

Despair – An Invigorating Discussion in The Light of Poetic Utopias and Anti-Utopias

(Romantisme dan Keputusan Pertengahan Abad Kesembilan Belas – Sebuah Diskusi yang Menyelidiki dalam Terang Utopia Puitis dan Anti-Utopia.)

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Abstract

The word “utopia” denotes “a place which does not exist”. On the contrary anti-utopia depicts a social setting which is juxtaposed to utopian idealism. In this paper we would attempt to redefine the Romantic imagination of Wordsworth and Coleridge as poetic utopia and the Victorian despair in Mathew Arnold’s poem as anti-utopia. We would consider Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and Mathew Arnold’s *Dover Beach* in our discussion. In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet is in search for the moments of insight, and understanding which, he believed; only nature could give. He believes in truth of his own senses and imagination and he describes moments in which he perceives mystical and transcendental truths. Coleridge in *Kubla Khan* presents an exotic landscape which has often been interpreted as symbolizing the movement of the creative imagination. On the contrary when we discuss the poem *Dover Beach* by Mathew Arnold, we observe how the poet discusses love, faith and desolation and concludes the poem with a vision of the world more completely negative than in the previous two centuries. The main contention of the paper is to make a discussion in the light of romantic aestheticism and Victorian disillusionment. The research aims to establish the discussion that critiques the idealism of early romanticism with the dichotomy and ambiguity of mid-nineteenth century through the relevant documentation of utopian and anti-utopian ideals in literary creations.

(Kata “utopia” berarti “tempat yang tidak ada”. Sebaliknya, anti-utopia menggambarkan latar sosial yang disandingkan dengan idealisme utopis. Dalam makalah ini, kami akan mencoba mendefinisikan ulang imajinasi Romantik Wordsworth dan Coleridge sebagai utopia puitis, dan keputusan Victoria dalam puisi Mathew Arnold sebagai anti-utopia. Kami akan mempertimbangkan *Biara Tintern* karya Wordsworth, *Kubla Khan* karya Coleridge, dan *Pantai Dover* karya Mathew Arnold dalam diskusi kami. Dalam *Biara Tintern*, penyair mencari momen-momen wawasan, dan pemahaman yang, menurutnya, hanya dapat diberikan oleh alam. Ia percaya pada kebenaran indra dan imajinasinya sendiri, dan ia menggambarkan momen-momen di mana ia memahami kebenaran mistis dan transcendental. Coleridge dalam *Kubla Khan* menyajikan lanskap eksotis yang sering ditafsirkan sebagai simbol pergerakan imajinasi kreatif. Sebaliknya, ketika kita membahas puisi “*Dover Beach*” karya Mathew Arnold, kita mengamati bagaimana sang penyair membahas cinta, iman, dan kesunyian, lalu menutup puisinya dengan visi dunia yang jauh lebih negatif dibandingkan dua abad sebelumnya. Tujuan utama makalah ini adalah untuk melakukan diskusi dalam perspektif estetika romantis dan kekecewaan era Victoria. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membangun diskusi yang mengkritisi idealisme romantisme awal dengan dikotomi dan ambiguitas pertengahan abad ke-19 melalui dokumentasi yang relevan tentang cita-cita utopis dan anti-utopis dalam karya sastra.).

Keywords: Romanticism, Utopia, Anti-utopia, Victorian disillusionment.

In the words of Oscar Wilde – “Literature anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose”. (Oscar Wilde, 1891) Literature is a medium which is inbuilt with utopian ideals and which has the characteristic to bring transformation through creative exploration. The paper intends to discuss the basic concept of utopia and anti-utopia in the realm of poetry. Before I delve deep into the arguments let me discuss at the outset the fundamental concept of utopia and anti-utopia. Utopia is a structured concept that introspects individual lives to find out the source of happiness, joy and satisfaction. Plato in his *Republic* evokes the first thought of utopia and it is considered to be the first work reflecting utopian ideas. In *Republic*,

