visionary world full of brightness and the idea of Shelleyan millennium is evidently seen.

The overlap of time and timeless world expressed here is certainly related to the poetic structure as a whole and it is, further, related to the characteristics of Shelley's imagination.

Shelley distorts the time-sequence of the narrative of Laon and Cythna, making it start with their arrival at the Temple of the Spirit. With this manipulation, he tries to contrast earth (time) and vision (timelessness). This dichotomy, however, is not static but it incorporates a cyclical movement. The narrative sequence, in this way, ever circles, both in space and in time. This movement of the narrative, of course, emphasizes what the poet wants to convey: the revolution must never be abandoned only because it once fails; so long as man continues to kindle his radical passion for a better society, the significance of the revolt mounted by Laon and Cythna never perishes; it ever recurs whenever we

read this poem.

Yet, apart from this meaning, this movement represents a broader connotation related to the Romantic period. Generally speaking, a circular movement is one of the artistic characteristics of the Romantic poets. For the Romantic poets, it was the common deplorable destiny or curse to have to come back from the visionary world down to the earth. Through imagination, they can ascend to the visionary world, but to their chagrin, they cannot stay there for ever. As long as they are mortal beings, they have to return to the earth in the end. A typical example of this circular pattern is Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and most of Keats' poems deal with this problem.

The Revolt of Islam has this circular movement, and in this respect, it is typically Romantic. But it is evident that in the poem this movement assumes a reverse pattern. In other Romantic poems, circular movement usually starts from earth toward vision. On the contrary, the narrative of Laon and Cythna starts from vision in the form of a recollection. Happiness and immortality are secured beforehand. Therefore, a pang of grief felt when returning to earth is non-existent. It is needless to say that Shelley, as one of the Romantic poets, sincerely struggled with the dichotomy of earth and vision like other poets. But we know that his poetic world in almost all his poems is peculiarly one-dimensional. This must be so because Shelley is endowed with a natural tendency to see things through visions and this tendency seems to lead him to Platonism. Anyway, such peculiarity of Shelley's imagination must contribute to bring forth his one-dimensional poetic world. Jack Stillinger's classification of Shelley's imagination as "apocalyptic or visionary imagination"⁽¹⁶⁾ may be of some help in considering this problem, though we are yet to solve it.

(IV)

From Canto X, the counterrevolutionary's predominance is de-

scribed. The tyrant summons "The banded slaves" (Canto X, I, 1. 3821) from all over the world and attacks the rebels. A bloody battle continues, and as a result, a horrible suffering spreads among the living things, beginning with thirst and hunger. Beasts, fish, birds and insects suffer one after another. Hunger, thirst and madness prevail. To soothe the God's vengeance, "an Iberian Priest" (Canto X, XXXII, 1. 4072), who is zealous, admonishes to sacrifice Laon and Cythna:

'Our God may lull Pestilence to sleep: —
 Pile high the pyre of expiation now,
 A forest's spoil of boughs, and on the heap
 Pour venomous gums, which sullenly and slow,
 When touched by flame, shall burn, and melt, and flow,
 A stream of clinging fire, — and fix on high
 A net of iron, and spread forth below
 A couch of snakes, and scorpions, and the fry
 Of centipedes and worms, earth's hellish progeny!
(Canto X, XXXVIII)

'Let Laon and Laone on that pyre,
 Linked tight with burning brass, perish! — then pray
 That, with this sacrifice, the withering ire
 Of Heaven may be appeased.
(Canto X, XXXIX, 11. 4135–4138)

The narrative proceeds for its finale. In Canto XI, Laon appears before the tyrant, concealing his face "with a hermit's vest" (Canto XI, XIV, 1. 4343) and begins addressing him and the senate. He demands that Cythna be freed to America in return for his arrest, with which proposal the tyrant agrees. After this address, he is arrested and the crowds rejoice. He is taken to the pyre in "the Tyrant's gem-wrought chariot" (Canto XII, II, 1. 4463) in which "A shape of light" that is "A child most beautiful" sits ((Canto XII, II, 1. 4465). This child seems to be a grown-up baby Cythna is said to give birth to, while confined in

a dungeon, and was later stolen away, which episode is related in Canto VII in Cythna's recollection. There, the existence of this baby-girl is told in a rather ambiguous way, and Cythna is described as being doubtful of its reality; she is not sure whether her giving birth to is actual or only illusory. And there is an ambiguous suggestion, too, that this baby's father might be Laon, not the tyrant, though it is impossible in the context of the narrative.