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Plato describes a model for an ideal world; however, it was not until the 1500s, when the term utopia was coined by Sir Thomas More in his work of the same name that illustrates a fictional society on a remote island in 1516. More was the father of true utopian ideals by setting up what Fatima Vieira sees as a “tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment.” (Vieira, 2010) Thomas More in his Utopia, which in reality defines the concept of “No Place”, shows that Utopia is an illogical ideal world as well as a medium to satirize the writer’s society. Therefore, Utopia in the fictional world or in literary depiction is the world where life is in peace, harmony, prosperity and happiness. On the contrary anti-utopia is a world which is a revelation of a place that satirizes a type of “ideal” or holistic society that the author actually abhors. According to Peter Fitting, anti-utopianism is “explicitly or implicitly a defence of the status quo”. (Fitting, 2010) At the beginning of the eighteenth century when the enlightened people of the society considered utopian thinking to be something unattainable, then anti-utopianism appeared in literature. Anti-utopian works totally negate utopian feeling as they feel it is impossible to achieve an ideal future where everything will be organized and systematic with no room for anarchy and chaos. Frederic Jameson in *The Seeds of Time* says that utopia and dystopia as terms are “simple play of oppositions”. (Jameson,1994) So it is quite evident that the general concept of utopia and its status have undergone several transformations along the centuries. However, we can always perceive the fact that poetry exists in a perpetual utopia of its own.

Considering the two antagonistic opinions let us embark on the main postulation of the paper which focuses on Romantic aestheticism and Victorian disillusionment. It is believed that utopia is a literary imagination of possibilities and alternatives and although very old concept but not outdated at all as the seeds of anti-utopia and dystopia lies very much in the concept of utopia. If we look back to the Age of Prose and Reason, in the days of Alexander Pope, town life, sophisticated culture and conventions engaged the people of the society. Heroic couplet was one form of poetry. Milton, Spenser and Shakespeare were totally neglected. We observe a complete decline of the Elizabethan passionate and emotional fervor. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century there was a furious attack on the puritan regime. Poetry, drama and other forms of literature observed a despicable attack against the puritan dogmatism and influence of French literature was predominant. Like Dryden Pope’s satires are full of savage invective against real or imagined enemies. So, in the middle of the eighteenth century mainly importance was given to reason and rationality, everything was controlled. Strong feeling, fancy and imagination was totally controlled whereas in the romantic period, there was a scope for exhibition of strong feelings and more importance was given to heart and individuals. The most important characteristic of the romantics is their commitment to the idea that the character of art and beauty and the engagement with them should shape all

aspects of human life. The romantics propounded that the aesthetic is the foundation of knowledge and the pursuit of truth: “Beauty is truth, and truth beauty,”-that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Ode on a Grecian Urn, stanza II, 49-50). William Wordsworth in The Prelude says “Bliss was it in that dawn of a new age” (The Prelude, Book X), thus evoking the dawn of a new age. Along with industrial revolution and mechanization there were literary revolution too which brought a visible change in literature, particularly into poetry. The shift from agrarian culture to industrial culture led to the emergence of the new world. In this world identity of an individual was questioned rather more importance was given to individual sensibility and consciousness. Romantics also strived to make nature enticing thereby, posing challenge to the modern world. Romantic aestheticism is capable of rejuvenating nature as it brings out a different conception of nature as organic rather than mechanic. Thus, at the background of industrial revolution and in the presence of all other political revolutions, we can very well consider the spectacular simplicity and human nature of Wordsworth and the super natural elements of Coleridge as poetic utopia. It is the ideal world that both the poets desired to explore in their literary journey. In Preface to Lyrical Ballads both the poets contributed but Wordsworth’s utmost effort was to introduce simple language in poetry subsequently making it accessible and understandable to everyone. Wordsworth’s poetic manifesto influenced the whole of romantic movement in literature. In the immortal poems of Wordsworth, we find his attempt to connect with every ordinary people on earth and in Coleridge’s poems there is a continuous effort to create an extraordinary world of mystery and supernaturalism. We would like to consider these elements of their poetry as the poetic utopia, the utmost bliss of nature pervading their compositions thereby, fulfilling utopianism through literary imagination.

To illustrate the statement, we have taken two poems from the Romantic period- Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth and Kubla Khan by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In Tintern Abbey the poet describes Wordsworth’s attitude towards nature. It reveals how the poet appreciates the beauty of nature through his sensory organs and how he discovers the divine spirit in nature. Let us observe the beauty of nature embedded in these lines from Tintern Abbey:

These beauteous forms/Through a long absence, have not been to me/As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye: / But oft, in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din of towns and cities, I have owned to them/In hours of weariness, sensations sweet. Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into the purer mind, / With tranquil restoration; -feelings too/Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps, /As have no slight or trivial influence/On that best portion of a good man’s life, /His little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love. (Tintern Abbey, stanza II, 23-36)

The poet actually revisits Wye after five years and in the intervening years he had spent partly in London. During his stay in London, his mind was perturbed by the tremendous impact of French Revolution thereby leading to acute mental and moral crisis. His heart felt the weariness due to the atrocities of the reign of terror. During that time, he could feel the earlier impressions that he carried from his first visit to Wye and the enchanting beauty of nature had an unconscious moral and spiritual influence on his character and that prompted him to perform little deeds of kindness and love. This restored happiness and prosperity in his life in the midst of chaos and agony. The poet again says:

For she can so inform/The mind that is within us, so impress/ With quietness and beauty,
and so feed with lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,/ Rash judgements, nor the sneers
of selfish men,/ Nor greetings where no kindness in, nor all/The dreary intercourse of daily
life,/ Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb/Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold/Is
full of blessings.(Tintern Abbey, stanza II, 128-137)

Through these lines the poet overwhelmingly reiterates the importance of nature or the role played by our communion with nature to restore peace and happiness in life. If nature is worshipped and if we try to unite ourselves with nature then misfortune can never crush our indomitable spirit and we can live against every adversity in our own protected environment with idealism, strong conviction and optimism. The idea that we want to construct is that Wordsworth's communication with nature in his first visit is retained in his memory and in his second visit to Wye, the same image is revived in his vision, providing eternal peace, that he tried to obtain in the natural landscape and in the beauty of nature. The perpetual utopia in the poem is elaborated in diverse stages: in the poet's appreciation of Nature and identifying nature as a separate space to bring versatile happiness in his life. In the first stage he derives extreme sensuous delight in the beauty of her colour and form, in the second stage there is an association of human sorrow with nature and in the third stage he detects in nature the presence of a divine, all pervading, living and the watchful spirit, which harmonizes the multifarious discord of the elements that compose the forms in which it makes its home. The poem ends with a positive note of enthusiasm and a sacred feeling which he derives from the abode of nature.

When we consider Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another extraordinary romantic poet, we come to know the fact that at his young age he was an active member of the general movement around the unforeseen historical disaster, French Revolution, and that his "little world" described its own unique "orbit". This specific orbit is utopianism. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge claims that his principles were always equally distant from all the political coteries existing in the country. He never desired to surpass the existing reality, but he always tried to

create an ideal one that has never fully existed before. In a letter to Beaumonts much later, in 1803, Coleridge describes his early utopian impulse in a striking image, as he looks back at his past and generalizes it:

For what is the nature and the beauty of youth? Is it not this –to know what is right in the abstract, by a living feeling, by an intuition of the uncorrupted Heart? To body forth this abstract right in beautiful Forms? And lastly to project this phantom – world into the world of Reality, like a catoptrical mirror? Say rather to make ideas and realities stand side by side, the one is vivid as the other, even as I have often seen in a natural well of translucent water the reflection of the lank weeds, that hung down from its sides, standing upright, and like substances, among the substantial water plants ... (Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,2: 1000)