In Canto XII, the girl plays such an important role as to take Laon and Cythna in a boat to the Temple of the Spirit and, astonishingly enough, she reveals herself as a child of Laon and Cythna:

Then the bright child, the plumèd Seraph came,
And fixed its blue and beaming eyes on mine,
And said, 'I was disturbed by tremulous shame
When once we met, yet know that I was thine
From the same hour in which thy lips divine
Kindled a clinging dream within my brain,
Which ever waked when I might sleep, to twine
Thine image with her memory dear—again
We meet; exempt now from mortal fear or pain.

(Canto XII, XXIV)

It is clear from the quoted stanzas that this child is a symbol of hope born between Laon and Cythna, not a factual baby. Therefore, she plays a role of intermediary between time and timeless world who brings the lovers. Likewise, a hope connects these two spheres, immortalizing the idea of revolution.

When Laon is about to be burned, Cythna appears on a horseback to share his fate.

She won then, though unwilling, her to bind
Near me, among the snakes. When there had fled
One soft reproach that was most thrilling kind,
She smiled on me, and nothing then we said,
But each upon the other's countenance fed

Looks of insatiate love ; the mighty veil
 Which doth divide the living and the dead
 Was almost rent, the world grew dim and pale,—
 All light in Heaven or Earth beside our love did fail.—
(Canto XII, XV)

Laon and Cythna resurrect into the world after death :

And is this death?—the pyre has disappeared,
 The Pestilence, the Tyrant, and the throng ;
 The flames grow silent—slowly there is heard
 The music of a breath-suspending song,
 Which, like the kiss of love when life is young,
 Steps the faint eyes in darkness sweet and deep ;
 With ever-changing notes it floats along,
 Till on my passive soul there seemed to creep
 A melody, like waves on wrinkled sands that leap.
(Canto XII, XVII)

The warm touch of a soft and tremulous hand
 Wakened me then ; lo ! Cythna sate reclined
 Beside me, on the waved and golden sand
 Of a clear pool, upon a bank o'ertwined
 With strange and star-bright flowers, which to the wind
 Breathed divine odour ; high above, was spread
 The emerald heaven of trees of unknown kind,
 Whose moonlike blooms and bright fruit o'erhead
 A shadow, which was light, upon the waters shed.
(Canto XII, XVIII)

And they sail for The Temple of the Spirit piloted by the child which is a symbol of hope : “ The boat was one curved shell of hollow pearl, / Almost translucent with the light divine / Of her within ; ” (Canto XII, XXI, 11. 4630–4632). Three of them go on sailing between mountains and meadows, amazing and marvelling at incredibly beautiful sceneries studded with star-light, moonshine and sun-beams. And after a several-day-voyage, they finally come to their destination, The Temple of the Spirit :

Motionless resting on the lake awhile,
I saw its marge of snow-bright mountains rear
Their peaks aloft, I saw each radiant isle,
And in the midst, afar, even like a sphere
Hung in one hollow sky, did there appear
The Temple of the Spirit; on the sound
Which issued thence, drawn nearer and more near,
Like the swift moon this glorious earth around,
The chamèd boat approached, and there its haven found.
(Canto XII, XLI)

Conclusion

The structure of *The Revolt of Islam* is complicated and difficult to follow. The narrative line goes backward and forward, causing a rapid change in time and space accordingly. Furthermore, esoteric Shelleyan symbolism and imageries often obtrude themselves. But its gist is consistent throughout; no matter how harsh the present situation is, we have to keep faith in something good and eternal, because the bright future comes without fail. Shelley tries to present this message in the vast and ambitious scheme of revolutionary poem which includes such concerns as radical ideas of equality symbolized in feminism and as mythological regeneration. These concerns are inseparably connected with the subjects of love and revolution evolved in the context of a time-timeless dichotomy. The result of this ambitious attempt, however, is not so much an artistic perfection as a rather unorganic and lengthy work, though there certainly exist not a few unforgettably exquisite expressions. Yet the poem should not be considered as valueless, because it is a stepping-stone to a more mature and finer work, *Prometheus Unbound*. And even though it "did not provoke a cultural revolution"⁽¹⁷⁾ in his time, *The Revolt of Islam* comes to increase its importance, in the current social trend, as one of the earliest literary work dealing with feminism.