Coleridge's concept of utopianism was temporary. It is almost difficult to figure out the exact period of his utopian fervour in poetry but it is almost around 1794-96. This period represents a distinct period in his entire literary journey when his utopian feelings/ expressions or thoughts takes birth, evolves and finally perishes too. The same period is characterized by enthusiasm –although qualified –for the French Revolution, the latter being closely but problematically linked with utopianism. During 1794-96, when Coleridge's sense of utopianism was assumed to be active, he strived to create a utopian colony through his literary creations. Several early poems of Coleridge, like "Happiness" (1791) and "A Wish" (1792) could be considered incipient utopian projection. To discuss on Coleridge's sense of utopianism let us consider one of his famous creations, Kubla Khan which was written earlier in 1798 and circulated orally, it was published along with Christabel named Christabel and Other Poems in 1816. So, his utopian commitment could be perceived in Kubla Khan as it was written during the time when the flickering light of his commitment was still active. In the poem it is seen how Coleridge conjures up variations of two kinds of Paradise, - one being the "stately dome and pleasure garden" (Kubla Khan) of Kubla Khan, and the other the Paradise of Mount Abora. These two paradises do not exist as objects of nature but to be created by man. The focal point of attraction in both the cases is a domed structure – "a sunny pleasure dome and caves of ice". There is a suggestion that both are made for sensual pleasure and gratification and both are beautiful, fragile and objects of destruction. So, both these paradises conjure up the image of a separate world which the poet wants to create and which never existed before in the world.

Hence, if we follow the structure and the narration of the poem, in the first section we get the fictitious description of of Kubla Khan's stately pleasure dome and also a ten mile long garden with "sinuous rills, many an incense- bearing tree, sunny spots of greenery, ancient forests

and hills, a deep romantic chasm” associated with savagery, holiness and enchantment “ceaseless turmoil” within the chasm, the unthrusting of “a mighty fountain” amidst huge “dancing rocks”, and flinging up of Alph, “the sacred river” which after “five miles meandering with a mazy motion through wood and dale” reaches “the caverns measureless to man”, rises up from the underground only to sink again “in tumult to a lifeless ocean. (Kubla Khan) The narrative style of the first section shapes the perception of a reader and the reader is bound to delve deep into a different phantasmal world away from pragmatism and seriousness. It is at the backdrop of imaginative exploration. The alternate world encoded in the king’s narrative is highly imaginative. Ruth Levitas, proposes it to be “imaginary reconstitution of society”. (Levitas, 2010) In the first section we get the ‘decree’ of Kubla Khan for a sunny pleasure dome with a beautiful garden and a gratifying ambience. Juxtaposed to it is the “Ancestral voices prophesying war” and this multi-voiced narrative promises destruction. So here we get an authoritative tone and the speaker expresses both intention and desire for an architectural change in a particular space; a pleasure dome. It carries the vision of ultimate bliss and satisfaction. The prophesy of war conceptualizes or creates a completely different world guided by realism, compassion and understanding. It is predicated upon the recognition of ‘fear, self-interest, and pride’ as fundamental human characteristics. Consequently, this formation of a new world offers another way to the imaginary restoration of the society; a completely new reconstructed world. This new world threatens the existence of a calm and composed agrarian world, and the movements of Alph seem to echo or symbolize this, thus emphasizing the fact darkness and destruction is trapped in pleasure and happiness. There is a vision to conquer the evil and to establish a utopian world of happiness and prosperity.

In the second section we shall have to remain content simply with the ‘pleasure –dome’ for the description of a nicely- laid garden is missing here. However, initially a picture as large as Kubla’s garden flashes in the mind’s eye the moment reference is made to the Abyssinian maid’s singing of mount Abora, a place made like a veritable Eden on Earth by the old man of the mountains, a place full of diverse flowers and fruits brought from distant places, rippling streams, caves and structures offering cool shades, hanging gardens, music halls with diverse instruments and players, sweet delicacies and dancing girls offering sensual pleasures. While the palace of Kubla Khan has a solid existence, the other pleasure-dome is built ‘in air’. The second section of the poem refers to a dream like state. Before we proceed with the analysis of this section, we need to know that Coleridge started composing the poem before being disturbed by a man on business from Porlock. The song being sung by the Abyssinian maid is envisioned by the poet and so the narrative of it is quite questionable. If the word utopian defines the visionary existence of a society, then imagining a world (Mount Abora), existence

of a sunny pleasure dome is surely utopian as it evokes something unthinkable and unachievable. The imaginary spaces like domes, gardens and mountain; as stated by the poet is focusing on non-existing places and that is precisely what 'utopia' means ('ou-topia, nowhere as well as 'eu-topia', a good place). In the words of Balasopoulous Antonis, "utopia is a projection that moves from the specificity of a place toward what has been called the 'incipient planetary spatial horizon'" (Antonis, 2006) and Coleridge's speaker is gesturing at possible places. The concluding section of the poem

Could I revive within me/Her symphony and song, /To such a deep delight t'would with me,
/ That with music loud and long, /I would build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! Those
caves of ice! (Kubla Khan, stanza III, 41-46)

suggests that one can find pleasure in imagining such good non-places. Here 'Could I revive' means, the speaker of the poem wishes to revive the 'decree' of the emperor or the Abyssinian maid, to build a pleasure dome or a separate world of his own. It ends with the yearning for a better world but with clear understanding that such a world can be created or can emanate only if we can recall the source of this new world. So, the 'decree' and the Abyssinian's song actually led to a new world.

If we consider utopia and dystopia as simple play of opposition, anti-utopia is being reserved for a passion to warn against utopian programs in the political realm. To discern the utopian views, the desire for a separate world rather an abode of happiness and prosperity in Wordsworth and Coleridge, we would try to juxtapose it with the Victorian disillusionment and despair observed in Mathew Arnold's Dover Beach. To perceive the transformations from the Romantic love for nature to despair, we need to make a discussion at the contextual and historical background of the poem. The age records a rapid economic expansion and changes from the sociological perspective. Actually, the industrial revolution started in the Romantic period and due to it deep rooted traditions were uprooted. The whole landscape of Britain changed due to increasing mechanization both in the land and in the industrial factories, thus continuing high levels of unemployment. Gradually with different political revolutions of the period: American War of independence in 1776, French Revolution with its slogan of 'Equality, liberty and fraternity' and storming of Bastille in 1789; situation was quite tensed and so there was a call for "Return to Nature", source of peace and happiness in the Romantic period. However, in the Victorian period the growth of London and the major cities of Britain marked a remarkable change due to the development of manufacturing industries, foreign trade and stable financial institutions. Britain became the centre of the new Trade, of new scientific and technical innovations and of continuing industrial inventions and explorations. Although the age was characterized by faith and positivism; however, the nineteenth century

was also a century of paradoxes and uncertainties. There was social unrest, exploitation of lower-class workers at home and of colonies overseas; a compromise between philanthropy and tolerance. There was a mass movement throughout the Victorian period towards democracy, as it was evident in rest of Europe and such expressions flourished in the literature of the period. Mathew Arnold's *Dover Beach* is one such creation which evokes the Victorian despair and disillusionment which essentially opposes the utopian values, thus evoking anti-utopian idealism.

This poem appears in his final volume of poetry entitled *New Poems*, published in 1867 and in 1869 his *Culture and Anarchy* was also published. Hence the poem is published at a time when he was becoming recognized as the leading critic of the day. The poem begins with "The sea is calm tonight", sea symbolizing the sea of faith, thus representing the Church of England which epitomized unity and protection, culture and civilizing force to the Christian world. Unfortunately, with the progress of science, with the rise of materialism and fall of spiritual values; man lost faith on Church and religion. Arnold's melancholy is due to the growth of skepticism and agnosticism. The distinction between romantic idealism and anti-utopian visions finds its evocations in poetry. The heart touching lines to his beloved:

Listen! You the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, /At their return, up the high strand, /Begin, and cease, and then again begin, with tremulous cadence, slow and bring/The eternal note of sadness in. (*Dover Beach*, Stanza II, 09-14)

Here nature's melancholy is transferred to the poet's mind. Sea is a part of nature but here the natural description does not import us to a phantasmal world nor does it bring eternal happiness in our life. Wordsworth found consolation in nature and Arnold's nature is unable to provide any kind of happiness and satisfaction. It reiterates disappointment and disillusionment. The poet associates the earlier life which was under the guidance of the Church of England with happiness and the Victorian life to be deeply subjected to anarchy and chaos. The poet could no longer see the sea of faith in its full tide. He could only hear mournful sound as the receding waves leaves the shore with the sound of sadness and despair. In the words of Kenneth Allot, the extract is "probably the most musically expressive passage in all Arnold's poetry and a valid poetic equivalent for his feelings of loss, exposure and dismay." (Allot, 1976) Arnold starts with social observation rather than philosophical reflection and stresses the importance of visualizing things as they appear in reality.