Notes

- (1) For this matter of evaluation, Lloyd Abbey in *Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 51, summarizes thus: "The Revolt of Islam" has fared badly at the hands of critics who, in their preoccupation with Zoroastrian Manichaeism, have ignored its relation to Shelley's other poems and to Romantic poetry generally...While hardly on the level of "Prometheus Unbound" and the major poems which follow it, "The Revolt of Islam" is nevertheless, in imagery, in symbol, in narrative, and in theme, the paradigm against which their ironic variations are to be measured. The refinement, revision, and redefinition of this poem in Shelley's mature masterpieces is the backbone of his artistic achievement."
- (2) Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 63, *The Revolt of Islam*, Canto II, XLIII, ll. 1045-1047.
- (3) In Canto V, Queen Mab, a fairy Queen, criticizes the present society where everything is transacted to the spirit of Sleeping Ianthe, saying, "Even love is sold." *Poetical Works*, p. 782.
- (4) There are several critical books dealing with the influences of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft on Shelley's feminism. One example: Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London Sidhwick & Jackson, 1980), Chapter 5, "Feminist," p. 102. "Shelley first stumbled on these ideas in the comparatively dry pages of Godwin's *Political Justice*, which he read while still at Eaton. Godwin led inevitably to Mary Wollstonecraft...had they not been comrades, lovers, members of the same radical circle? Shelley's early letters are full of requests for Mary Wollstonecraft's books and letters. By the time he was twenty, he had absorbed them all."
- (5) Shelley, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- (6) On these alterations, Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 391, details as follows: "Though sixty-three lines of the poem were corrected, only thirteen were cancelled because of their controversial references to God, Hell, Christ, republicanism and atheism. In every case Shelley had to retreat to a vague and unsatisfactory circumlocution. Much that politically explicit was now weakened and obscured."
- (7) Shelley, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
- (8) Micheal Henry Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism*

and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1982), Chapter Four, "The Hermit of Marlow" p. 125. "Promising to oppose the selfish and tyrannical, Shelley devotes himself to acquiring knowledge useful for the struggle. The libertarian mission, however, is undermined when loneliness and disappointment in love lead to despair. Fortunately Mary came to rescue him as she defied "Custom" and strengthened him in his fight for justice. Their resolve is steeled by the prior examples of Mary's parents ultraradicals in the 1790s. But even if Shelley is not successful in his libertarian project, at least he and Mary will be wholly themselves, undivided, and like "stars that burn forever, inspiring other rebels."

(9) Shelley, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

(10) Paul Foot, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

He states in chapter 5 as follows:

"All this was shaken by the French Revolution. A flood of speeches and pamphlets came out of France preaching a very simple doctrine: "Either no member of the human race has real right, or else all have the same; he who votes against the rights of another, whatever his religion, colour or sex, abjures his own..."

That was the marquis de Condorcet, one of the great writers for women's liberation during the French Revolution. Condorcet and others resurrected the ideas of older thinkers whose ideas about sex and marriage had been banned in their lifetime."

(11) H. N. Brailsford, *Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle* (London: Williams and Norgate, Ltd.), 1927, Chapter IV, "Political Justice", pp. 138-141. Brailsford's classical criticism emphatically stresses the influence of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft on Shelley's radicalism. And as for the idea of feminism, clearly reflected in his negation of marriage, he speaks thus:

"It follows that marriage is an evil, for it is at once the closest form of cohabitation, and the rashest of all promises. Two thoughtless and romantic people, met in youth under circumstances full of delusion, have bound themselves, not by reason but by contrast, to make the best, when they discover deception, of an irretrievable mistake..."

Godwin has little fear of lust or license. Men will, on the whole, continue to prefer one partner, and friendship will refine the grossness of sense. There are worse evils than open and avowed inconstancy—

the loathsome combination of deceitful intrigue with the selfish monopoly of property.”

(12) Paul Foot, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

(15) Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 181.

(16) Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 127.

(17) Scrivener, *op. cit.*, p. 133.