The note of melancholy pervades the entire poem. If we carefully observe the following lines:

But now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating to the breath/ Of the night- wind, down the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world. (Dover Beach, Stanza III, 24-28)

We note, how the poet in a dejected and desultory mood, expresses the unhappy condition of the world after being deserted by the Catholic Church. The world depicted in the poem has a dearth of happiness, gladness, warm affection, true understanding, no certainty, neither peace nor fellow-feeling. The world, the poet is convinced, has become so because of the waning influence of religion and which has been brought about by men's love of materialism and science and their cultivation of skepticism and agnosticism. In Dover Beach, a spiritual void is created by the projection of loss of faith and the emergence of mechanized modernity. What we perceived in the romantic period, the ideal vision of nature is transformed to alienation, religious and existential crisis. In this period there is rise of scientific realization and it critiques historical relevance of Bible, thus erosion of spiritual values. The poem begins with a vision of a world of endless sadness and ends with a vision of bleak nothingness in which meaningless wars are fought for meaningless causes. Against such a backdrop, human love has no purpose:

And we are here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night. (Dover Beach, Stanza IV,35-37)

According to A. Dwight Culler the central statement which Arnold makes about the human condition is to be found in 'we are here as on a darkling plain'. (Dover Beach, Stanza IV,35) Culler also highlights that the Romantic poets never made such a statement. So, the poet concludes with a vision of the world more completely negative than any in the previous two centuries. The negativity of the poem establishes the anti-utopian statement and the root of skepticism, it is one of the fundamental questions embedded in the poem, due to the anti-utopian idealism. Similar perspective is also observed in Tennyson's "In Memorium" as it continuously struggles with loss of religious values and principles. Like Mathew Arnold the anti – utopian idealism is also observed in Browning and Rossetti. Fragmentation, moral lapse and failure to go beyond limitations are also observed in the poems of Browning and Rossetti besides Arnold.

Finally, the paper puts forward the main features that delineate the concept of utopia and anti-utopia. Utopian vision creates, carves and manifests all the essential features of happiness, pleasure and love in the visionary world which the romantic poets tried to establish through their literary creations. Dual poetic consciousness is ascertained in the coexistence of faith and despair. In Tennyson's Ulysses, which is lyrical in nature there is the evidence of

romantic yearning as Tennyson aspires for more heroic achievement. His insatiable thirst for adventure itself reveals romantic fervour. It is highly debatable as within the evocation of utopian idealism of the romantic period, there is a sense of collapse; Keats's death – haunted beauty and the failed pleasure dome in Kubla Khan. Anti-utopia is not devoid of utopia, rather it is the reverse of utopia where idealism becomes shallow. Contra distinct to this theoretical hypothesis is the anti-utopian precepts which are discussed in the paper at the backdrop of Victorian disillusionment. Coexistence of utopias and anti-utopias anticipates modernist fragmentation, alienation and absolute disillusionment in the modern period. It is very well observed and perceived in the poems of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. The dichotomy of life is embedded in utopia and anti-utopia as romantic imagination carries with it despair. We can understand this very well in Keats's Ode to Nightingale. The famous line in the poem: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (Ode to Nightingale, stanza VIII, 71-72) where the poet becomes conscious of the romantic world of fancy, imagination and glamour and wants to retire to the real world. The poet is questioning his self and brings back the sense of mortality and he is almost torn between the two worlds of fancy and reality. So, within romantic imagination lies despair and the poems of mid-nineteenth century poetry amplifies the inner struggle thereby giving birth to literary pieces which are replete with something which is utopian and at the same time having anti-utopian sentiments embedded in it. This dialectical approach is central to poetic explorations and quite integral to the existential presence of hope and despair in the world. The legacy continues even today and poetic creations are not bereft of it.

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